

The horse has been used in health care work for a several hundred years, but what is it with the horse that makes us humans to function better both physically and mentally ?

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This is the first part in an article “The horse as a therapist”

In special position as a health performer

Already in antiquity horses were used in health promotion work, and the known Greek doctor Hippocrates talked about the healing effect the horse could have on people with physical or sociological deficiencies. The first riding schools in the world that operated with physical therapy was started in Norway in 1953 by physiotherapist Elsebeth Bødtker. Today it is Germany, England and the United States that have come the furthest in the work of using therapy riding.

It was not until the 1990s that the horse's impact on our mental health received greater attention. Since 2007 it has been systematic research on both the mental and the physical perspective of the horse's impact on human health.

The horse in health-promoting work

There are many who do health-promoting work with horses in for example, riding schools and “Inn på tunet” activities on farms. There are also other forms of treatment with horses that require special expertise in both horse and health to be able to offer. With a research-based approach and a plan for the user's development, one can for many see great progress by providing various offers where the horse is in focus.

Riding physiotherapy

Riding physiotherapy is a form of physiotherapy that can only be given by specially trained physiotherapists who have taken the Norwegian Physiotherapist Association's continuing education course in equestrian physiotherapy.

In equestrian physiotherapy, the horse's movements are the basis of the treatment. When riding, the horse reflects its movements in the rider, something that can lead to, among other things, better balance, strength and coordination. One can also have many additional effects of riding physiotherapy, such as better language and communication skills, better fitness, better social skills and better self-confidence. There are many different patient groups that have a good effect of riding physiotherapy.



Horse-assisted psychotherapy

Horse-assisted psychotherapy is a form of treatment that targets people with various mental health problems. Here it is the relationship with the horse that gives an effect. Horse-assisted psychotherapy can be practised in many ways, but usually one works with the horse from the ground, either loose or in ropes. (Rains)

There is a psychotherapist and an equine expert who together are responsible for the treatment, which is adapted to each individual patient. The focus in horse-assisted psychotherapy are the user's feelings, thoughts and reactions about being around the horse. One must relate and interpret thoughts, feelings and bodily reactions to a greater extent.

Through horse-assisted psychotherapy, the patient can work with, among other things, presence and awareness, physical reasoning, contact and closeness, communication, social skills, setting boundaries, or knowing, interpreting, expressing and regulating emotions.

Among the patient groups that have a good effect of horse-assisted psychotherapy are those who have trauma-related ailments, intoxication or other addiction, difficulties with self-regulation or ailments related to anxiety, depression and personality problems. In Norway, there are just few institutions that offer horse-assisted psychotherapy to their patients, between them the Veksthuset at Gaustad Hospital, Modum Bad and Lofoten Horse and Health Center.

Horse-assisted activities

Horse-assisted activities with horses are carried out by one or more knowledgeable persons. Here the user gets to meet the horse in a safe environment and gets to create a relationship with the horse. People of all ages can benefit from participating in horse-assisted activities. Children who need an alternative school day or have had poor upbringing conditions can have positive experiences with the horse. In addition, it can have an effect on several diseases and challenges, such as behavioral disorders, poor self-esteem, difficulty communicating, dementia or mental retardation.



The horse is in a special position

The horse is in a special position when it comes to being able to give a therapeutic effect on humans. One would not have the same effect if one had replaced the horse with, for example, a dog or a cow.

Much research has been done on the horse's effect on human health, where physical conditions have received the greatest focus. Gradually one has also learned more about the horse's impact on our mental health. In the studies that have been done, it has been concluded that the horse has a good effect on our health, but it is not always as easy to explain why.

The physical aspect of how the horse can affect us is easy to see. When we ride, we are in many ways one with the horse's movements. It has soft fur, and the body temperature of the horse is higher than in us humans, so it is warm and good to touch.

But what is it about the horse that makes us feel so good? Healthy people can also understand this - we have probably all known how walking in the stable and being around the horses can get us in a good mood, even on a miserable day.

The horse lives here and now

One explanation is that the horse lives here and now and makes us do the same. The horse does not walk around pondering things that have happened, or dreading things that are going to happen.

The horse is aware of our feelings, it is controlled by instinct and gives a direct response to the way we behave. In this way, the horse becomes a mirror of our feelings and reactions, and we must observe, analyse and regulate our own feelings to get the reaction we want from the horse.

The horse does not judge

Anyone who behaves fairly and respectfully towards a horse can achieve a good and close relationship with him. One does not need to be afraid that the horse will judge you for example what you look like or what you believe in. Contact with the horse is often a freedom for those who have experienced bad relationships with other people. In addition, even those who have poor language or lack of other communication skills can manage to communicate well with a horse, and in that way achieve mastery and feel connected to another being that they may never have experienced before.