

Dances With Horses: Fluid Leadership, Affective Exchange, and the Future of Therapeutic Robotics

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Abstract

Horses, as prey animals, have evolved an acute sensitivity to human affective states. In equine-assisted interventions (EAIs), this is actively engaged, with horses functioning as biofeedback mechanisms, mirroring participants' internal states with precision. Unlike conventional therapeutic models centered on human cognition and verbal articulation, EAIs foreground more-than-human communication—bodily attunement, energy dynamics, and non-verbal cues—actively shaping emotional regulation [2].

Our work [5] argues that horses are not passive therapeutic tools but autonomous participants in emotional co-regulation [3]. Leadership within EAIs is fluid: excessive control prompts resistance, while passivity invites the horse to assume leadership. Emotional meaning emerges relationally, forming a dynamic dyad where agency is distributed across human and non-human bodies. This entangled human-horse “dance” positions horses as co-regulators rather than mere instruments [1].

We extend this insight to a parallel human-nonhuman network [4], particularly human-robot interactions, advocating for therapeutic robots that resist subordination and instead engage in reciprocal emotional regulation. This challenges dominant paradigms in therapeutic robotics, which prioritize obedient, submissive machines. By rethinking robotic agency through the lens of EAIs, we propose a shift toward autonomous, resistant co-regulators, fostering a more ethically attuned, relational approach to human-technology interaction.

Keywords

Human-Animal Interaction, Equine-assisted Interventions, Therapeutic Robotics, Interspecies Relationality, Dyadic Attunement

ACM Reference Format:

Ellen Weir, Ute Leonards, and Anne Roudaut. 2026. *Dances With Horses: Fluid Leadership, Affective Exchange, and the Future of Therapeutic Robotics*. In . ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1 page. <https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnnn>.

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Conference'17, Washington, DC, USA

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ACM ISBN 978-x-xxxx-xxxx-x/YYYY/MM
<https://doi.org/10.1145/nnnnnnnn>