

Horses Help make Humans Healthier



By Sheryl King, PhD, PAS.

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All horsemen are familiar with the famous Winston Churchill quote, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." It seems 'Winnie' had it right in more ways than he imagined at the time. Horses are indeed good for people. Not only do they labor on our behalf, horses stimulate our body and souls.

How does owning a horse make us healthier? We have all heard about the fattening of America – about 1/3 of us are overweight, and we don't get enough exercise. National guidelines call for 30 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise five days/week. Riding a horse carries the equivalent calorie expenditure of a moderately brisk walk; trotting and galloping can increase that exercise level to the equivalent of jogging or swimming. Add that more pleasant activity to the effort of catching your horse at pasture, grooming, tacking and hotwalking, and you have yourself a workout.

Those activity guidelines also include muscle-strengthening exercise on two or more days a week that works all

major muscle groups. Lucky are we horse owners – horse barns are the equivalent of weight training gyms! If you care for your horse yourself, you are likely indulging in weight training as well as aerobic exercise. Horses produce about 50 pounds of manure a day. Add sodden bedding to the equation and you have a regular mini weightlifting session in the form of stall cleaning. Lifting, hauling, dumping, raking, and rebedding is good for the horse *and* good for the heart. A typical 5-gallon water bucket weighs about 40 pounds – schlepping a few of those around each day may not give you arms like Popeye, but you'll be less likely to have a gut like Wimpy. Add hauling 50-60-pound hay bales and 50-pound grain sacks, hammering, digging, and fixing up after your horse's mischief and you have likely met your weekly exercise quota without even counting the muscular rigors of riding.

I once had an argument with my daughter's grade-school gym teacher. Weekly exercise outside of school time was required as part of the class grade. This teacher refused to consider horseback riding a form of exercise. "The horse does all the work," she said. "Spoken like someone who has never ridden a horse," was my reply. Anyone who has ridden a horse for the first time, or after a long hiatus from the activity, can testify to the unique muscles that are (*ouch*) stimulated by this activity.

Indeed, horseback riding is a well-documented and widely accepted mode of delivering physical therapy. Former U.S. press secretary James Brady famously complained about his hippotherapy rehabilitation (he calls his physical therapy "physical terrorism"). Horses helped him regain some of his function following the head wound he sustained during Ronald Reagan's attempted assassination.

NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) is a global organization that has revolutionized the delivery of physical therapy for children and adults with physical, mental and emotional challenges. Horses are officially rehabbing our military veterans. In 2005, the Horse Cavalry Detachment

at Fort Hood, TX became the first Army unit to host a hippotherapy program for wounded veterans.

Riding horses is therapeutic in so many ways. Horses help us reconnect with the natural world. Horse activities get us out in the fresh air and sunshine. Did you know that most Americans get too little vitamin D, which is associated with a myriad of serious health problems? Yet just 15 minutes outdoors a few times a week (without sunscreen) allows us to make enough vitamin D to protect our health. Who would have thought that enjoying your horse on a sunny day could actually be cancer-protective!

Horsemen know the profound effect these marvelous animals can have on our psyche. Most of us can testify to the stress-reducing effect that spending time with a horse induces. But horses have also proven their value in reaching humans as no other therapy can. Horse-assisted psychotherapy has succeeded in helping people with profound mental problems, such as autism, eating disorders, PTSD, anger management, and a plethora of other disorders. Horses connect with us at a most primal level, and although psychic healing is more difficult to scientifically document than physical rehabilitation assisted through horses, it is readily recognized by most of us who have experienced that special relationship with horses.

EAGALA – Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association – is an international program devoted to the notion of horses assisting with social, emotional and mental healing. At Southern Illinois University (Carbondale) we hosted a similar program where I had the privilege of witnessing the transformative power of the horse on children with autism, ADHD, victims of unspeakable abuse and those challenged with other mental, behavioral and social challenges.

So, the next time you are breaking a sweat at the barn, or enjoying a companionable moment with your mount, thank your horse for keeping you healthy – body and soul.