

Personal journey

paddock and looked Ko Li straight in the eye, urging him to come over and make friends. Well, he couldn't have tried to get away fast enough and even attempted to escape into the next field!

HORSE POWER

Humiliated and hurt, I looked to wise Erika for guidance. 'Hold your ground; go inwards,' she whispered. I knew what she meant. Was I looking for too much from the horse? Was I asking him to take care of me? In any event, I'd chosen the horse the least likely to do any of this.

I felt defeated, so I sat down and cradled myself like a child. There was a lesson here. This was my pain and it was up to me to look after it. I looked up and there was Ko Li standing beside me. It was as if he was saying, 'Okay, that was a bit much, but you're starting to get this. Take care of yourself and we may be able to be friends, but I'm not doing this for you.'

When we worked with our horses in an obstacle course that we'd constructed, my performance was dismal again. I tried to make Ko Li follow me. Erika stepped in, and under her guidance, I was able to step back, take control of my emotions and show him the path forwards.

As the day ended, I felt mentally and physically exhausted. We were urged to write a journal over the next few weeks to see what came up. The theory is that the real learning and healing happens after the sessions. It was in these reflections that I uncovered how the herd, and especially Ko Li, had helped me in the next stage of taking care of my grief.

The frozen feeling that pervaded my mood was leading to a detachment from the magic of life. The feelings were so powerful that I needed a safe space to release them. I think the power of this grief drove Ko Li away, and showed me how huge it was. Over the next few weeks, I felt something lifting. Hannah and I talked more. There was still scary ground between us – the losses loomed so large – but we talked about her wellbeing, how emotional the horses made us feel and the relief of being able to cry.

After Chloë died, I found it almost impossible to look at her special things (her first shoes, a lock of her hair, her prom dress). I keep them wrapped up in



Her rock: Debbie with her husband Simon



Every moment with Chloë was special, says Debbie

I realised that it was okay to be a bit more open and vulnerable

Why horses?

Equine therapy is used in a range of scenarios, including as a treatment after trauma, for drug and alcohol issues, challenging childhoods, and also in corporate settings to assist with team building.

The theory is that horses are social animals with herd dynamics that are similar to the family system. Therapy doesn't usually involve riding horses, it's about interacting with them. It's thought that horses are highly tuned to body language. If someone is anxious, they get skittish; when a person is in tune with their emotions, horses are drawn to them. This promotes self-awareness and shows how our behaviour affects others. Key to the therapy is that a person has to engage emotionally to work with the animals. This encourages people to be in tune with their internal world and, therefore, they're less likely to act out their pain in other circumstances.

• Facilities across the UK offer various kinds of equine therapy. Debbie and Hannah attended Inspired Change (inspiredchange.global).

a memory box. I hadn't looked at photos, either. It's still early days, but after the horses, I took the first step of peeking into the box and felt the things that convey the essence of who she was. Tears fell and my heart ached for my child, but I felt better, as one seems to after releasing sad feelings.

It's no exaggeration to say that I found that day, in that Sussex field, life changing. It reignited some kind of life force and I've felt lighter and brighter ever since.

I don't think life can ever feel normal again after losing a child. Every year is a painful reminder of the young woman she would have been. I miss her and my husband so much. But through all the work I've done, including horse therapy, I have a box full of tools that I can take out when I need a little help.

Hannah says

I miss my sister and stepfather terribly, but I've never found it especially helpful to talk about my feelings. I prefer to get on with life and keep busy running my family's care business and looking after my children, Roman, seven, and Nahla, five.

I was really surprised to feel myself getting emotional when we stood in the field looking at the horses. I don't know why, but I started crying and couldn't stop. I don't cry easily, but I noticed how much better I felt letting go of this emotion. In the classroom, I surprised myself again when I started to open up and speak from the heart.

I chose an older black mare called Lozen as my special horse. She was (I later learned) the 'mother' of the herd. The wise old lady that others look up to. Spending time with her on my own was lovely. I felt a really deep connection.

The most magical moment came when I was working with Lozen in a pen. I broke down in tears and she came straight over and nuzzled my arm. It was at that point that I realised it was okay to be a bit more open and vulnerable.

Horses will be a part of my life from now on. More than anything, I recognised how calm and content I feel around them. Their presence alone feels healing.

• *Yet Here I Am (Splendid Books)* by Debbie Binner is out now