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Panic Attacks

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Tentatively and quietly he said “I can’t go to school.” The words came out as if they had been clawing in his throat all day and finally managed to narrowly escape. His penetrating stare was searching for a beacon, demanding an answer to an unasked question; silently screaming for help.

At 14, Allan was having panic attacks. In fact, this was his second year living with medication and one of the most frightening mental health disorders ever diagnosed. Panic attacks strike without notice. They are villainous thieves who violently and unexpectedly steal your breath and then pound the triumph of their victory into the core of your soul with their giant fists. There is only one word to describe them: Horrifying. Living with panic attacks is like being stalked by invisible, murderous, unforgiving entities. They are lurking everywhere and there is no escape once they find you.

Allan had been to four therapists and two psychiatrists in the past year. He was desperately worried that there was no solution to his problem. He wanted to go back to school but he could not. He had been out for a month now and the fear of going back was holding him hostage. As I stared back into the depths of his beautiful, haunted eyes, I prayed silently: “Please help me help him.”

Although I have been a therapist and behavior management specialist for fifteen years, I am nowhere near as good at helping people as my 23 fur-and-feathered helpers are. It was time for Allan to meet my co-counsellors. We left the house and were guided by moonlight through the wet snow to the old shed where the chickens were sleeping. They were perched up on the highest shelf and started protesting the minute we opened the door, squawking and clucking; reprimanding us for disturbing their beauty rest. We invited Allan to help us deliver them a peace offering and a plea for forgiveness; oats, their favorite treat. Allan stood in the center of the coop with chickens kamikazing all around him as they left their roost to accept his gifts. The baby rooster stepped off the shelf and went awkwardly careening right past his head. Allan never flinched. He stood riveted in place and appeared fascinated by the chaos we were causing. I picked up Molly, a huge laying hen who’s named after my aunt and whom we’ve had since she was three days old, and held her out for him to pet. He gathered her to him, took off his glove and gently stroked her dark brown head. Molly crooned. As Allan embraced her he heaved a sigh that had long since been held captive. I automatically heaved one too, releasing a breath I didn’t know I had been holding since I met him.

Although Allan was visibly trembling from the cold night air, he wanted to meet the rest. Off to the three-way shelter. Loaded with alfalfa cubes, he stepped into the corral. Six heads reached out to greet him and the city boy stood tall amongst them. Three eager horses nudged their noses up against him and overtop of every horse was a curious llama, sniffing his hair and silently begging him to flip a cube his way. They teamed around him and for a split second he was gone, absorbed into the folds of manes, tails and foot-long ears. The boss mare, Buttons, forced a clearing with a flick of her tail and through the opening we saw the radiant face of a transformed child. He was laughing and held one hand against Buttons’s cheek as she nuzzled his nose with her big fuzzy lips. If I didn’t see him go in there, I would have sworn he was a different boy. In place of the fearful, mask-like expression he previously wore, was the face of a boy with not a care in the world. It was as if those few fleeting seconds rallied together to force the softening of his worried features. As he crooked his neck to look way up into the face of his new hairy friend, my pulse beat faster as I thought: “This is going to work.”

The bond was instant, Allan chose Buttons to work with. I was dumbfounded. Children don’t usually choose

Buttons because when they greet her she tosses her head, flattens her ears and bares her teeth at them. Something was different about Allan. She wanted to be with him and followed him around, she was nice to him and kept kissing his face, giving me a heart attack each time her muzzle came into contact with his vulnerable skin. When I asked Allan why he picked Buttons he said: "Because she's like me." I looked at my assistant, who is a horse professional, and she just smiled and nodded her head. She had been trying to get me to see this side of Buttons for a year and I just didn't get it. I went with the flow and confirmed Allan's statement: "You're right, she's like you" even though I had no idea what they were talking about.

Allan led Buttons away from her herd and we tied her just on the other side of the fence, away from them. She began to pace. When we held her still, she put her head way up and looked wildly down at us, the whites of her eyes glowing like skulls against black felt. She pawed the ground with her perfectly manicured hoof and tossed her head violently up and down. She was panicking. Allan said: "She's afraid, like me" and he was right. We worked together to calm her down, teaching Allan how to help her through her fear, how to help her feel safe. He had no horse experience but within two hours, she followed him around the shelter and out of herd sight with no coercion, no lead rope. There was a magnetic force between them that was so strong it was almost visible. I truly had never seen this side of Buttons.

After working with her for just three short weeks, Allan has helped Buttons learn to remain calm whenever she is away from her herd. At the same time, he has been able to go to school for up to half an hour on five different days and though he has a ways to go, he is determined to get there. Allan says if Buttons can do it, so can he. Although they are different species, they share the same torment and are teaching each other how to feel safe in the world. Allan hasn't had a panic attack since he started and Buttons is calm and quiet in pasture, a thing we have never seen. These two souls are connecting on a level that defies my eight agonizing years of university and fifteen years of therapeutic experience. I could never have done for Allan or Buttons what they have done for each other. They are healing and my prayers have been answered.



Eileen Bona is a Registered Psychologist and the Owner/Founder of Dreamcatcher Nature-Assisted Therapy, a private practice that partners with animals and nature to help children, youth and adults who have neurodevelopmental disabilities or mental health diagnoses. For more information, visit online: www.dreamcatcherassociation.com or call: (780) 809-1047