

The Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding

by Meghan Lyons



As I sit here preparing to present this information to you, I am overwhelmed with unbridled excitement having been offered this opportunity to bring forth such fundamental information! This topic is one of my all time favorite “soap-boxes.” I will do my best to make you aware of some of the benefits of therapeutic riding. Please know, what follows is only skimming the surface of a limitless horizon.

The historical pattern of therapy has been to cut the person into several pieces and send them into the world. Traditionally the “self” gets separated, leaving no “oneness.” There is no reason why these different efforts cannot be coordinated. Through the physical and social course of developing riding skills comes all the ingredients of self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, mobility, independence, a sense of participation in a recreational activity, and above all, the ability to deal with people as an equal and to be dealt

with in a like manner. There is no other sport that not only creates, but supports an environment which allows instructors, aids and volunteers to focus on the people and not the paraphernalia that supports them in their daily life. In this lies horseback riding’s therapy for all (Bieder 1983).

The rider is positively affected physically when riding a horse. Riding increases muscle strength, challenges balance and coordination, and improves respiration. Horseback riding is an extremely strenuous sport. Secondary to swimming, it uses the most muscles in the body. You cannot ride a horse and not be challenged in your balance. Every move the horse makes, in every step, your body has to respond in a way to keep you upright. Just imagine the work that the body is doing unconsciously to help each rider succeed and remain in balance. Some riders have to make a conscious effort because their body doesn’t work to its optimal potential naturally.

Many studies show the movement of the horse’s walk gate is almost exactly the same as that of humans’. This aspect is of utmost importance when helping riders who cannot walk, or have difficulties doing so. If they have walked in the past, the movement of the horses’ three-dimensional gate helps to refire synapses in the brain that the body once knew, when they had the ability to walk. For those riders that have never walked, it simulates the walk movement, helping them to feel what walking is actually like, without having to bear weight through the legs.

The warmth of the horse’s body is a very important component as well. It helps to soothe, stretch and loosen a rider’s muscles enabling them to feel the movement more adequately. Because horseback riding is exercise, respiration is increased. This promotes expanded lung capacity, heightened awareness, and vocalization. The rider can open up the chest cavity by utilizing breathing exercises.

The benefits to a rider’s mental and emotional well-being are endless. Winston Churchill said, “There is something about the outside of a horse...that is good for the inside of a man.” Horses bring us abundant pleasure and the environment of riding fosters hope, faith and a purpose, which in turn heals the mind and the body.

Some riders spend all of their waking time in a wheelchair, always looking up. For a moment, imagine what it would feel like for them to have the opportunity to look down. Riders who use assistive devices such as wheelchairs, canes, walkers, and crutches delight in the fact that when they are sitting astride their horse, they look normal to those around them.

Small things that we take for granted are substantial to our riders. It is inevitable for a rider’s self-esteem to be boosted because of



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accomplishments at riding and connecting with an equine friend. Many therapeutic riders have the opportunity to participate in horse shows, at which they work tirelessly to succeed. It is an absolute thrill to see a rider's family and friends come out and encourage the rider. Their smiles, excitement, emotions and sense of achievement are beautiful to witness.

Riders, their families and caretakers enjoy the social aspect connected with the therapeutic riding center that they frequent. Some riders live alone, in group homes or other institutions and their only outing might be going to the horseback riding facility. There they find a faithful team; aides, instructors, and let's not forget their trusty steed! They also find smiling faces, non-judgmental people and unbiased horses. They look forward to the quality time, learning opportunities and caring conversations. Often, a rider just needs to talk with a supportive friend that they have made at the center. Parents or caretakers look forward to a refreshing conversation with others in similar positions, seeing the riders enjoy their accomplishments, and sometimes simply enjoying the peace and quiet of time to themselves.

Autism, which is a communicative disorder, has become the primary population that is served in therapeutic riding. Many riders with Autism have behaviors that are difficult to handle. These may not be solely limited to intense repetitive motions and/or sounds, self-inflictions to find comfort, inability to handle touch, sounds, sights or smells or unwillingness to make eye contact or communicate with people.

Riders with Autism often have no way to communicate their needs. They are seeking an input to satisfy their sensory system and fulfillment is frequently found with the horse. Every rider with Autism that we work with seems to connect with the horse on a level that far exceeds what we (those without Autism) are capable of acquiring. They are often immediately soothed and calmed by the repetitive and consistent movement of the horse.

I have been graciously blessed to be called to teach riders who have physical and mental disabilities of all kinds. For the past 30 years, I have been involved with horses in some aspect or another, and have always known how unique the bond can be between horse and rider. But until I started teaching therapeutic riding, I had never fathomed the depths to which that connection could go.

Watching human and equine friendship evolve is extremely moving. Every rider has enormous potential and great abilities. It is my job to figure out how to tap into their language of learning and then make adaptations so the rider can succeed.

Please don't just take my word on the magic that occurs between horse and rider in a therapeutic riding setting. Find time to visit a therapeutic riding facility in your area. You will be forever moved. One place that I partake in this divine experience is at Thorncroft (www.thorncroft.org), where I am an instructor. You can also find other facilities by visiting www.narha.org. NARHA (North America Riding for the Handicapped Association) accredits facilities and certifies instructors in many avenues of equine assisted therapies. If you have questions or comments you are welcome to contact me at meghanblyons@aol.com.

SELECTED REFERENCE

Bieder, N. (1983). *The Integration of a Therapeutic Equestrian Program in the Academic Environment of Children with Physical and Multiple Disabilities*. *New Perspectives on our Lives with Companion Animals*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.