

BENEFITS OF THERAPEUTIC RIDING FOR ADULTS OVER 50

By Barbara Stender, M. Ed. Adult Education/Gerontology

I first met Ethel when she made an appointment for me to do bodywork on her 20-year old gelding who was recovering from EPM. When I arrived for the appointment I discovered that Ethel was 72 and her real goal was to learn the skills herself so she could participate in his rehabilitation. Ethel had ridden her first horse when she was 60, bought a horse a few years later, went to riding clinics, taught lessons, had friends of all ages, and thought that going to the barn each morning was like going on a picnic. I was studying educational gerontology at the time and realized that Ethel was a wonderful example of both successful aging and lifelong learning – both concerns of educational gerontologists. I wondered if it would be possible to develop a safe riding program for adults over 50 using the therapeutic riding model. Below is a condensed version of a paper that assessed the correlation of therapeutic riding centers and the needs of aging adults.

Many changes have occurred during the last 50 years that affect the role of aging individuals in our society. Due to increased longevity, this is now our fastest growing population. Older adults had expected to retire around 65 and then to live another 10 years in the comfort and security of their family. However, average life expectancy is now 75, families are scattered throughout the country, and most daughters – the typical caregiver - are employed outside the home. More and more aging individuals, especially women, now spent later years in a group living residence – independent living, assisted living, and nursing facilities - because are not physically fit enough to take care of their activities of daily living. Physical fitness programs weren't a part of their earlier lives and women, in particular, were not encouraged to exercise. Programs are being developed to encourage older adults to remain or become active in order to maintain physical abilities, but is difficult to motivate people to become more active after they pass after middle age.

Needs of Aging Adults

Increases in longevity are not a benefit if aging bodies become a burden, if there is a decline in mental abilities, or if depression over multiple losses of spouse, friends, and abilities prevent participation in meaningful activities. Gerontologists and others concerned about this age group are continually seeking activities and programs that:

1. Keep people physically and mentally active so they can live independently.
2. Slow down or reverse some of the physical, mental, and psychological changes that accompany aging.
3. Involve older adults in social community and intergenerational activities.
4. Give a person a sense of self-worth and a feeling that life is meaningful.

Loss of Independence by Older Adults

Unfortunately, as people age they usually become less active. The result is loss of muscle tone—the end result of which is that they may become unable to perform the chores necessary for the activities of daily living and become unable to live independently. Exercise at any age can increase muscle strength, bone mass, and brain function. In 1982 the National Council on Fitness and Aging advised that "regular exercise (can) reap significant cardiovascular, muscular-skeletal, and psychological benefits for the elderly and can intervene before the traditional cycle of inactivity and degenerative disease takes its toll."

Several hundred bones and muscles are gently moved and exercised in the process of riding on a walking horse. This helps to increase fitness, balance, and flexibility; encourages better posture, and leads to better functioning of the cardio-vascular system. Additionally, tuning in to the rhythm of the walk can

influence the central timing mechanisms in the brain and may result in improved motor function and integration of the timing involved with stepping, walking, and swinging arms. Grooming, more active riding, and helping with stable chores increases physical fitness and stamina.

Lifelong Learning and Intergenerational Activities

Throughout life people have the capacity to continue to learn, and lifelong education is an important aspect of successful aging. Horsemen, at any stage or at any age, are challenged to learn more. Riding programs can form a context for intergenerational, lifelong educational programs in which people of all ages and backgrounds cooperate in order to achieve their goals. Studies have shown that:

1. Strong friendly relationships take root in the context of a learning activity.
2. There is value in intergenerational learning situations in which people of different ages learn from each other.
3. When older and younger people cooperate in order to achieve their goals, it is an effective way to reduce prejudice between the generations.

For older adults who are beginning to learn about horses and riding, there is the opportunity to learn from and with younger people. For older riders, years of experience may mean that they are able to help younger riders. There is an exchange of skills and knowledge between people of all ages that few other activities provide.

Opportunity to Contribute to Others

A challenge for those working with older people is to create leisure opportunities that participants perceive as meaningful and as contributing to their sense of satisfaction and well being. Studies show that the most satisfied members of organizations are those who become involved in order to achieve something, be creative, or help others. Therapeutic riding programs depend on the contributions of volunteers. Encouraging older adult to participate in any of the numerous volunteer activities in a therapeutic riding center is a win-win situation. They may be able to be a leader or a side-walker, help in the office or with fund raising, write thank-you notes, plant flowers, etc. As a volunteer in a therapeutic riding program a person becomes part of a committed team helping the rehabilitative process of disabled people of all ages – a meaningful and rewarding activity fostering social, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

Therapeutic Riding Programs for Adults

A recreational and therapeutic riding program called Ridercise is being developed at Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Center, Cameron, NC, in conjunction with the Health and Wellness Center of nearby FirstHealth Hospital. It is tailored for adults over 50 and includes 6 areas of development: rider fitness, horse management, riding skills, personal discovery, lifelong learning, and participation in volunteer activities at Prancing Horse. Participants pay for lessons and are routinely tested using the Fullerton Functional fitness Test to track the effectiveness of the program.

A therapeutic riding program tailored for handicapped adults has been in operation Quantum Leap Farm, Odessa , FL. This is a funded program and available slots filled rapidly. Research that tracks the benefits of the program is being conducted at the University of Southern Florida.

Conclusions

As the result of normal aging or disease, many adults over 50 experience deficits in their abilities. Many of the goals for healthy aging parallel the goals for younger people in therapeutic riding programs. Because involvement with horses is a strong motivation for many people, group riding sessions would be a safe and fun to motivate older adults to maintain their physical, mental, emotional, and social skills – skills that are needed to remain independent for as long as possible

By using the NARHA guidelines for therapeutic riding, safe and effective riding programs can be designed to promote the healthy aging of older adults. As people learn about riding and related skills they:

1. Become more physically fit, better balanced, and have better posture.
2. Mentally process a complicated and complex activity that keeps their mind nimble enough to cope with insurance, social security, medical forms, end of life directives, and developing health issues.
3. Participate in intergenerational activities with the opportunity to be with others who enjoy the outdoors and being with horses.
4. Can become a volunteer, with the opportunity to contribute to others -enhancing their sense of contribution and well being.

Older adults state that the most important component of their quality of life is their independence. For senior citizens that enjoy being with horses, therapeutic riding programs offer the opportunity to maintain their independence.

(Side bar) Age Related Contra-Indications

Moderate to severe osteoporosis.

Obesity, or weight exceeding 250 lbs.

Active arthritis.

Incontinence.

Hip dislocation or disarticulation.

Medications –especially those interfering with balance, concentration, or that increase sun sensitivity.

Open wounds, pressure sores, or poor skin integrity.

(Side Bar) Some Characteristics of Older Riders

They have other responsibilities.

They want skills and techniques explained in detail.

Past learning in other activities may interfere with learning to ride.

They may not mention small but relevant problems.

Injuries take longer to heal.

They are often unable to verbally express their fears.

They may need to talk about their concerns. It matters who rides in their group lesson.

They may not want hat-hair after their weekly beauty parlor appointment.

Author Profile

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