



## HOW RDA PROGRAMS HELP.

Animals often create a special bond with humans, and this is especially true with horses. The nonverbal communication between the person and the horse strengthens the emotional bond that is created. Words aren't needed for them to be perfectly in tune with each other. [Emotions](#) find space to flow and the relationship between them creates a love and understanding that is often indescribable.

The [Mental Health Foundation](#) highlights that '*finding an activity you enjoy can give you a goal to aim for and a sense of purpose. It can also be a great way to meet people, have a break from daily life and gain confidence. Other benefits include:*

- *less tension, stress, and mental fatigue*
- *a natural energy boost*
- *a sense of achievement*
- *more focus and motivation*
- *feeling less angry or frustrated*
- *a healthy appetite*
- *having fun.*

*It's even better if you're able to get active outdoors. Research shows that being in nature can make us feel happier, feel our lives are more worthwhile, and reduce our levels of depression and anxiety'.*

Horse riding is a natural reflex inhibiting position which helps improve balance and posture providing a unique form of exercise and rehabilitation.

### PHYSICAL BENEFITS

#### **Improved Balance**

As the horse moves the rider is constantly thrown off balance, requiring the rider's muscles to contract and relax to rebalance. This exercising is similar to physiotherapy, reaching the deep muscles, but making the therapy more enjoyable and even fun!

The three-dimensional rhythmic movement of the horse is similar to the motion of walking, teaching rhythmical patterns to the muscles of the legs and trunk. By placing the rider in different positions on the horse (therapeutic riding) different muscles are worked. Stopping and starting the horse as well as changing the speed and direction increases the benefits.

#### **Strengthened Muscles**

Muscles are strengthened by the increased use involved in riding. Even though riding is exercise, it is perceived as enjoyment, therefore the rider has increased tolerance and motivation to lengthen the period of exercise.



## **Improved Coordination, Faster Reflexes and Better Motor Planning**

Riding a horse requires a great deal of coordination to get the desired response from the horse. Since the horse provides instant feedback to every action from the rider, it is easy to know when you have given the correct cue. Repetition of the patterned movements required in controlling a horse quickens the reflexes and aids in motor planning.

## **Stretching of Tight or Spastic Muscles**

Sitting on a horse requires stretching of the adductor muscles of the thighs. This is accomplished by pre-stretching exercises prior to mounting and by starting the rider on a narrow horse and gradually working to wider horses. Gravity helps stretch the calf muscles when the rider sits on the horse without stirrups. Stomach and back muscles are stretched by encouraging the rider to maintain an upright position against the movement of the horse. Arm and hand muscles are stretched by the act of holding the reins. The rhythmic motion and warmth of the horse aids in relaxation, particularly of the legs. Sitting astride the horse helps break the extensor spasms of lower limbs. Holding the reins helps to break the flexor spasm patterns of upper limbs. Fatigue helps to decrease spasticity by producing relaxation.

## **Increased Range of Motion of the Joints**

As spasticity is reduced, range of motion increases. Range of motion is also improved by the act of mounting and dismounting, tacking, grooming and exercises during the lesson

## **Improved Respiration and Circulation**

Although riding is not normally considered a cardiovascular activity, trotting and cantering do increase both respiration and circulation.

## **Improved Appetite and Digestion**

Like all forms of exercise, riding stimulates the appetite

## **Sensory Integration**

Riding stimulates the tactile sense both through touch and environmental stimuli. The many sounds of the outdoor setting helps to involve the auditory system.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS**

Interaction with horses relaxes and de-stresses in equal parts, freeing the mind from day-to-day stress. Many psychologists recommend equine therapy to deal with anxiety and stress problems.



Spending time with horses or ponies also helps people relate to other people who are outside of their usual context. It improves the self-control of emotions and teaches participants to express what they are feeling in an appropriate way.

## **Improved Self Confidence**

Confidence is gained in mastering new skills normally performed by able-bodied people. The ability to control an animal much larger and stronger than oneself is a great confidence builder

## **Emotional Control and Self Discipline**

The love and understanding that an animal can give sometimes much more enriching than what some people can offer. This is something that anyone who has lived with an animal knows.

The RDA programs are designed to improve concentration and attention. The participant focuses on the relationship with the horse, thus increasing the spatial-temporal domain and promoting pre-operative thinking.

## **Identifying and Coping with Feelings**

Equine therapy is a powerful way to get in touch with thoughts and feelings. Horses have a unique ability to sense emotions and react accordingly.

If you are angry or aggressive, the horse may become obstinate. If you are anxious, the horse may get skittish. But when approached by someone who is open and calm, the horse is more likely to respond in kind. Witnessing the horse's response promotes self-awareness and can help people see themselves in a more realistic way.

## **Communication & Interpersonal Skills**

Many people living with disabilities may have difficulty relating or getting close to other people. Yet they manage to establish close bonds with horses.

Through working with horses, people recognise their patterns of interacting with others. Horses do not speak, but they are excellent communicators. Learning to understand horse behaviour can help people learn the way their behaviour impacts others. "As a sophisticated herd animal, horses immediately begin building relationships with people as members of their herd, While riding can be part of equine therapy, the most important work happens during the interactions between client and horse. Ground-based exercises as simple as haltering, leading, and grooming teach people how to approach others with respect and awareness.

Those with psychological disabilities often talk about what they see and feel. The Coach or Volunteer guides the person to see the horse's responses with an objective lens. They can begin



to recognise the ways in which their perceptions are accurate or misguided. They also discover the ways they may be projecting their own issues onto others.

## **Setting Boundaries**

Lessons may be as simple as how much physical space the horse needs to feel comfortable. Without any words at all, horses make clear when someone has crossed their boundaries. Trying to control or dominate will not work with a horse. Likewise, a detached or passive approach can make it difficult to lead a horse.

## **Overcoming Fears**

Horses are large animals. Their strength and size can bring up unmet needs, fears, past trauma and feelings of inadequacy or lack of control.

Some people may fear that the horse won't like them. They also fear the horse could hurt them physically or emotionally. Rather than giving in to their usual reaction – to escape or get defensive – people learn to tolerate and process the emotion.

In a safe environment, RDA clients learn to face their fears. They build confidence in their ability to overcome challenges. Many people feel intimidated and nervous at first. Later they discover how quickly they process those feelings and find comfort in their relationship with the horse. Empowered by the experience, people may develop the confidence to address other fears. They then transfer these lessons to day-to-day life.

## **Trust**

Horses are soothing, gentle animals. They are straightforward in their interactions without lying or manipulating. They do not judge or blame. Their presence alone can be healing. When people open themselves up to a horse, they grow in their ability to build relationships with others.

## **General Sense of Well Being**

Exercise in the fresh air of the country away from hospitals, doctors offices, therapy rooms, and home helps to promote a sense of well being.

## **Increased Interest in One's Own Life**

The excitement of riding or grooming a horse encourages the riders to speak and communicate about their activities.

Other benefits include:

- learning to accept responsibility
- taking care of oneself and others
- patience



- humility
- a sense of pride
- an appreciation for the simple joys in life.

## **EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS**

### **Reading**

Before one can be taught to read, it is necessary to recognise the difference in shapes, sizes and colours. These can be taught on horseback in the form of games and activities. There is less resistance to learning when it is part of a horse-riding lesson.

### **Maths**

Counting is learned by counting the horse's footfalls, objects around the arena etc. Because the concepts of maths are taught through games, the resistance to learning is less.

### **Sequencing, Patterning and Motor Planning**

Something as simple as holding a pencil requires a great deal of motor planning. Knowing which comes first in a sequence of events is an important part of most activities. These and other skills are taught on horse back through the use of obstacle courses, pole bending and many other games and activities. Even grooming a horse requires the groom to follow a sequence of activities.

### **Improved Hand/Eye Coordination**

Eye and hand coordination is necessary for skills such as writing. These skills are taught in grooming and preparing the horse as well as other activities and exercises.

### **Visual Spatial Perception**

This includes an awareness of form and space, and an understanding relationships between the forms in our environment. Included in this is directionality (knowing right from left), space-perception (knowing when items are close in shape but different), perception of depth (picking out an object from a background) and visual sequential memory (such as remembering patterns).

### **Differentiation**

The rider learns to differentiate significant from less significant stimuli in the environment. An improvement in this area occurs as the rider learns to attend to their horse and those things that may influence the horse rather than attending to the environment in general.

## **SOCIAL BENEFITS**



## **Friendship**

Although riding can be a solitary activity, at RDA Centre lessons are normally performed in small groups often at the same time each session. Participants can develop friendships, share achievements and build a strong sense of belonging.

The benefits of RDA are not limited to the participants. The Centres have a strong history of building a sense of shared purpose and inclusiveness among carers and volunteers drawn from across all parts of the community.