

# Origins of Therapeutic Riding

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## HISTORY

To be honest, nobody really does have a full understanding of that first part its origins. The fact is that there are historical accounts of people with disabilities riding horses as long ago as the times of the ancient Greeks, who recognized that horses had the potential to be more than just a means of getting from Athens to Corinth, or succeeding in battle.

Some suggests that the ancient Chinese also recognized the horse in this manner.

Therapeutic riding in some form or another has probably existed since that time of antiquity.

However, the beginnings of modern therapeutic riding could probably be traced to turn-of-the-century England. At this time, Oxford Hospital doctors and therapists offered horseback therapy to soldiers wounded in World War I. By the 1950s, they were probing the possibility of making the therapeutic benefits of horseback riding available to people with a wider range of disabilities.

1952 is a year often marked as one which provided unprecedented impetus to the therapeutic riding movement. In that year's Helsinki Olympic Games, Liz Hartel, despite being confined to a wheelchair due to polio, rode away with the silver medal in the discipline of dressage. The Danish woman's achievement jolted medical and equine professionals throughout Europe, and soon many centers for therapeutic riding were established across the continent. Even the British Royal Family was impressed, and granted support for the founding of the British Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) in 1969.

Simultaneously, word of the "new" therapy tool began to reach North America. Centers were developed in Canada and the United States, and North American professionals, like their European colleagues, quickly realized a need for an organization to govern therapeutic riding activities and provide information to the public. To that end, the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was founded in 1969. NARHA still provides training and education, safety guidelines, instructor certification, and center accreditation (which Circle of Hope has earned!).

Today, riders with disabilities continue to enjoy the many benefits of the horse.. The field is widely recognized by medical and

therapy professions, whose practitioners regularly refer patients and students to therapeutic riding programs. Hippotherapy (physical therapy on horseback, with the horse acting as a dynamic moving surface) continues to develop. Horses have become everyday heroes, helping and befriending people with a variety of disabilities.

## BENEFITS

So what exactly are these benefits, compelling enough to incite a global therapeutic revolution? They come in many guises, and range from those discovered by every person who sits on a horse to those uniquely available to people who ride for the purposes of therapy. They are physical, scholastic, social, and psychological.

### Physical

Improvement in muscle strength is one of the most obvious and important physical benefits of therapeutic riding. Muscular development, the goal of many other conventional therapies, is accomplished much more easily by therapeutic riding for a simple reason: riding is fun! Riders who are constantly forced to perform exercises which they view as frustrating and monotonous are excited and yet challenged by their riding sessions. Longer exercise periods may be achieved because of this increased motivation; furthermore, riders view the time as fun, not work.

Closely tied to muscular development is the improvement of balance. The movement of the horse requires the rider to constantly readjust his or her center of gravity, repeatedly contracting and relaxing deep muscles not easily affected by conventional physical therapy. The rhythmic motion of a horse's walk is similar to that of a person's, and teaches the muscles of the legs and trunk to perform rhythmically on the ground, as well. Ever wonder why therapeutic riding instructors sometimes place riders on the horse sideways, or even backwards? It's not just for a change of scenery—the different positions work different sets of muscles.

Ask any rider, and they will tell you just how much coordination riding a horse requires. Horses always know when their rider has given an incorrect cue or lost his or her balance, and will provide instant feedback to the rider to help stimulate improvement. Likewise, horses will let you know when you have done something correctly, and the feeling of accomplishment is an unrivaled reward. Repetition of patterns and sequences used in working with a horse also quicken the reflexes and develop motor planning.

Muscle tightness and spasticity are alleviated by horseback riding. Merely sitting on a horse stretches three muscle categories: the adductor muscles of the thighs; the back and abdominal muscles; and either the muscles on the front of the leg (when riding without stirrups and a hanging leg) or the muscles of the calf and the heel cords (when riding with stirrups and the heel down or level). Arm and hand muscles are stretched by manual exercises or by holding and using the reins. The warmth of the horse and the fatigue produced by exertion also help reduce spasticity by causing relaxation of the muscles. Increased range of motion of the joints follows from decreased spasticity, and is also accomplished by mounted exercises.

The three final major physical benefits of therapeutic riding are less often considered. First, trotting and cantering help to improve respiration and circulation. Secondly, riding, like other forms of exercise, stimulates not only the appetite but the digestive tract itself, increasing energy availability and efficiency of digestion. Thirdly, all of the senses are stimulated by the exercises, sensations, sights, smells, and sounds. Even the vestibular system, which aids in balance, is active. All of this comes together and affords the benefit of improved sensory integration.

### **Scholastic**

Like the physical benefits, the scholastic or educational benefits of therapeutic riding are multifold. Math and reading skills may be developed through games—the playful nature of the learning environment decreases resistance to it. Sequencing and patterning techniques may be taught, and hand-eye coordination, needed for skills such as writing, may be refined. Riders learn to differentiate significant from trivial stimuli in the environment, and to attend to only the ones which may affect themselves or their horses.

Visual/spatial perception is also developed. This category includes awareness of form and space, and the person's own place in it. Riders learn to distinguish items—such as letters—close in shape or form, objects from the background, and left from right. Visual sequential memory is improved. These things are accomplished not only through specific exercises but also as a natural result of horseback riding.

### **Social**

The social benefits of therapeutic riding are manifest. Besides simply having fun, riders are exposed to a limitless variety of experiences. In one session, they may groom and tack the horse, have a mounted lesson in the ring, go for a cool-down trail ride, and spend a little quiet time caring for the horse afterwards. Riders with physical disabilities experience newfound mobility, and can travel to places they could not previously visit at speeds they could not previously attain. Riders develop respect for and love of animals, and learn to put the horse's needs before their own. They bond with

the horses and develop an interest in their well-being. Finally, riders become part of a community founded on the common experience of riding, a community which provides friendships and support.

### **Psychological**

Despite the importance of the physical, scholastic, and social benefits of therapeutic riding, the psychological ones are arguably the most significant and the most unique. Foremost among these is the improvement in self-confidence, gained by being proficient in a skill in which most able-bodied people are not. When on a horse, people with disabilities can at last be considered “normal” or even “above-normal”. Emotional control and self-discipline are learned, as riders discover that emotional outbursts upset the horse. Another consequence of the horse’s presence as an entity with its own agenda is the development of patience. Riders learn to stay calm and persevere when the horse is not cooperating.

They also learn to conquer their fears by taking risks such as attempting new skills on horseback. The locus of control expands as riders view themselves as having control not only over their own bodies but also over a very large animal. And riding sparks increased interest in the outside world and in the rider’s own life. Overall, the psychological benefits of therapeutic riding are unparalleled by any other form of therapy.