

BENEFITS OF THERAPEUTIC RIDING:

1. **Educational:**

- Remedial reading: Before one can read, it is necessary to recognize the difference in shapes, sizes, and colors, These can be taught more easily on horseback, as part of games and activities
- Sequencing, patterning and motor planning: knowing which comes first in a sequence of events is an important part of most activities.
- Improved eye-hand coordination: this is necessary for skills such as writing.
- Visual spatial perception: this includes our awareness of form and space. Included are directionality (knowing right from left); space perception, which allows us to differentiate between items close in shape but spatially different (“h” versus “b”); figure ground (picking out an object from the background).

2. **Social:**

- Friendship: although riding can be a solitary activity, it is normally performed in groups of people who share a common love of horses.
- Increased experiences: from tacking and grooming to trail riding, from going to horse shows to learning the parts of a horse, the rider is constantly experiencing and growing.
- Enjoyment: there is no doubt about it, riding a horse is fun. Riders experience excitement and pleasure every time they come for a lesson.

3. **Psychological:**

- General sense of well-being: exercising in the fresh air of a ranch, away from hospitals, doctors’ offices, therapy rooms, or home help to promote a sense of well-being.
- Improved self-confidence: confidence is gained by mastering a skill normally performed by able-bodied people.
- Increased interest in the “outside world”: For those confined by a disability, the world tends to shrink in size. Riding increases interest in what is happening around the rider, as the rider explores the world from the back of a horse.

4. **Physical:**

- Improved balance: as the horse moves, the rider is constantly thrown off-balance, requiring that the rider's muscles contract and relax in an attempt to re-balance. The three-dimensional rhythmical movement of the horse is similar to the motion of walking, teaching rhythmical patterns to the muscles of the legs and trunk. Stopping and starting the horse, changing speed and changing direction increase the benefits.
- Strengthened muscles: muscles are strengthened by the increased use involved in riding. Even though riding is exercise, it is perceived as enjoyment, and therefore the rider has increased tolerance and motivation to lengthen the period of exercise.
- Stretching of tight or spastic muscles; sitting on a horse requires stretching of the adductor muscles of the thighs. Gravity helps to stretch the calf muscles as the rider sits on the horse without stirrups. Riding with stirrups helps to stretch the heel cords. Stomach and back muscles are stretched as the rider is encouraged to maintain an upright posture against the movement of the horse. Arm and hand muscles are stretched as part of routine exercises on the horse and by the act of holding and using the reins.
- Decreased spasticity: spasticity is reduced by the rhythmic motion of the horse. The warmth of the horse helps to break up extensor spasms of the lower limbs.
- Increased range of motion of the joints: as spasticity is reduced, range of motion increases.
- Sensory integration: riding stimulates the tactile senses both through touch and environmental stimuli. The vestibular system is also stimulated by the movement of the horse, changes in direction and speed. The olfactory system responds to the many smells involved in a stable and ranch environment. Vision is used in control of the horse. All of these senses work together and are integrated in the act of riding. In addition, proprioceptors (receptors that give information from our muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joints) are activated, resulting in improved proprioception.