



medical professionals including the American Physical Therapy Association and the American Occupational Therapy Association. The benefits received from participation in therapeutic riding are as numerous as the types of disabilities and conditions served.

Evidence of therapeutic riding can be traced through the ages. There is documentation of individuals exploring the therapeutic benefits of horsemanship as far back as 600 B.C. However, modern therapeutic riding is most often attributed to Lis Hartel, a Danish woman who used a wheelchair in the 1940's as a result of contracting polio as a child. Hartel was so successful in her efforts to rehabilitate herself using horseback riding, she went on to win two Olympic silver medals for Grand Prix Dressage (1952 & 1956). Her fortitude and remarkable achievement caught the attention of therapists, doctors and horsemen alike. Hartel later partnered with physical therapist Ulla Harpoth; together the women started one of the first therapeutic riding programs. Word quickly spread of this successful treatment, and riding programs developed throughout Europe, North America and Australia.

## Therapeutic Riding

*“When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk;  
He trots the air; The earth sings when he  
touches it; The basest horn of his hoof is  
more musical than the pipe of Hermes;  
He is pure air and fire”*

*-Shakespeare*

### Therapeutic Riding – An Emerging Field

Therapeutic horseback riding is an emerging field in which horses are utilized to promote emotional growth and pronounced physical benefits. The therapeutic qualities of horseback riding are recognized by many



*“There’s Something About the Outside of a  
Horse that’s good for the inside of a Man”*

*-Winston Churchill*

### Benefits of Therapeutic Riding

Horseback riding transports individuals with special needs into a new, unexplored world providing a sense of independence and freedom that defies disabilities. When riding, individuals escape their braces, crutches, wheelchairs and disabilities, replacing them with the gentle gait of a well-trained horse. Therapeutic Riding is widely recognized as an effective rehabilitation tool in the treatment of children and adults experiencing a wide range of physical, cognitive, developmental, and social/ emotional disabilities. Therapeutic Riding provides a unique multi-sensory therapeutic experience unduplicated in standard physical therapy sessions.

For those who are learning to walk, or re-learning to walk due to stroke, brain injury or other disability, therapeutic riding is invaluable. The three-dimensional movements of the horse’s back during a walk—up and down, side to side, and front to back—transmits a sensorimotor experience to the rider closely mimicking the input received during the normal human gait. This provides a normal sensorimotor experience contributing to the maintenance, development, rehabilitation and enhancement of physical skills.

The movement of the horse throughout the therapeutic riding session promotes improved balance, muscle tone and flexibility. From the moment the riders mount, the horses’ movement facilitates strengthening of core muscles (postural muscles along the spine). Instructors strategically place clients in a variety of positions (sideways, backwards) on the horse while riding. Each position change requires the client to refocus and find their center of balance. The varied positions and the horse’s gaits engage additional muscle groups in new ways.

Throughout each lesson, riders engage in specific activities, exercises and riding skills designed to improve balance, muscle strength, coordination, flexibility, joint movement, and fine/gross motor skills. Many studies have supported these improvements. In a study by Hammer,



Nilsgard, Forsberg, Pepa, Skargren & Oberg (2005) involving patients with multiple Sclerosis, marked improvements were seen in the areas of gait, spasticity, functional strength, coordination, pain-relief emotion and balance. A study testing the effectiveness of therapeutic riding in children with cerebral palsy by Benda, McGibbon and Grant (2003) showed significant improvement in symmetry of muscle activity in children with spastic cerebral palsy and credits the movement of the horse rather than passive stretching for the measured improvements. Another study by Sterba, Rogers, France & Vokes (2002) involving 17 participants with cerebral palsy over an 18 week time period found that therapeutic riding improved the gross motor function in children with CP, which may reduce the degree of motor disability. In yet another study by Burkland and Eelmae (2000) dealing with young individuals ages 9-12 with mild or severe mental retardation, statistically significant improvements were seen in the areas of posture and balance. Therapeutic

Riding can benefit people with many different physical disabilities, including muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, amputation, paralysis, spina bifida, and down's syndrome among others.

People with various cognitive disabilities can be helped through horseback riding. Therapeutic Riding provides excellent opportunities for activities targeting specific skills including following directions, sequencing, problem solving, reasoning, attention, and memory skills among others. Riding builds knowledge as time progresses and simple tasks grow into complex skills providing the rider with needed intellectual stimulation.

Many disabilities are accompanied by speech and language difficulties and delays which can be devastating to learning, interpersonal relationships and critical everyday functioning. A study comparing traditional speech therapy with therapeutic riding by Macauley & Gutierrez (2004) involved children ages 9 to 12 and showed higher gains in speech and language capabilities in the group following therapeutic riding, with additional benefits of improved motivation and attention noted.

Individuals with emotional, social and psychological disabilities benefit in similar ways. A study conducted by Hannah Burgon found that Therapeutic Riding increased confidence and improved self-concept, aided social stimulation and lead to acquisition of transferable skills. Results in an additional study by Kaiser, Smith, Heleski and Spence (2006) showed a significant decrease in anger and behavior problems in at risk youth after participating in just one 8 week therapeutic riding session. Riding helps students interact with others and form meaningful relationships with horses and people. Building a relationship with an animal is rewarding in many aspects; for a person with an emotional, social or psychological disability, the trust and loyalty an animal shows for people demonstrates how important these attributes are in personal relationships.

Because of the innately rich sensory environment involved, Therapeutic Riding benefits those with sensory processing

issues. Sensory Processing Disorder is a complex disorder of the brain affecting developing children and adults. People with SPD misinterpret everyday sensory information, such as touch, sound and movement. There are several types of Sensory Processing Disorder; each one may result in a number of different behavioral and sensory patterns that may cause severe and debilitating motor, attention and behavior patterns. The combination of all aspects of horseback riding, the various tasks and activities directed by the riding instructors, the sensory rich environment of the trail and the warm, accepting, caring atmosphere in a Therapeutic Riding setting provide outstanding opportunities for individuals with Sensory Processing Disorder to learn to effectively manage their responses to sensations and live, learn and love in a more functional manner. A study by Chandler (2003) showed significant and positive change in sensory processing capabilities both from an individual and occupational perspective after participating in therapeutic riding for only 1 week.

No two riders are exactly the same. Most clients have a primary disability coupled with secondary disabilities. Disabilities range from mild to severe. Each client has their own strengths, areas of need, likes, and dislikes. The Therapeutic Riding program is designed to meet each rider's special needs.

*"In Riding A Horse, We Borrow Freedom"*

*-Helen Thomson*



many hands one vision

## What is Therapeutic Riding?



many hands one vision

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