

heartbeats

SOMETIMES THERAPY HORSES CAN USE A LITTLE
HEALING
THE HORSES
THERAPY OF THEIR OWN

1 who heal others

BY DUTCH HENRY



Being a horse advocate and writer, I've had the privilege of writing over half a hundred stories about what I call "People and Horses Helping Horses and People." I've met unbelievably self-sacrificing people who mortgage their homes to keep the doors open so children dealing with autism, Down's syndrome and other unkind conditions can learn to smile and even laugh while being carried to a happy place on the back a therapy horse. I've met veterans who've conquered the stranglehold of PTSD while holding the reins. I've met battered women who've learned to love and trust again simply sitting in a stall with a quiet horse. And I've met many understanding, caregiving therapy horses who give their own heart and soul for the greater good of humanity.

This therapy horse is calmly doing her job though overwhelmed with confusing signals. In almost every therapy session the horse will receive signals from the leader asking her to walk, the rider may lose balance and tug on the reins, the sidewalkers may bump into her and the therapist will be talking and encouraging the rider. The therapy horse must sort through all the confusion and concentrate on their job.



It has often been said that throughout history, everywhere man has gone he has been carried upon the back of a noble horse. They've plowed our fields, carried us into wars and died with us on the battlefield, pulled our wagons and travois laden with treasured possessions to new lands and pulled our wedding carriages, too. They've run our races, herded our cattle, given explosive demonstrations of their power and agility in rodeos. They've strutted their magnificence in arenas before cheering crowds to win ribbons unimportant to them. When I think of the horse's spirit and how he has selflessly carried the spirit of man through the ages, I'm awed at their utter nobility. How they have answered every call with strength, beauty and unquestioning devotion, no matter the

A lot goes on around a therapy horse every day, and the horse must be mindful of his rider, leader, sidewalkers and therapist. This can take a toll on their mind as well as the body, and the therapy for therapy horses exercises are designed to keep their body in top shape as well as their mind clear and focused. These photos, from Sprouse's Corner Ranch at their Heartland Horse Heroes therapeutic riding program, show that therapy horses, even in perfectly managed conditions, often need a little therapy, too. As owner LaRue Dowd said, "They need debriefing from all the stuff in their heads." Photos courtesy Heartland Horse Heroes.

"When I think of the horse's spirit and how he has selflessly carried the spirit of man through the ages, I'm awed at their utter nobility. How they have answered every call with strength, beauty and unquestioning devotion, no matter the sacrifice. Today, the noble horse is embarking on perhaps his most important calling—the healing of man."



Standing work can be hard on a horse's backs and legs and takes a lot of concentration as the horse may be prevented from taking a step to regain balance. Asking this horse to rock back off his forehead as the therapy is being done would be a simple move that would benefit the horse.

sacrifice. Today, the noble horse is embarking on perhaps his most important calling—the healing of man.

It was Hippocrates who first wrote about the health benefits of horseback riding some 3,000 years ago. We all know of Winston Churchill's famous quote, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." Perhaps the most stunning and inspiring event to shake up the world of physical therapy was Liz Hartel of Denmark winning the Silver Medal in dressage at the Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland in 1952. Though polio had left her paralyzed from the knees down and with limited use of her hands in 1944, together with the help of her horse Jubilee, she battled back to not only take the Silver but also to be the first woman in history to win a medal in the equestrian games. It is said that her remarkable accomplishment on the world stage sparked the idea of equine-assisted therapy.

continued next page

Many times therapy horses must not only deal with sidewalkers but also riders in unbalanced positions. Dealing with unbalanced riders may cause the horse to tweak their spine.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY

Therapeutic horseback riding took root in Europe in the 1950s and came to the US and Canada sometime in the late 1960s. A few years ago, I had the honor of writing a story about Barb Heine, who in the '60s and '70s worked tirelessly to promote the use of hippotherapy as an accepted form of physical therapy. Thanks to her and many others who shared like beliefs and understanding of the healing power of the horse, today there are hundreds of equine-assisted therapy centers across the US where thousands of selfless horses are doing their part to help heal children, women and men.

Therapy horses take their jobs seriously. From the interviews I've conducted for stories, most folks who know say only about one horse in 25 or 30 has what it takes to become a therapy horse. They have a happy but demanding job, and need to possess a way of thinking that puts others first. Therapy horses carry precious cargo and much is expected of them. As they walk along giving healing therapy, they must not only be aware of that precious cargo, who may not be able to sit correctly, use their legs or concentrate, but they must also be careful not to bump the sidewalkers, one on each side. The leader and therapist too must be accounted for with each step. This can sometimes cause the horse to move in ways that tweak his spine, neck, withers or hips.

THERAPY HORSES HAVE CHALLENGING JOBS

Equine-assisted therapy programs often include exercises for the participant to do while sitting on the horse at a standstill, such as upper body calisthenics, shooting basketball or playing catch. This can be very stressful on a horse's back. Many times therapy horses are donated

This Will Give You Goose Bumps...

A nine-year-old lad, Andrew, had started to lie down during each therapy session, hugging the horse's neck. This had become a concern for the occupational therapist. I didn't know about this until later, but by coincidence I saw one of their horses, Zack, walking with short, choppy strides behind. When they returned Zack to his stall, I went to him and spent about an hour doing exercises to free him from front to back, while fully saddled. He was especially tight in the hind end and loved the release. They called for Zack, I led him out to the arena and they started a session with Andrew. Halfway around the arena Andrew sat up straight and thrust his arm in the air. Everyone cheered excitedly, and I thought it was just part of the support therapy. Later they told me it was because Andrew had not sat up during therapy for months. He felt safe enough to sit up because Zack was walking more smoothly and softly than he had been able to in months.

As they go along, therapy horses must be ever mindful of their riders. Note the concentration as well as concern on the pony Jo-Jo's face.



When I only have time to do a few exercises, these are the ones I do and in this order as I feel, and sense from the horse, that order matters. The Rock Back helps the horse find proper posture. Poll Wiggle starts the release and sends it down the neck and shoulder. Vertebrae Wiggle continues the release down the spine to the tip of the tail, releasing and relaxing muscles and tension. Belly Lift should be done last to loosen the back, neck, shoulders and hips. I think asking the horse to lift into a tight back forces them to lift "into the pain," and while they may do it, it teaches them it hurts to lift their back. Be careful to have them loose before doing Belly Lift. Photos by Robin Wolfskill

EXERCISE #1



With your finger on the chest, apply just enough pressure so she will shift her weight off her forehead. This releases tension on the chest and frees the shoulders. This is the first step in releasing tension through her entire topline.

because they've had an injury that forced them out of their careers, so they may already be compensating in some way. And since many centers work with donated tack as well, it is not unusual for therapy horses to perform their miracles in tack that does not quite fit.

This is not to imply that therapy horses are not well cared for and loved deeply. They are. But like any important job, being a therapy horse is very hard work. I was once told in an interview that the therapy horse has a more demanding job than a racehorse. Another person told me they are martyrs. Each working day therapy horses meet new people who bring their needs. This can over time take a toll, mentally and physically.

I had the privilege of studying under renowned Connected Riding instructor Diane Sept for six years, learning many techniques of Connected Groundwork and Tellington Touch. I would sometimes assist her in rehabilitating Tennessee Walking Horses. It was from Diane that I learned much about the biomechanics of the horse.

SURPRISING OBSERVATIONS

One day while visiting a very nice therapeutic riding center for an interview for their story, I noticed that the horses, while well cared for, had stiffness about them. Upon closer examination I noticed several horses were heavy on the forehead, inverted and weak in the hind end. As part of the interview, I watched a few therapy sessions and noticed some of the horses moved with short, choppy strides and had difficulty turning smoothly. This came as a surprise to me.

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“Therapy horses take their jobs seriously. From the interviews I’ve conducted for stories, most folks who know say only about one horse in 25 or 30 has what it takes to become a therapy horse. They have a happy but demanding job, and need to possess a way of thinking that puts others first. Therapy horses carry precious cargo and much is expected of them.”

I had written a number of stories by then about therapeutic riding centers and the miracles that happen there, but all of my interviews had been over the phone, as the centers were great distances from me. I had decided to search out centers near enough for me to visit in person, excited to witness the magic firsthand. I did witness magic, and lots of it, on my first in-person interview. And when I wrote their story I was reminded of the excitement on children’s and volunteers’ faces. For one little boy it was the first time he’d ever caught a ball. How we cheered! I still get teary-eyed thinking of it. I decided what I thought I saw in the horses was actually me not really getting it...yet it tugged at me.

Over the next few months, I had the opportunity to visit several more therapy centers for interviews. Oh, we had splendid times. What a treat! And a few times I was even allowed to participate as a sidewalker. I visited centers with both children and adult participants. With horses purchased specifically because their breed enjoys a reputation as great therapy horses and centers operating with all donated horses as well as a mixture of both. Every place I visited was a happy place with clean, well-managed barns; well-kept, well-fed horses; wonderfully polite and knowledgeable staff and volunteers; and lively and eager participants. I had several great stories to write celebrating the wonderful things that happened in those barns.

I did, however, begin to notice in many of the horses the same stiffness and discomfort I thought I saw earlier. Unsettled, I did some checking and discovered that indeed, horses who do equine-assisted therapy often develop a few kinks in their bodies. And in fairness, any horse doing the same job repeatedly does, too. Even lesson horses and show horses can become a little stiff or locked up here or there—they are just more likely to let us know they are unhappy about something. But most therapy horses have that frame of mind to endure and not show their discomfort too boldly. That personality trait of caring more for others than themselves is exactly

With both hands, lightly cup your hands over the vertebrae and topline, and gently wiggle each vertebra all along the back, including the tail to its tip. (Note: If your horse’s back dips down, she might have a sore back.) This releases tension all along the back, even down into the shoulders, hips and legs. This is the third step in releasing the topline.



EXERCISE #2
Gently place your hand on her poll and wiggle it lightly. This releases tension in the poll, neck, jaw and mind. This is the second step in loosening the topline. Note: if your horse does not appreciate being touched on the poll, start on the neck wherever she likes it. After you get a release, such as lowering the head, with both your hands cupped over the top of her neck, continue the wiggle down her neck to the withers.



EXERCISE #3

the trait that makes them good therapy horses.

HELPING THE HORSES WHO HEAL OTHERS

Just as I was compelled to write stories of “People and Horses Helping Horses and People,” I now felt compelled to see how I might be able to help the therapy horses. I visited a few more centers and kept a keen eye on each horse’s movement and attitude. What I had earlier suspected seemed to be true. Too often the horses were on the forehand, inverted and weak in the hind end. I even saw horses who protested by nipping the leaders or shaking their heads. From my training and work with Diane Sept, I could easily recognize what was wrong and had thoughts about how to help. The exercises she had taught me years earlier based on the teachings of Peggy Cummings and Linda Tellington-Jones were all that was needed.

But understanding how full every day is at most equine-assisted therapy centers, how would adding extra duties to their day be a benefit? I called Diane, as I often do for advice, and as luck would have it she was just a week away from presenting a short refresher

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Signs That Your Therapy Horse Is Being Overworked & Misunderstood & Can Use A Little Therapy Of His Own

When therapy horses begin to hurt or are stressed they give signals. These are not discipline issues. These are stress issues.

Some horse’s nature is to simply shut down, to withdraw within themselves. You can recognize this in their reduced appetite. They may stand with their head in the corner of the stall. You can see it in their eyes and often in their coat.

Personality change is often an early indicator that a therapy horse is tired, sore or overstressed. Therapy work is very demanding mentally for horses. So much goes on around them, and every workday brings new riders who, for the horse, have new demands. It’s not like a horse who gets to settle in and bond with one rider, and they learn from each other. I hear often when I arrive to do a clinic, “This horse just started biting.” Or “He used to stand so quietly, now he just fidgets; he won’t even stand to saddle.” Believe it or not, I have seen a therapy horse wearing a muzzle because he was biting the leaders!

Slowing down or refusing to move forward is an indicator that something hurts. The nature of some therapeutic riding involves upper body calisthenics while the horse is standing still. This is very hard on a horse’s back and can make it very sore.

Crowding the leader and sidewalkers is another sign of stressed-out horses. A lot of therapy horses begin to carry themselves heavy on the forehand. There are many reasons for this, but it causes them to be out of balance, and it may become difficult or even painful for them to walk slowly.

Fidgeting or girthy when saddling is also a common sign. Aside from the obvious that the saddle may not fit, they may not even have a sore back, but they know what is coming next and are sending a signal they need a break.

Therapy For Therapy Horses clinics address all of these and other issues. If a horse is comfortable, walking in correct posture and released he is happier in his work, and the participants benefit from better equine-assisted therapy, too.

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Place your fingertips in the center of her belly and apply as much pressure as required for her to lift her belly and back. Hold a few seconds and release SLOWLY. This engages the stomach muscles and re-introduces her to correct body carriage. This is the final step in releasing the topline and teaching proper body carriage. It is imperative you do the preceding exercises first so the horse is loose and can lift her back without pain.

“A healthy, happy, comfortable horse will be able to provide better therapy to the participants.”

clinic on many of the basic Connected Groundwork exercises. Perfect! I made the long drive to Pennsylvania. Over the weekend she coached me and helped select the exercises that were most beneficial to therapy horses and easy to learn for volunteers. Most could be worked into the regular routine, adding very little time to already overloaded schedules. This was great, because no exercise is worth anything if it's not practiced.

Armed with Diane's suggestions and advice, I put together what I call my "Therapy For Therapy Horses" clinics, a series of easy to do and easy to learn exercises for the horses, and began to offer them free of charge (I do ask for travel expenses) to Equine-Assisted Therapy centers. These exercises help the horses release and relax, carry themselves off their forehand, lift their back, soften their inversion muscles, and engage the hind end into a softer, longer stride. They also help to relieve the tension built up in their mind and body, and help them to focus. Another benefit of these simple exercises is the release the horse enjoys mentally as well as physically.

A "bonus" benefit of these exercises is the communication skills they build within the person. These exercises are so soft and gentle that the handler must pay close attention to what the horse is saying. Did the horse release, did he ignore, did he show gratitude, did he protest, does he want you to do something else, is his back sore? These are subtle signs the person doing the exercises will soon master and be able to transfer to other interactions with the horses.

A healthy, happy, comfortable horse will be able to provide better therapy to the participants. I've traveled as far as New Hampshire providing Therapy For Therapy Horses clinics, and I've seen wonderful places full of joy and smiles. I have received emails and phone calls about how the horses have changed since beginning the exercises.

I've been to many different equine-assisted therapy centers now, both to do clinics and to write stories. I had the honor of meeting wonderful people who give all they have to help others. I've also had the honor of meeting and working with some outstanding horses who also give all they have to help heal man. I think most folks believe, as I did, therapy horses have it made—what a great way to retire and hang out. It is a great and honorable life for them, but it is hard work, too, that takes a toll. Think about offering a little care to the caregivers. They never hesitate to do their part.

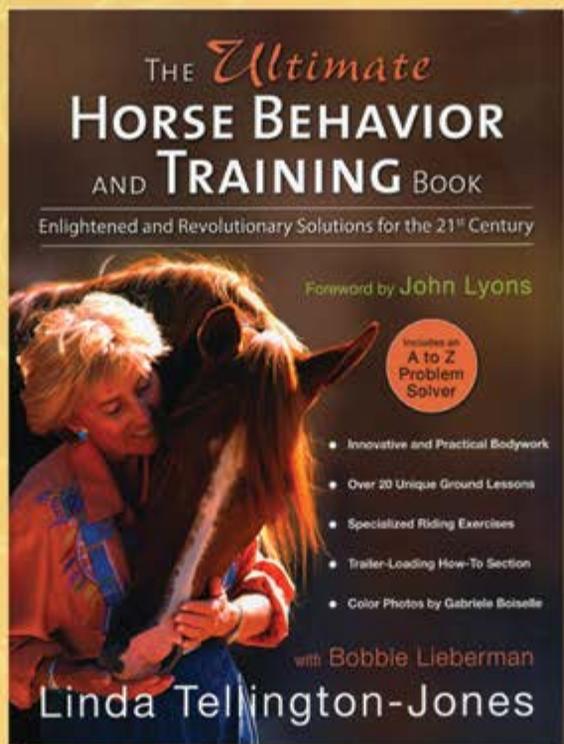


Dutch Henry is a writer and novelist who writes about "People & Horses Helping Horses & People." He resides in Virginia with his wife of 36 years, Robin, and a horse, dogs, cats and chickens. Dutch also does Therapy For Therapy Horse Clinics at therapeutic riding centers across the country to help horses maintain proper posture, movement and body carriage—because therapy horses can use a little therapy, too. You can reach

Dutch at dutchhenry@hughes.net—he would love to hear from you. His novel, "We'll Have the Summer," is available on Amazon and at www.dutchhenryauthor.com

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