

Therapeutic horseback riding



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Running Head: THERAPEUTIC HORSEBACK RIDING

Abstract

Therapeutic horseback riding is very beneficial for a rider of any age and had been used as a way of improving the health and physically good state of a person with a handicap or disability. Therapeutic horseback riding is a good way of teaching a kid with disabilities how to react and grow while working with horses. Horses have an uncanny way of communicating with a person and knowing how to work with them to benefit them no matter how long they have known the person. Many miracles have happened with people who were disabled and told they couldn't do something but with some work are able to now. I have heard many success stories in the news and in the paper about people getting into accidents or becoming unable to move and after many years of hard work on horseback they are able to take their first step again!

Therapeutic Horseback Riding

Eleven years ago, Henry Boersma's stroke left him not only paralyzed on his left side, but without the self-confidence he once had in his career as a regional industrial representative. It took a move to Ocala and volunteering with MTRA (Marion Therapeutic Riding Association) to not only find his self-esteem again, but also regain his physical strength-on the back of a horse. When Henry, now 64, heard someone from the Marion Therapeutic Riding Association speak at a meeting of a local stroke club about five years ago, Henry decided to give it a try, even though he had never been on a horse in his life. “ The first time I was on a horse, I was really sore the next day! Now I

ride once a week, and volunteer 5 days a week. I feed the horses, clean their hooves, and even help clean the fields and carry the manure! I go home tired, but it feels good. This is such a great program. Two years ago Henry won the Exceptional Challenge Cup at the National United Professional Horseman Association competition in Kansas City. He won third overall too. (Marion, 2007)

Therapeutic horseback riding can help people in many ways and can be traced throughout the ages. There is documentation of individuals exploring the different therapeutic ways of horsemanship as far back as 600 B. C. The first study actually documented can be traced back to 1875 where Cassaign, a doctor, prescribed horseback riding his patients and believed that riding would and did benefit the patient. There were many patients with all different issues like; neurological disorders, joint pain, people being told they will never walk again, and people with balance issues. A hospital in England called Oxford tells their patients or injured soldiers from World War I to ride. (Marion, 2007) Due to the unique bond formed between human and animal. Many people throughout the ages have realized the importance of riding for people with disorders of all kinds.

History

According to the *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association* , therapeutic riding is mostly attributed to Lis Hartel. She was stuck in wheelchair and even though she could barely walk she was very determined to keep riding despite her disability. Hartel was stricken with polio in 1940 and that illness made her limited to how much she could move. Even though

she was limited in her mobility she still rode all the time and due to that she was successful in rehabilitating herself through horseback riding. She was so successful that she went and won two Olympic silver medals for Grand Prix Dressage in 1952 and 1956. This caught the attention of therapists, and doctors and Hartel paired with a physical therapist and together started one of the first. (O'Rourke, 2004)

Therapeutic Riding

According to All and Loving (1999) therapeutic horseback riding, which can also be called equine-assisted is an emerging activity used for a person with a range of mental, physical, social or emotional needs and who need special attention to survive in life. This kind of riding is greatly beneficial for the rider as a way of improving health and a well being of people with handicaps and disabilities.

There are two services in therapeutic riding equine assisted activities and equine assisted therapy. Equine assisted activities are activities with the horse's provided by trained professionals, but more focusing on recreational, leisure, sport or education some examples are therapeutic riding, driving or equine facilitated learning. All these activities are guided by an educational or learning model and skills are taught to riders and students. (Bieber N. 1996)

Equine Assisted Activities-

Therapeutic riding is usually most effective in children because they are learning from the horse mental and social development. These activities

produce many improvements and many success stories in riders of all ages. Some activities they do on horse back are identifying shapes, colors, numbers, letters, and pictures and also playing games to help the kids function while working a horse but also improving on their flexibility, balance, posture, breathing, and verbal abilities. There are hundreds of programs around the world as well as many organizations that work with the various forms of therapeutic riding including hippo therapy which is a treatment strategy used by occupational, physical and speech therapists and use the horse as a therapeutic tool. The movement of the horse is helps by influencing neuromuscular changes in the patient.

Psychotherapy-

There is psychotherapy which is used by a mental health professional and uses the horse not as a tool but in different ways for a therapeutic benefit. Horse's often provide the best therapy for patients because they do not have to suffer from the unreliability of a person. (Warner& Saleh, 2007). Horses are honest, which forces the patient to become responsible for their actions. Patients who refuse to admit to their responsibilities encounter many difficulties in working with a horse. Once a patient begins to admit their mistakes and search for ways to fix them, then they are naturally rewarded by the horse being more intuitive to their actions.

Equine Assisted Therapy-

The other service is Equine Assisted Therapy; these services are taught by licensed medical professional. To be a professional in this kind of program they have to go through proper training, education and state license

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appropriate to their practice. Examples of this practice are hippo therapy and equine assisted psychotherapy. How they use the horse's to help treat the patients is by utilizing the horse's movement to meet the patient's goal based on what their disability is. But these horses help the patients not only with acquiring a relationship with the animal and learning to care for the animal but riding a horse provides a often profound and unique activity for many people. The motion of the horse, the concentration it takes to learn how to ride and the communication between their instructor and rider allow the patient to benefit from riding even with a disability and is a fun kind of therapy. This therapy has many benefits because when horseback riding gently and rhythmically moves the rider's body so similar to a humans gait that patients with physical disabilities show improvement in flexibility, balance and muscle strength. But with patients who have a more mental or emotional disability the relationship the patients have with the horse can lead to an more confident person with more self esteem than when first started. (Bieber N. 1996)

Who Can Benefit?

Physically Disabled-

Some advantages of therapeutic riding are; physically therapeutic riding can be beneficial to many people with special needs. Riding is a physical activity and people who are mentally disabled benefit from it with an improvement of physical tasks, balance, muscle strength, flexibility, joint movement, and posture. Some physical disabilities that this helps with is muscular

dystrophy, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, amputation, paralysis, spinal bifida, downs syndrome, etc. (Beiber, 1996)

Balance and Posture-

Horseback riding requires balance and posture for any rider. Patients lacking good balance and posture get a lot of work on it when riding from the very moment they hop on the back of a horse. The movement from the horse causes the rider to strengthen its core muscles and the movement works on both sides of the rider helping with the position. The connection between riders is the most important element in building a patient up to improve in different areas.(Beiber, 1996)

Strength and Flexibility-

The movement of a horse requires good strength and flexibility, the muscle regions that are used the most when riding are the back, buttocks, legs, ankles, knees and hips. Riding can also benefit smaller muscles and joints throughout the body in an activity or exercise. This exercise helps riders with low muscles tone and loose flexibility and helps strengthen and tighten the muscles. But it also works in reverse ways also and people with high muscle tone work on relaxing the muscle and moving with the gait of the horse. (Beiber, 1996)

Mentally Disabled-

People with sensory and cognitive disabilities can be helped on horseback also. Some examples of disabilities that can get help are: mental retardation, autism, brain damage, down syndrome, developmental disorders,

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ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, learning disabilities, etc. When riding you have to be very attentive and reason skills but also remember things that you have learned as halting, going, trotting, ect. Due to riding building knowledge as time progresses, simple tasks grow into complex skills that can help provide the rider with intellectual stimulation. Riding involves a lot of information in a small amount of time and in a lesson a rider is asked to interpret sensory information they are learning from the horse, instructor, and environment around them.(Sterba J 2007) The rider has to gain and learn all this information that is appropriate for learning riding skills. The motion, feel, smell, sound and sight of a horse is a lot to absorb especially for a mentally disabled person. Even though the instructors take it slow and let the student process this information. According to the North American Riding for Handicapped Association (NAHRA, 2002) “ Riding is both relaxing and demanding for students of all cognitive abilities, depending on the focus of the lesson.”

Why horses are therapeutic

If you have ever looked at a small child's drawing or play toys they have always drawn horses or played with horses even if they have never seen or ridden one. When watching a horse movie you are always cheering or gasping when a horse is running onto the screen or racing in a big derby like Seabiscut . Many children loved that movie or Black Beauty and watched them over and over, playing with toy horses, or having a rocker to ride. I know my niece does and she is only two years old and has never seen a horse, but she rides her rocking horses every day.

A horse's special power

A horse holds a special power that people of all ages will never out grow. No matter if you love or hate horses, if you see a beautiful horse you gasp and love it but then if you see an emaciated, almost dead horse your heart goes out to it. A simple picture of a horse can emotionally move us and interacting with one can strengthen someone who needs it. Horses do have natural healing powers and, if you have ever been around a horse and actually spent some alone time with them it can make you grow so fond of that horse and make you feel like the most amazing person possible. They love to cuddle. They are always curious and can put a smile on any face. So when someone with a mental or physical disorder comes with them, it help the person grow from the inside out and starting with the heart.

If you show love to a horse they will show as much love as they can give to you. If you get mad at a horse and they realize they have done bad they will come up to you and try and kiss you and make up to like a dogs does. Those little things a horse does really shows to someone who has trouble mentally because it shows they do care. When interacting with a horse it immediately challenges issues of fear and confidence and horses are very responsive to human emotion and actions. Horse's will sense and respond to a student's negative emotions and behaviors. If you are frustrated on a horse the horse will sense that and become frustrated also. This shows a person that they need to recognize the effects of their emotions while riding and put all that aside.(Loving 1999)

Advantage of Riding

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One advantage is a horse will never lie to you. Horses will truthfully tell you how it is and never hide emotions. Horses also do not respond nicely to bullying or aggressive behavior, a horse will kick or bite you and never hesitates to tell you “ how it is.” To be able to work correctly with a horse a person needs to be aware of their methods of communication and be able to solve any problems that may come upon them when riding so they get positive responses from the horse. (Loving, 1999)

Another positive thing is horse's will not judge you they will react simply to what is or has happened or how they feel. People soon learn that the “ labels” that are constantly used in today's society don't apply. They can “ tell it to the horse—he doesn't care” Because of this people who are in therapy are able to learn to truly be themselves and enjoy for the first time in their lives! (Loving 1999)

Individuals with emotional, social and mental disabilities benefit in many ways with therapeutic horseback riding. A study found that patients experience increased confidence and improved self-concept and with these activities it helps in a patient's social skill. Horses also can help a person feel in control because you are telling the horse to do something and they will do it. A person also improves in communication due to learning how to care for and ride a horse, the patient has to be able to communicate with the horse and the instructor. Riding is a very social activity. Riding helps empower people and enables them to connect on a personal level. Also the unpredictable nature of animals and situations also creates a real-life environment in which the patient will be able to confront fears and make

adjustments to situation that can be beyond their control. (Warner C & Saleh S 2007)

Skills you need to teach

Some skills you will need to have to become an instructor or do therapy with the kids on horseback is: You are going to need a lot of patience and consideration to the kids, they do not understand everything going on and it is usually a new environment for them. If you are doing therapy with the kids you need the proper education as a four year college and proper physical therapy degree also. When coaching or instructing you are going to need a degree in an equine program for example equine industries management, so you know how to work with a horse and control a horse if it may go out of control. Other things that will be useful to have is being a happy person and not a grouchy person. A student does not want a grumpy teacher when they are trying to do something but a person who is happy and always cheering them on and helping them achieve the goals they have set for. You really need to have a positive attitude about everything so it is easier on you and the student but also be able to communicate well and if worse comes to worse have a plan B if plan A falls through. You want to be able to make the therapy lessons fun and enjoyable for the students also so they want to come back and enjoy what they are doing.

This horse program is an integral part of any ranch and therefore are required to attend sessions at the barn regularly. When you first appear at the ranch you start working with a horse learning the safety, care, feeding, grooming, and as well the basic behavior and herd interaction of a horse.

You participate in horse classes with a team of trainers two times a week for an hour and a half each time. Very few students who approach a ranch proclaim they hate horses and want nothing to do with them which is mostly a fear factor. But usually by the time they are done with their program they loves horses and cant get enough of them. These programs have been found to be very successful with the inexperienced as you are able to have a fresh start with them and easily shape the nature of their experience.

In conclusion I have found out with a lot of the research I have been doing that when riding a horse you can really grow and become able to do things that you were not able before as; walking, making friends, and the daily chores a person must do. When riding a horse you also form a bond with the horse and learn how to work with such a big animal and you really can grow from the experience and develop better physical, mental and sociological skills that you could not learn before. Therapeutic horse back riding has many benefits and can help people achieve their dreams as it has already done for many others. Therapeutic horseback riding can be a very rewarding experience for the student and the teacher if you put the time and effort in it. Many people say that it is dangerous and students can get hurt but a professional will not put a kid on a high spirited horse all the horses they use are dead broke and are specially trained for this type of work. They are used to high pitched noises and mentally disabled kids. For these horses this is not their first rodeo.