



Therapeutic Horseback Riding,
(also known as an equine-assisted activity)

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Therapeutic Horseback Riding,

Therapeutic horseback riding, also known as an **equine-assisted activity**, is for individuals with a range of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social special needs. There are several different kinds of programs that utilize horses for therapeutic benefits.

Equine-assisted activities, produce very favorable improvements in riders of all ages. "Therapeutic riding" refers specifically to horseback riding lessons for people with special needs in which the therapeutic benefits of riding are a result of learning riding skills.

Therapeutic riding can be beneficial to many people with special needs. The most obvious and often the most immediately recognizable benefit is physical. Because riding is a very physical activity, children and adults with special physical needs and various physical impairments can benefit from riding. Instructors employ a variety of physical tasks that help improve balance, muscle strength, flexibility, joint movement, and posture. Therapeutic riding can benefit people with many different physical disabilities, including cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, spina bifida and down's syndrome.

Balance and posture: Because horseback riding requires balance and good posture for all riders, students lacking good balance and posture will be working on their balance issues from the very moment they mount. The exercise of riding grounds the rider in his or her hips. The movement input from the horse causes the rider to strengthen core muscles (postural muscles along the spine) and the movement offers input to both sides of the rider so they are more likely to improve their upright position.

This connection between horse and rider is a fundamental element in building balance in riders with and without special needs. Instructors often employ various exercises and riding skills that work on balance and posture in multiple ways. Because therapeutic riding is fundamentally flexible to the student's needs, balance exercises are quite varied.

Exercises can range from simply sitting atop the horse, to walking, to trotting. The combination of supporting as well as challenging the rider enables the rider to improve their physical capabilities.

Muscles and joints: The movement of the horse also requires good strength and flexibility. The most obvious muscle regions that benefit from such exercise are the back, buttocks and legs, as well as the ankles, knees and hips. Riding also affects smaller muscles and joints throughout the body as riding is an activity that requires the participation of the entire body.

Riders with low muscle-tone and loose flexibility will work on strengthening and tightening the muscles primarily in the back, neck, buttocks and leg regions. Riders with very high muscle-tone work on relaxing the muscle and moving with the gait of the horse. The different gaits of the horse can be used to make the student aware of different muscle groups.

As the rider learns different riding skills, muscle strength and flexibility are increasingly improved. The flexibility of equine-assisted activities enables riders with very different needs to benefit from learning the same skills.

Cognitive and sensory: People with various cognitive and sensory disabilities can be helped with riding activities. Examples of some disorders include: mental retardation, autism, brain damage and developmental disorders.

Riding requires attention, reasoning skills and memory. Because riding builds knowledge as time progresses, simple tasks grow into complex skills that provide the rider with intellectual stimulation. Riding incorporates a lot of information into a fairly small amount of time. In a session (which varies depending on the student and the program) an individual is asked to both interpret sensory information they are receiving from the horse, instructor, environment, etc., and use this information in a manner that is appropriate for learning riding skills. The motion, feel, smell, sound and sight of a horse is a lot to absorb; however, lessons can be simplified giving the student time to process this information.

Higher-functioning riders use riding skills and tasks given by instructors to help integrate this sensory information in a way that makes sense to the individual student. According to the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA), a section of NARHA, Riding is both relaxing and demanding for students of all cognitive abilities, depending on the focus of the lesson.

Emotional, social and psychological: Individuals with emotional, social and psychological disabilities all benefit in similar ways. A study conducted by Hannah Burgon found that therapeutic riding participants experience increased confidence and improved self-concept, and that these activities aid social stimulation and leads to acquisition of transferable skills.

Riding helps the student interact with others and form meaningful relationships with horses and people. Building a relationship with an animal is very rewarding in many aspects; for a person with an emotional, social or psychological disability, the trust and loyalty an animal shows for people demonstrates to the student how important these attributes are in personal relationships.

Horses also help people feel in control of their situation because there is a direct correlation between action and reaction. To learn how to care for and ride a horse, a student must also be able to communicate efficiently with the horse and the instructor. In this way, riding is a very social activity, but is less daunting to people who are uncomfortable in social situations. However, the experience of riding a horse is very different. Riding helps to empower people and enables them to connect on a personal level.

The sometimes unpredictable nature of animals and situations also creates a real-life environment in which students will be able to confront fears and make adjustments to situations beyond their control.