By Monica Rodriguez

John Anthony, a United States Marine Corps veteran, was about two hours away from a final exam, but instead of feeling anxious, the math major felt relaxed. He had spent part of the morning grooming and walking an Arabian purebred named Alada Sprite VS, or simply Sprite, through a short obstacle course at the W.K. Kellogg Arabian Horse Center.

“They’re really emotionally connected to you,” he says. “You forget about the outside world. It helps with stress. You forget about what is happening at school, at work, at home. You don’t want to leave.”

Horses are perceptive creatures who sense the emotional state of the humans around them, according to April Kilbourne, student activities coordinator at the horse center.

“They’re like big antennas for emotion,” Anthony agrees. “Whatever I am feeling, Sprite will pick up on it and reflect it back at me like a mirror.”

Orozco says working with Sophie has taught him to be much more aware of his emotions and state of mind.

“Before I just jumped into things,” he says. “With the horse, it’s ‘Wait, what am I feeling?’”

If he’s feeling anxious or stressed, he makes a conscious effort to calm down and relax. Orozco says he’s also become more sensitive to the mindset of other people and will ask them how they feel.

During one exercise, student veterans took the horses through a series of obstacles: a wooden platform, four wooden poles laid on the ground about 2 feet apart, and a gate-like structure made of PVC pipes, and blue and green swimming pool noodles.

The obstacles represent situations a horse may encounter on a trail: a wooden bridge, objects on the ground, and bushes or tree branches that might brush against the side of the animal’s body. All are things that could scare a horse, Kilbourne says.

“Horses for Heroes teaches people how the horses think,” she says. “It teaches them to slow down.”

It also strengthens the human-animal team.

As the student veterans took turns going through the obstacle course, Anthony, 36, had a few words with Sprite. “Pay attention, this is what you’re going to do in a moment,” he said as he leaned toward her neck.

Before creating Horses for Heroes, Cal Poly Pomona administrators looked into research results on the positive effects of riding horses on military veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder and the benefits of the human-horse bond, according to Lideth Ortega-Villalobos, psychologist and Counseling and Psychological Services liaison to the Veterans Resource Center.

Although Horses for Heroes is not an expressly therapeutic program for PTSD, it includes training on coping skills and elements from similar programs that have been successful.

Program organizers are reviewing the data and results from Horses for Heroes, which will resume in fall 2020, to fund the program in the future.