What picture comes to mind when I say Horse Therapy? Did images of horses receiving deep tissue massages surface? Well that is not the type of therapy to which I am referring. Instead, Equestrian therapy is the practice of involving horses to play a vital role in human therapeutic methods. By definition, equestrian therapy, or Equine-Assisted Therapy [EAT], or more simply Horse Therapy, enhances the physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills of persons with disabilities; EAT plays a particular role in aiding persons that suffer from ADD, anxiety, dementia, delay in mental development, down syndrome and other genetic syndromes, depression, trauma and brain injuries, behavior and abuse issues and other mental health issues.

I will be honest, at first, I thought to myself, “Do these methods really work as well as they say?” Then I took a closer look into how this particular therapy affected me, well not me personally, but my younger brother, who has a mild form of autism paired with Asperger’s syndrome. For those that do not know, Asperger’s Syndrome affects one social skills, causing them to be either extremely extroverted or extremely introverted; my brother falls into second category. After beginning my research on this topic, I learned just how much this therapy benefits so many. For example, the rhythmic motion of riding a horse enables the rider, specifically children, to indirectly learn better focusing. This is one reason why so many therapists recommend equine therapy. Not only that but also for the horse’s ability to respond immediately and provide feedback based on the rider’s behavior or action; the basis of Equine Therapy is that because horses behave similarly to human beings in their social and responsive behavior, patients find it easier to establish a connection with the horse. Throughout the Equine Therapy process, the goal is for the patients/students to build a sense of self-worth, self-confidence, improve their communication skills, build trust and self-efficiency, and learn their limits or boundaries.

In equine therapy, there is no “one size fits all” method; in fact, there are four unique methods to choose from, all requiring the guidance of a licensed therapist. The first form is Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) or equine assisted psychotherapy. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy promotes and practices interaction with horses to assist individuals with emotional and mental disabilities. Simply being around a horse and becoming comfortable with it is all that this therapy requires. Another method is Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL); this method covers a wide array of social and emotional learning activities organized around horse experiences. Practitioners of this method take whatever experience the rider may have and expands upon it to improve brain functions and other systems within the body; some leaders invoke self-awareness while training clients with mindfulness skills as a recovery tool for those who routinely make poor choices or those who are under high stress. What is so unique about this method is that has been found to be effective for both youth and adult clients; the other methods mostly target youth. Hippotherapy, the third process, is a form of physical, occupational, or speech therapy in which a therapist, specifically a hippotherapist, uses the characteristic movements of a horse to provide carefully graded motor and sensory input. The horse’s movement is an essential role of the therapy as a treatment tool to aid in the development of neurological functions as well as sensory processing. The final method is known simply as therapeutic riding, which is a somewhat generalized term encompassing riding activities pursued specifically for therapeutic outcome. Therapeutic Riding utilizes horseback riding to positively impact cognitive, physical, emotional, and social well-being; it also allows the rhythmic movement of the rider’s body in a way similar to the human gait, or walk, which translates into the improvement of muscle strength, balance, and flexibility. This method particularly benefits those who have cerebral palsy (such as a girl in my 4H group), Downs Syndrome, autism, and Sensory Integration Disorder.

An example of these methods in action would be seen a beginners’ horse therapy class, where the students would be asked to get the horse to move along the outside of a circle without touching it. If students tried to clap, yell, or whistle, the horse would not respond. In the same way that the students learned that these brash methods were ineffective, so too did the parents, friends, and guardians of the students learn that shouting, clapping, and forcing would be ineffective on the students. Therapy proved just as beneficial to the families as it was to the students.

Looking back on these methods and thinking about my brother, I am amazed at how far he has come as he has used these very same methods without even realizing it. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Equine Facilitated Learning allowed him the opportunity to be around horses, big, small, cuddly, grumpy, speed horses and halter horses, which are his favorite. Therapeutic riding taught him to gain confidence, love being outside and enjoy being on a one-thousand-pound animal.

What about the rest of us? Is equine therapy only for those with a disability? No, of course not. Therapeutic riding benefits all participants; a Sunday trail ride with family or friends, a local county horse show or rodeo, or even volunteering to lead an equine therapy group. The leaders learn as much from their students as the students do from their teacher. It is a proven fact that simply being around a horse provides many different health benefits such as lower blood pressure, lower stress levels. As for me, I too have used these exact methods thanks to opportunities to volunteer through my local 4H club to help other students with disabilities. The smiles, joy, and fun had while leading the children around horses’ patient than we ever could be makes me and my fellow 4Hers join in with the glee and happiness.

Just like with other therapies such as physical, occupational and speech, people with disabilities are being helped by certified therapists to cope with their disability so that they are able to function like normal people. However, equine therapy combines all three in such a way that the patients or students do not feel that they are actually under therapy. Equine therapy - no matter which of the four methods, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy, Equine Facilitated Learning, Hippotherapy, or Therapeutic Riding - are tools in the fight against disability.

**References**

**• Human-Equine Alliances for Learning**

**• http://www.equestriantherapy.com/**

**• Pontotoc County Extension Office**

• Dr. Mack Huddleston – **a local Veterinarian**

• Mary Frances Malatesta **– a local Special Ed Teacher**

Thank you. Are there any questions?