



The Benefits of Therapeutic Riding, Hippotherapy, Equine Facilitated Learning and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy

Therapeutic Riding, Hippotherapy, Equine Facilitated Learning and Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, is when the horse is worked with in a variety of equine-assisted activities to achieve a variety of therapeutic goals, including cognitive, physical, emotional, social, educational and behavioral goals.

Therapeutic riding is practiced in some form in most countries in the world. Great Britain formed the Riding for the Disabled (RDA) program initially to promote competition and equine sports for the disabled and Israel formed the Israel National Therapeutic Riding Association (INTRA) to promote the same goals to include helping its country's military veterans. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) in the United States puts forward a model that incorporates therapy, education, sport, and recreation/leisure activities.

- At our center, the emphasis is on learning riding skills and using these skills for recreational or sport purposes. These would include trail riding, driving, vaulting and competition.
- An emphasis on education and/or psycho/social development usually includes educational, behavioral, social, and emotional growth. Specific goals in these areas are incorporated in the standard riding lesson.
- The therapeutic/medical model integrates principles of medical and/or psychological development into various uses of the horse. In this case, the use of medical practitioners such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, speech therapists and others become an important part of the program. A specialized form of therapy called Hippotherapy is sometimes employed by physical, occupational and speech therapists that are trained in this area.
- The principles of Equine Facilitated Learning are basic and easy to understand. The horse is the perfect mirror of the human that is with it (horses do not lie). The horse is looking to have feelings of safety and peace always. This is because the horse is a 'prey' animal always looking over its shoulder for the 'predator'. If the human is trying to control the animal for whatever reason, this produces fear within the horse. If the human does not display authenticity around the horse, this makes the horse fearful as well. If the human is disrespectful of the horse (inappropriate touching, movements, sounds, thoughts or feelings), this produces fear with the horse too. When the human begins to make conscious and appropriate requests, rather than demands, of the horse cooperation begins to happen. When a human waits for and notices responses of the horse to the human's communication that is showing acknowledgement and respect for the horse. Trust and respect are earned with horses in much the same way as with people. The 'golden rule' applies to horses. However, with the added aspect of great guidance and leadership coming forward from the human. It is the human's responsibility to approach the horse as a great parent approaches a child. Along with the love, compassion, patience and consistency of a great parent, comes confident, skillful, knowledgeable guidance and leadership.
- Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is experiential psychotherapy that includes



equine(s) as part of the therapy session. It may include, but is not limited to, a number of mutually respectful equine activities such as handling, grooming, longeing, riding, driving, and vaulting. EFP is facilitated by a licensed, credentialed mental health professional working with an appropriately credentialed equine professional.

- Our center uses an integrated approach, involving all of the above approaches. Most centers, as well, use a team approach to therapeutic riding. The team consists of some or all of the following: riding instructors, volunteers, educational specialists, behavioral specialists, and medical professionals.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

- ***Improved balance.***

As the horse moves, the rider is constantly thrown off-balance, requiring that the rider's muscles contract and 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 and trunk. By placing the rider in different positions on the horse (therapeutic vaulting), we can work different sets of muscles. Stopping and starting the horse, changing speed and changing direction increase the benefits.

- ***Strengthened muscles.***

Muscles are strengthened by the increased use involved in riding. Even though riding is exercise, it is perceived as enjoyment, and therefore the rider has increased tolerance and motivation to lengthen the period of exercise.

- ***Improved coordination, faster reflexes, and better motor planning.***

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 and aids in motor planning.

- ***Stretching of tight or spastic muscles.***

Sitting on a horse requires stretching of the adductor muscles of the thighs. This is accomplished by pre-stretching prior to mounting the horse, and starting the rider off on a narrow horse, gradually working to wider and wider horses. Gravity helps to stretch the muscles in front of the leg as the rider sits on the horse without stirrups. Riding with stirrups with heels level or down helps to stretch the heel cords and calf muscles. Stomach and back muscles are stretched as the rider is encouraged to maintain an upright posture against the movement of the horse. Arm and hand muscles are stretched as part of routine exercises on the horse and by the act of holding and using the reins.



- ***Decreased spasticity.***

Spasticity is reduced by the rhythmic motion of the horse. 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. Many of the developmental vaulting positions are also designed to break up or reduce spasticity. Fatigue also helps to decrease spasticity by producing relaxation.

- ***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 and dismounting, tacking up, grooming, and exercises during lessons.

- ***Reduction of abnormal movement patterns.***

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

- ***Improved respiration and circulation.***

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

- ***Improved appetite and 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 and environmental stimuli. The vestibular system is also stimulated by the movement of the horse, changes in direction and speed. The olfactory system responds to the many smells involved in a stable and 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 and are integrated in the act of riding. In addition, proprioceptors (receptors that give information from our muscles, tendons, ligaments and joints) are activated, resulting in improved proprioception.



PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

- ***General sense of well-being.***

Exercise in the fresh air of a ranch, away from hospitals, doctor's office, therapy rooms, or home help to promote a sense of well-being.

- ***Improved self-confidence***

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

- ***Increased interest in the outside world.***

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

- ***Increased interest in one's own life.***

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

- ***Improved risk-taking abilities.***

Riding is a risk sport. The rider learns to master fears though the act of staying on the horse, as well as attempting new skills and positions on the horse.

- ***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 riding principles also helps to develop patience.

- ***Emotional control and self-discipline.***

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



- ***Sense of normality.***

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

- ***Expansion of the locus 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 and a common experience of riding -- a good foundation on which to build a friendship.

- ***Development of respect and love for animals.***

Horses require a great deal of care and attention. Riders find themselves bonding with the animals. They develop an interest in them and learn to care for them. They learn to put the needs of the horse first.

- ***Increased experiences.***

The variety of experiences involved in riding are endless. From tacking and grooming to trail riding, from going to horse shows to learning the parts of a horse, the rider is constantly experiencing and 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 and 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, and even colors. These can be taught more easily on horseback, as part of games and 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, and 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***

Counting is learned by counting the horse's footsteps, objects around the arena, or even the horse's ears and legs. Number concepts are gained as the rider compares the number of legs on a horse to the number of his own legs. Addition and subtraction are taught through games involving throwing numbered foam dice and adding or subtracting the numbers. Because the concepts are taught through games, resistance to learning is decreased.

- ***Sequencing, patterning and motor planning.***

Something as simple as holding and using a pencil requires a great deal of motor planning. Knowing which comes first in a sequence of events is an important part of most activities. These and other similar skills are taught on horseback through the use of obstacle courses, pole bending, drill team, and many other games and activities.

- ***Improved eye-hand coordination.***

Eye hand coordination is necessary for such skills as writing. These skills are taught in tacking the horse, as well as various activities and exercises.

- ***Visual/spatial perception.***

This includes our awareness of form and space, and our understanding relationships between forms in our environment. Included in this area are directionality (knowing right from left); space perception, which allows us to differentiate between items close in shape but spatially different (i.e. "h" versus "b"); form perception (i.e. differentiating "h" and "m"); figure ground (picking out an object from the background); and visual sequential memory (such as remembering symbols in a particular sequence or pattern). Both reading and 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 and those things that may influence the horse as opposed to attending the environment in general.

