EQUESTRIAN THERAPY

Healing through Horses

By Esther Altmann

Horses have been our close companions throughout the centuries. Now they are now serving humanity in a very different capacity. No longer necessary to transport warriors into battle, or pull our carriages, horses have become our partners in treating a myriad of human woes. At once, ancient and cutting edge, riding therapy, also known as equine-assisted, or hippotherapy, is being practiced around the world and is becoming more widely known and popular in the U.S. thanks to its great success in treating a wide spectrum of difficulties – physical, emotional and spiritual.

The therapeutic effects of horseback riding have been known since ancient times. In 600 BCE Hippocrates described the “healing rhythm” of the horse’s movement, and in the 17th and 18th centuries, English and French physicians used riding therapy to treat a variety of neurological and orthopedic conditions. After WW I and WW II riding therapy was used to treat veterans who were suffering from war injuries – paralysis, amputations, traumatic brain injuries and shock, and many programs are currently treating our own military wounded to heal through the almost miraculous bond between horse and human. Today, across the globe, people of all ages, suffering from a myriad of ailments are benefiting from equine therapy.
On a beautiful summer afternoon, I traveled to bucolic Rockland County, NY to meet with Dana Mase, the director and creative force behind Ride Kind Therapeutic Riding, a therapeutic program that pairs horses and humans to affect healing changes that are nothing short of amazing.

Dana, a slim blond woman with a calm demeanor exudes an easy confidence and warmth. She is not only an accomplished horsewoman, certified riding therapist, entrepreneur and singer-songwriter, but she is, above all, a visionary, whose dream of a holistic healing center that would be free of cost and open to all may just become a reality.

Walking through the horses’ stalls, I was treated to an up-close experience with the horses at Ride Kind. I found that being near these majestic animals, touching them, talking to them and looking into their beautiful, sensitive eyes, was quieting and soothing, and although I had practically no experience with horses, it was a quiet, emotional experience. The horses were far more relational than I had expected, and as I gazed at them, they seemed to engage with me; they looked into my eyes and seemed to be taking my measure and figuring me out in their intuitive horse minds.

Riding therapy successfully addresses an astonishing range of problems including: autism, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, vision impairment, Cerebral Palsy and related neurological disorders, disorders in muscle tone, Traumatic Brain Injuries, sensory integration issues, developmental delays, behavioral and social problems of at-risk youth and military injuries and amputations.

Dana explained that the movement of the horse as it walks emulates the feeling of a person walking in a proper manner, and so, by just sitting on the horse as it walks, the rider reinforces motor skills and symmetry, while it calms and nurtures the rider. An entire array of physical therapy exercises may be included in riding therapy: moving the riders’ pelvis in the correct way, improving core muscle strength, improving breathing as well as alignment, flexibility, coordination. There is a great deal of experience using equine therapy in the treatment of autism as the improvement of sensory integration is one of the many beneficial effects of riding. [Information is widely available on the web.]

Horses, I learned, possess very special qualities that encourage the development of trusting, emotional relationships and therefore, working with them can bring about personal growth in their handler/riders. As prey animals, horses have developed extraordinary sensitivity to external stimuli, and their unusual sensitivity and responsiveness are invaluable in treating emotional problems. This is particularly so in treating the effects of trauma - situations where there has been a major disruption of trust which must be reestablished. Even their tactile physicality - the warmth and softness of their bodies is tremendously comforting.

The horses used in therapy are care-
fully vetted for temperament and are chosen according to the needs of each particular rider. All activities are closely supervised and every precaution is taken to assure their safety. There are side walkers who help stabilize the rider and the activity is structured to meet the specific needs of each rider. In some cases, grooming and caring for the horse is more appropriate therapy than actual riding. Some disabilities are specifically excluded from equine therapy (allergies, some epilepsy, fragile bones and some bleeding disorders) and all candidates for this therapy must have medical permission before they are admitted to the program.

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As the riders continue to come to the stables week after week, emotional bonding grows stronger; both human and horse become more attuned to one another. As a result, many positive emotional and physical changes are able to take place. In the case of Ethan, the little boy with behavioral and relational difficulties, he was often reminded throughout the session that horses have feelings and he must not frighten his horse. Little by little, in ½ hour segments, he became calmer, was less volatile in school, and his interpersonal relations improved. Now, Ethan still rides, finally has friends at school, and he no longer needs medication.

Chani, a slight, long-haired 10-year-old girl is blind from birth, and had come because of difficulties in balance and confidence. The child obviously didn’t know what a horse looked like, and she was initially nervous around the large animal, afraid that the horse would step on her, since she had no way of knowing where the horse’s legs were. But she soon fell in love with the sounds of the horses – their whinnying

Eleven-year-old Ethan stood in the corral looking up at Corry, an eight-year old mare who towered over him in all her silky brown splendor. When Ethan first arrived at the stables a year earlier, he was nervous being around such a huge animal; today, after many happy encounters with “his” horse, they are close friends. Watching the horse and child gaze into each other’s eyes, the mutual love was obvious.

The past year had been one of dynamic changes for Ethan who had been diagnosed with ADHD and came to Ride Kind with his exasperated parents. They were at their wits’ end and so were his well-meaning teachers, who suggested that they try “riding therapy. In desperation they arrived at the beautiful, pastoral setting in Monsey, where a dozen or more horses stood patiently in their stalls waiting for the assortment of riders that would be coming and going throughout the day.

Ethan had been diagnosed with ADHD, a set of behaviors characterized, in part, by the inability to focus on task and a lack of impulse control that may lead to troublesome social and academic problems. Medication seemed to help him, but not sufficiently, and his school eventually suggested that Ethan might benefit from equestrian, or riding therapy. His parents had tried everything else, so even though they had never heard of “riding therapy,” they were willing to give it try. Standing proudly next to “his horse,” a year later, Ethan was a far happier and more centered child who no longer relied on medication.

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unless firmly guided by the rider. Horses are acutely aware and perceptive, and can “read” the rider’s body language and gauge their muscle tone and anxiety level. Over time, Mona learned to assert control over the horse, as well as to respond to the body language of the animal. The resulting relationship encouraged the rider’s growth in self-confidence, assertiveness and trust and she was able to transfer these skills to her human relationships. As a result of her work at **Ride Kind**, she was able to function more happily in her daily life.

Equine therapy is growing in popularity in all segments of the healing professions. Effective in so many arenas - relational, physical, and emotional - horses have entered a new phase of their service to humankind. They are not only our servants, but are also our teachers in restoring lost trust and the ability to express and receive affection, as they comfort and soothe wounded hearts and souls. Just as the rider learns to trust the horse, the rider must and can earn the trust of the horse as the rider learns to command, with calm strength and sensitivity, to establish and enforce boundaries that the horse will respect. As Dana told me, “There is no judgment among horses, no pressure.” For many people, simply being accepted is a deeply healing experience.

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**All names of riders and cases are fictionalized composites and do not refer to any actual person.**

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Dana Mase is the Executive Director and Founder of Ride Kind Therapeutic Riding, located in Rockland County NY. Dana is a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Riding Instructor and has competed successfully in the Midwest A-rated show circuits, which included representing her stable in team jumping at the Prix de Ville of North America Jumper Competitions. Dana is also an accomplished singer/songwriter with 5 albums to her credit. She is the author of Horse Time: Life Lessons Learned Through Working with Horses for the Non Equestrian. For more on Ride Kind Therapeutic Riding, go to www.ridekind.org. Dana can be reached at dana@danamase.com or (845) 356-1464.