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## Therapeutic Horseback Riding

Throughout the world, horseback riding is considered a uniquely beneficial form of therapy. A horse's gait, similar to the walk, helps strengthen spine & pelvic muscles, improves posture & coordination, & increases joint mobility. Along with physical therapeutic benefits, horseback riding gives people a feeling of control, a sense of accomplishment & increased self-esteem. Therapeutic riding, also known as Equine Assisted Therapy, Equine Facilitated Therapy, & Riding for the Disabled, is the use of the horse & equine-oriented activities to achieve a variety of therapeutic goals, including cognitive, physical, emotional, social, educational & behavioral goals.

Horseback riding for the disabled is recognized as one of the more progressive forms of therapy. The ability to control a horse as well as one's own body inspires self-confidence, responsibility, & teamwork. Best of all, it is a thoroughly enjoyable experience, which creates a special relationship between the rider & horse, & promotes personal challenge.

From the beginning, riders learn balance, coordination & self-assurance while receiving therapeutic muscle stimulation. As a result of lessons, poise, posture, strength, & flexibility improve. Classes, horse shows & events encourage self-confidence & a sense of accomplishment as new levels of expertise & self-challenges are met.

### Physical Benefits

As the horse moves, the rider is constantly thrown off-balance, requiring that the rider's muscles contract & relax in an attempt to rebalance. This exercise reaches deep muscles not accessible in conventional physical therapy. The three dimensional rhythmical movement of the horse is similar to the motion of walking, teaching rhythmical patterns to the muscles of the legs & trunk. By placing the rider in different positions on the horse, we can work different sets of muscles. Stopping & starting the horse, changing speed & changing direction increase the benefits. Muscles are strengthened by the increased use involved in riding. Even though riding is exercise, it is perceived as enjoyment, & therefore the rider has increased tolerance & motivation to lengthen the period of exercise. Improved coordination, faster reflexes, & better motor planning are seen. Riding a horse requires a great deal of coordination in order to get the desired response from the horse. Since the horse provides instant feedback to every action by the rider, it is easy to know when you have given the correct cue. Repetition of patterned movements required in controlling a horse quickens the reflexes & aids in motor planning.

#### **\*Stretching of tight or spastic muscles:**

Sitting on a horse requires stretching of the adductor muscles of the thighs. Gravity helps stretch the muscles in front of the leg as the rider sits on the horse without stirrups. Riding with stirrups with heels down or level helps to stretch the heel cords & calf muscles. Stomach & back muscles are stretched, as the rider is encouraged to maintain an upright posture against the movement of the horse. Arm & hand muscles are stretched as part of routine exercises on the horse & by the act of holding & using the reins.

#### **\*Decreased spasticity:**

The rhythmic motion of the horse reduces spasticity. The warmth of the horse may aid in relaxation, especially of the legs. Sitting astride a horse helps to break up extensor spasms of the lower limbs. Holding the reins helps to break flexor spasm patterns of the upper limbs.

#### **\*Increased range of motion of the joints:**

As spasticity is reduced, range of motion increases. Range of motion is also improved by the act of mounting & dismounting, tacking up, grooming, & exercises during lessons.

#### **\*Reduction of abnormal movement patterns:**

If spasticity is reduced & range of motion increased, it follows that abnormal movements will be inhibited. Relaxation techniques while riding also help to inhibit abnormal movement.

#### **\*Improved respiration & circulation:**

Although riding is not normally considered a cardiovascular exercise, trotting & cantering do increase both respiration & circulation.

#### **\*Improved appetite & digestion:**

Like all forms of exercise, riding stimulates the appetite. The digestive tract is also stimulated, increasing the efficiency of digestion.

#### **\*Sensory integration:**

Riding stimulates the tactile senses both through touch & environmental stimuli. The movement of the horse changes in direction & speed also stimulates the vestibular system. The olfactory system responds to the many smells involved in stable & ranch environment. Vision is used in control of the horse. The many sounds of a ranch help to involve the auditory system. All of these senses work together & are integrated in the act of riding. In addition, proprioceptors (receptors that give information from our muscles, tendons, ligaments & joints) are activated, resulting in improved proprioception.

## Psychological Benefits

### **\*Improved self-confidence:**

Confidence is gained by mastering a skill normally performed by able-bodied people. The ability to control an animal much larger & stronger than oneself is a great confidence builder. Participating in events such as shows & play days add to the sense of achievement.

### **\*Increased interest in the outside world:**

For those limited by a disability, the world tends to shrink in size. Riding increases awareness in what is going on around the rider, as the rider explores the world from the back of a horse. Even exercising becomes fun when done on horseback.

### **\*Increased interest in one's own life:**

The excitement of riding & the experiences involved stimulate the rider, encouraging the rider to speak & communicate about it.

### **\*Development of patience:**

Since the horse has a mind of its own, the rider learns patience as he or she attempts to perform skills on the horse when the horse is not cooperating. Repetition of basic principles also helps to develop patience.

### **\*Emotional control & self-discipline:**

The rider quickly learns that an out of control rider may mean an out of control horse. Shouting, crying & emotional outbursts may upset the horse, which in turn frightens the rider. Riders learn to control these emotions & appropriately express them.

### **\*Sense of normalcy:**

By being able to master a skill considered difficult by the able population, the rider experiences him/herself as being normal.

### **\*Expansion of the focus of control:**

The rider begins to view him/herself as having control over his/her world as control over a powerful animal increases.

## Social Benefits

### **\*Friendship:**

Although riding can be a solitary activity, it is normally performed in groups. Riders share a common love of horses & a common experience of riding – a good foundation on which to build a friendship, development of respect & love for animals. Horses require a great deal of care & attention. Riders find themselves bonding with the animals. They develop an interest in them & learn to care for them. They learn to put the horse first.

### **\*Increased experiences:**

The variety of experiences involved in riding is endless. From tacking & grooming to trail riding, from going to horse shows to learning the parts of the horse, the rider is constantly experiencing & growing. The horse also provides the rider with the ability to go places otherwise inaccessible due to the disability.

### **\*Enjoyment:**

There is no doubt about it, riding a horse is fun. Riders experience excitement & pleasure every time they come for a lesson.

## Educational Benefits

### **\*Remedial reading:**

Before one can read, it is necessary to recognize the difference in shapes, sizes & even colors. These can be taught more easily on horseback, as part of games & activities. There is less resistance to learning when it is part of a riding lesson. Through the use of signs placed around the arena, letters can be taught, & reading of individual words by word recognition can also be learned. Games involving signs for “exit”, “danger”, “stop”, etc., help to teach important life skills involving reading.

### **\*Remedial math:**

Watching the horse's footsteps, objects around the arena, or even the horse's ears & legs help the rider's counting skills. Number concepts are gained as the rider learns through games involving throwing, adding or subtracting things, & repetitions of activity.

### **\*Sequencing, patterning, & motor-planning:**

Knowing which comes first in a sequence of events is an important part of most activities. These & other similar skills are taught on horseback through the use of obstacle courses, pole bending & many other games & activities.

### **\*Improved eye - hand coordination:**

Eye – hand coordination is necessary for such skills as writing. These skills are taught in various activities & games, as well as tacking up the horse.

### **\*Visual spatial perception:**

This includes our awareness of form & space, & our understanding relationships between forms in our environment. Included in this area is directionality (knowing right from left), & space perception, (what is close or far away). Both reading & math concepts involve visual spatial perception. Visual spatial perception improves as a natural result of control of the horse. Additional exercises are done on the horse to increase ability in this area.

### **\*Differentiation:**

The rider learns to differentiate significant from less significant stimuli in the environment. An improvement in this area occurs as the rider learns to attend to his horse & those things that may influence the horse as opposed to attending the environment in general.