

# Natural HORSE

M A G A Z I N E

WHEN HOOVES GO BAD,

**LOOK UP!**

WHOLISTIC REHABILITATION

*Shiatsu:*

HEALING from HEAD TO TOE

**HOOBOOT FIT,  
NOT FITS!**

**RELOCATING?**

Help your horse  
(and yourself!) with

*essential oils*

**HOLIDAY  
GIFT  
GUIDE  
INSIDE**



# THERAPY HORSES

Change Lives & Build Smiles

by Dutch Henry



*A veteran on a therapy horse at Lonesome Dove*

It was Hippocrates who first wrote about the benefits of horseback riding for physical therapy, over 3,000 years ago. Hippo is the Greek word for horse. He actually wrote how a rider's pelvis, legs and feet naturally move in synchronization with a walking horse. Thousands of years later this was proven scientifically.

Equine assisted therapy, or Hippotherapy, is an important and, thankfully, growing form of therapy used to help people of all ages improve and enrich their lives. According to the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International's (PATH Intl.) website, [www.pathintl.org](http://www.pathintl.org), there are currently over 800 member centers around the globe with an estimated 42,000 student participants, 3,500 instructors, 30,000 volunteers, and 6,300 equines. There are many other programs as well, but I wanted to be able to cite a few actual numbers. I read once that in the United States alone there are currently over 500 organizations or centers offering equine assisted therapy.

Equine assisted "physical therapy" is used for everything from spinal cord injuries to stroke victims to wounded veterans to skeletal and muscular diseases in children and adults. Seeing the equine/human connection and the ability of the spirit of the horse to touch lives, many therapists began to experiment. They began to use horses to aid in therapies not only related to physical rehabilitation but mental and behavioral health as well.

I write stories about "People and Horses Helping Horses and People." In the past 24 months I've written over 30 stories about therapeutic riding centers, horse rescues, mounted patrols, and wild horse and mustang sanctuaries. I've written about children who spoke their first word and smiled their first smile while riding a therapy horse, and about veterans who have begun to manage their struggles with injuries and PTSD with the help of equine therapy. I recently wrote a story about an organization who uses horses to

help abused women and girls cope with their situation, and another that uses rescue horses to teach at-risk youths to love life and learn the value and rewards of responsibility.

Therapy horses are incredibly valuable and helpful in so many different ways and for so many different treatments. More and more therapists are finding new and exciting results with not only physical but mental stress and confusion too. The spirit of the equine connects with the spirit of the person as she visits with or rides a therapy horse.

## Therapy horses need support

Those wonderful and giving horses who become therapy horses have the inner will to care more about their rider than they do their own body. More than that, they must be aware of not only their rider, but the therapist, the leader and sidewalkers. I've heard them called martyrs, in that they will ignore their own needs or ailments in favor of taking care of those all around them.

Ever aware of those around them, and those who need their support, these remarkable horses often make sacrifices in their movements and can become out of alignment themselves. This causes them to often walk in ways that may not allow free movement, and causes them to be heavy on their forehead, inverted, dropped at the withers and tight in the hind end. This may begin to affect their temperament and they get retired with the thought they are burned out, or tired of it. That may be the case, sometimes, but I don't believe it is the case all the time. Or even most of the time.

## Therapy for the therapy horse

Therapy horses can greatly benefit from a little therapy of their own and remain happily on the job for many years. One important thing many folks do with their therapy horses is to take them on regular trail rides. Trail riding is perhaps the easiest form of therapy for the

horse and it is not only terrific for the horse's body in that he will be allowed to walk along freely, and even run, but it is great for his mind too. Some centers have set up regular rotations for volunteers to take their horses on trail rides.

Hands-on therapy for the horses is important, too. Simple-to-do exercises to release the poll and soften the inversion muscles, along with a variety of other tension releasing routines to loosen their stifle and stretch their legs, will help keep therapy horses happy and in shape. These exercises should be part of the daily warm up routine. Remember, therapy horses meet new riders who are seeking benefits from the horse all the time. It is different from the horse who has one rider and together they can get into a comfortable and reliable relationship as they explore the world. Some centers incorporate not only their volunteers and therapists in the therapy-for-therapy-horse sessions, but the students and clients too - a sort of mutual therapy! I offer free clinics teaching these easy-to-learn and easy-to-do exercises to folks at therapeutic riding centers.

## Try these!

The exercises in my "Therapy for Therapy Horses" clinics are designed to release, relax, and improve self awareness in body carriage. They also clear the horse's mind and increase the ability and desire to focus.



Rock back

**1** **Rock Back:** Gently ask the horse to "rock back" off her forehead. Many horses collapse onto their forehead as a result of their daily routine; this causes tight inversion muscles, hollow backs, sunken withers and tight hind ends. Stand facing the horse and lightly touch the center of her chest and ask her to "rock back." Be careful to ask for tiny movement; if you ask for too much she will take a step back while remaining on the forehead. What you are looking for is a gentle "rock back." You should master this and every time you ask for a whoa, in hand or under saddle, rock her back. This in itself will go a long way toward a healthy horse. This can also be done while leading the horse, to teach her to carry herself off the forehead and engage the hind end. This one exercise will give the students better therapeutic rides because the horse's movements will become free and easy.

**2** **Poll Wiggle:** For release in the poll, very lightly lay one hand on her nose at the halter band, the other on her poll. Hold the poll in your finger tips and wiggle very gently. Most horses will begin to lower their head and get very relaxed. This releases tension all through the head,



Poll wiggle

## Therapy for Therapy Horses Clinics By Dutch Henry

Author of "We'll Have The Summer", horse enthusiast and coach of release and comfort for your horse

Free Clinics to Non Profit Therapeutic Riding Centers\*

Therapy for Therapy Horse Clinics will teach exercises that resemble massage too:

- Loosen muscles
- Maintain Proper Posture
- Promote Self Awareness

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\* Some expenses are requested call for details



neck and spine, and should be done before the vertebrae wiggle (next exercise). If your horse does not appreciate her poll touched, place your hand anywhere on her neck that she can accept and appreciate, then wiggle. In time she will allow you to move up closer to the poll.



Vertebrae wiggle

**3** **Vertebrae Wiggle & Belly Lift:** Starting at the withers and working to the tip of the tail, using both hands, gently wiggle each vertebrae back and forth, with a touch so light you barely move the skin. This frees up the tension stored in her back, loin and hips. You can then firmly press your fingertips under the middle of her belly and ask her to "lift" her belly and back. You must do the vertebrae wiggle first so she is not lifting into pain.



Belly lift

If you would like a free clinic of these and other terrific exercises for your therapy horses, please contact me. Let's "help them help."

The world is a better place because of these wonderful people and horses, and we thank them for their tireless efforts. The spirit of the horse touches so many lives, heals so many hearts, and builds smiles on thousands of faces. If you have the chance, hug a therapy horse. 🐾

*About the author:*

Dutch Henry is a freelance author who writes about "People & Horses Helping Horses & People" and novelist who resides in Virginia with his wife, Robin, of 36 years, horses, dogs, cats and chickens. You can reach Dutch at [dutchhenry@hughes.net](mailto:dutchhenry@hughes.net). He would love to hear from you. His novel "We'll Have the Summer" is available on Amazon and Dutch's website, [www.dutchhenryauthor.com](http://www.dutchhenryauthor.com).