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THE BENEFITS OF EQUINE ASSISTED ACTIVITIES AND THERAPIES

SCHOOL CAMPS AND RESIDENCES

Horses have long been associated in our imaginations with heroic tales of knights on horseback and cowboys riding into the sunset. They have a unique ability to connect with humans and we humans react to a horse's energy, strength and perceptiveness. History and literature are filled with quotes by those who have discovered this truth:

"A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" (William Shakespeare)

"Honor lies in the mane of a horse" (Herman Melville)

"To many, the words love, hope and dreams are synonymous with horses" (Oliver Wendell Holmes)

Throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of individuals with and without special needs experience the rewarding benefits of equine assisted activities and therapies (EAAT). A physical, cognitive, or emotional special need does not limit a person from interacting with horses. In fact, such interactions can prove highly rewarding. So whether it is a five year old with autism, a veteran dealing with PTSD, or a senior citizen battling dementia, research shows that individuals of all ages who participate in EAAT can experience physical and emotional rewards through the unique relationship formed with the horse that can lead to increased confidence, mobility and self-esteem. It would seem that Winston Churchill was right"there is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

Equine Assisted Activities and Therapies (EAAT) recognize the quality of life issues facing persons with special needs. EAAT influence the whole person. They can have an effect on all of the body's systems, providing alternatives to traditional methods of treatment and a meaningful recreation alternative for people with varying disabilities.

EAAT programs may offer concentrations in several different areas of need. Each area encompasses specific goals and techniques, may be appropriate for certain individuals, and requires different professional personnel. Yet all areas overlap, complement and support each other, so an individual riding for sport or recreation also receives valuable physical and psychological benefits. Regardless of the concentration the participant/client, the horse (chosen for its size and temperament), volunteers (trained as side walkers and horse leaders), a certified therapeutic riding instructor and/or a licensed therapist come together as a team to achieve individual goals.

In Therapeutic Horsemanship, children and adults with special needs come together with their team to experience a recreational activity. Therapeutic Riding is taught as an adapted sport where participants learn the rules of a sport, the techniques of horsemanship, and methods of controlling their bodies to make the human and horse interaction meaningful. For individuals with impaired mobility, riding rhythmically moves their bodies in a manner similar to a human walking gait contributing to increased balance, mobility, coordination and physical strength. While mastering the skills necessary to ride successfully, attention, concentration, learning and verbal skills are further enhanced. The result is the combination of learning a rewarding activity while attaining the best physical and functional levels possible.

Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) is an approach to human development through therapeutic horsemanship. Participants engage in non-riding activities and learn alternate skills to draw from when faced with challenges. In recognizing a horse's ability to read and understand human body language, EAL can provide insights into the physical manifestations of any inner conflicts and a pathway to change the "inside" by changing the "outside." The lesson is that the horse is doing exactly what the human body is telling them to do and if they change themselves, the horse responds differently. The size of the horse also offers an opportunity for some to overcome fear and develop confidence.

Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT), which includes Hippotherapy, is the use of a horse by physical,

occupational, or speech therapists as an integrated strategy to treat specific neuromusculoskeletal dysfunctions in a non-clinical setting. By providing multidimensional movement and a dynamic base of support, the horse becomes an invaluable tool when facilitating improvement of core strength, motor control, balance, posture, endurance, motor planning, receptive/expressive language, sensory processing and attention skills. By modulating the horse's movement, a therapist can elicit various responses from their client. When a client improves their functional abilities and their motivation is high, an ideal opportunity is presented to transition that client to a therapeutic riding program where the learning of "real" riding skills can add a new and exciting dimension to their lives.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) involves equine activities as part of a psychotherapy session conducted by a licensed mental health counselor in collaboration with an equine specialist in mental health and learning. The focus of EAP is the client's reactions and behaviors through the process of interacting with the horse. EAP can be used to better deal with trauma and loss, develop a sense of self, increase levels of trust, establish boundaries and create awareness of the needs of living creatures through responsible care of the horse.

Programs, such as those offered by Full Circle Equine Centered Activities, may have a specific orientation or draw from several concentrations, depending upon the needs of the individual. Integrated programs such as V.E.T.T. (veteran equine transition therapy) specifically for veterans may include therapeutic horsemanship and equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP). Monthly field trips for individuals with Alzheimer's and their care-givers would fall under the equine assisted learning (EAL) concentration, while weekly group lessons for adults with special needs from ARC of Rockland and Jawonio participate in a combined concentration of therapeutic riding and equine assisted learning. Children in grief counseling through United Hospice of Rockland's Healing Hearts program participate in a full day of EAAT that combines therapeutic riding, equine assisted learning and equine assisted psychotherapy.

Whatever the goals are for a particular lesson, or whatever the orientation is of a particular therapy team, the ultimate goal is to maximize each person's functional potential. Of course an individual's perception of accomplishment and joy in achievement are essential to any EAAT program.

Research shows that individuals of all ages who participate in EAAT can experience physical and emotional rewards through the unique relationship formed with the horse. That, in turn, can lead to increased confidence, mobility and self-esteem.

Donna and Mark Bergling, parents of Abby, on the therapeutic program:

"We were able to see Abby participate in the program at a time when there weren't many activities for her to participate in. Her rehabilitation from a Traumatic Brain Injury which left her with severe effects of a stroke consisted of traditional PT, OT, and Speech therapy. After several years of intense therapy, we were looking for alternatives that were more community based and more age appropriate that took place in a non-hospital environment.

Someone at Helen Hayes Hospital had suggested 'riding therapy.' We didn't really know what to expect from the program when we first signed up. We couldn't even image Abby being capable of being on a horse, but were excited about exploring the idea. When Abby first started with the

program, she was physically limited as she was still ambulating using a wheelchair. While it took some assistance for her to mount the horses, Lynn and her experienced staff always handled her with both skill and care. Without having to worry about holding herself up or walking, the muscles in her whole body were free to relax. That was both the beauty and benefit of the program. While not always so easy for her, she loved riding and always looked forward to going for her session. She didn't mind or even realize the therapeutic benefits of balance and control to her core"

A U.S. War Veteran on the therapeutic program:

"My name is Jordan. I have served in the United States Marine Corps from October 2002 to October 2006. I was deployed to Kabul Afghanistan [in 2004] and to Iraq in the Anbar province from [in 2005]. I served in the army national guard [from 2006 to 2009]. After returning home from my second tour of duty, I had a very difficult time re-acclimating back to life here in the United States. The day we got off the bus from Iraq my family could tell right away that something was wrong. It was if my body was here in the US but my mind was still stuck over in Iraq. My symptoms included but were not limited to: Feeling like a complete empty shell of a person, almost as if my soul was removed from my body. I was angry often, could not sleep, drank heavily, had overwhelming feelings of sadness and believed that I had not done enough. I had become withdrawn from loved ones and pushed my family and friends away Nothing seemed to work

After a long struggle with these symptoms I began to receive help for my situation. A friend had given me a business card for a therapeutic horseback program and had mentioned that her friend was looking to put a veterans program together to help work with vets that had a hard time re-adjusting to life. I had been a horse rider as a child and welcomed the experience. When I met Lynn, she had mentioned her idea of a program for veterans and asked if I would mind being her guinea pig. I said yes of course. The first time I began to work with her horse Journey, I began to realize how much feedback you could get from a horse and how important it is to learn to control and manage your emotions. She began working with a part of horsemanship that I had never learned as a young rider Soon after I began working with Journey, Lynn mentioned that she runs other programs that require volunteers to help run the sessions. "Vets to Volunteers" I call it! Amazingly it was in volunteering that helped me to find myself. I began to stop concentrating on me and my problems and started caring about other people.

I felt that my life had a direction and purpose in an otherwise purposeless existence. It was at that point in conjunction with other things that I began to put my life back together. The stable has become a safe haven for me and I now have an escape when things pop back up. With a diagnosis of PTSD the memories and symptoms will never go away, but the episodes become less frequent and I have learned to handle them better I would recommend this experience to others that are dealing with trauma or having a hard time readjusting from war."

Caitlyn on Joey the pony, with Annie Pitrelli at the Ramapo Equestrian Center in Suffern, NY

Warming up with stretches: Caitlyn with Annie Pitrelli, Maura Rodenas and Lynn Kuropatkin of Full Circle

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By LYNN KUROPATKIN

Lynn Kuropatkin is the executive director of Full Circle Equine Centered Activities, Inc. and is certified as a therapeutic riding instructor and equine specialist in mental health and learning by the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.). Additional certifications include ARIA (American Riding Instructors Association) and Parelli Natural Horsemanship. Full Circle Equine Centered Activities (a PATH Intl. member center) represents a collaboration of many dedicated individuals brought together with decades of experience in their respective fields to provide diverse programs tailored to the special needs of specific populations. Full Circle collaborates with Milestones Integrated Services OT,PT,RN,SLP,PLLC. and Journey's Way Mental Health Counseling Services PLLC., to better serve those needs and develop new programs. Full Circle operates out of Ramapo Equestrian Center in Suffern, New York and can be reached at [info@fullcircleeca.org](mailto:info@fullcircleeca.org).

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