

Centered Riding and Therapeutic Riding - A Perfect Blend

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As a Centered Riding Clinician, my major interest has been in the therapeutic riding world. Having been the director of my own therapeutic riding program since 1980 when I first met and rode with Sally Swift, I have advanced in my training in both fields at the same time.

These two disciplines go hand and hand. Centered Riding fits like the preverbal glove for those with special needs. If a program works with those that are physically disabled, the information about body work and how the energy flows through the body can reduce tension, relax spastic muscles, improve lateral balance and help one sidedness. Understanding Alexander and Feldenkrais from a Centered Riding perspective, helps the instructor recognize posture that is out of balance and gives a hands on education to touch that helps release and rebalance the body of the rider. For students with special challenges, Centered Riding **breathing**

techniques and exercises help the riders find relaxation and inner calmness whether the challenges they face are physical, emotional or cognitive. (learning ability) Without a relaxed mind and body, the transformational sensory input from the three dimensional movement of the horse is much more difficult to process. A blocked body will block the mind and the emotions as well as interfere with the ability to learn.

Knowing the basics of **building blocks** and understanding the ability to use imagery to facilitate better balance and posture on or off the ground, either walking, riding or in a wheelchair allows students to access pictures not words. For the non-verbal, autistic riders, or those with language speech processing difficulties, this enables them to actively participate in an experience that would otherwise be lost to them because of their difficulties with language expression and interpretation.

In a program that focuses on mental health diagnosis or behavioral challenges, the exercise from Centered Riding of "walk and the following seat" enables the students to begin to connect on a kinetic level. This starts to balance the body information from the sensory input of movement with the verbal input from the language of the riding instructor. Because of this balance, many students realize the experience of blending physical, cognitive and kinetic awareness often for the first time in their lives. Teaching "**Grounding**" to challenged populations presents students with an awareness that they can recognize and access when areas of their lives become overwhelming. The movement from the horse blended with having to control this large animal often creates a situation that is similar to the experiences each person has to deal with on a day to day basis. Because of processing, auditory or visual difficulties, making sense of the information they receive is often confusing and disorienting. Students react because they are trying to have some control over the situation they are experiencing. In riding, they have to control themselves and their reactions in order to control the horse. **Grounding** takes them out of their "flight or fight" response posture and helps them feel safe on the horses. This becomes a tool to reduce the "tendon guard" reflex which is the body's natural response to fear. This reflex causes all the tendons in the back of the body to shorten. Students then draw their heels up and lean forward in the saddle. Finding the **Bubbling Spring** and tapping the bottom of the foot bring sensory awareness to the feet and gives the student the opportunity to regain control over the fear response.

Many special needs populations have visual acuity problems. Helping a student to perceive their surroundings using **soft eyes** gives them a way to interpret the riding experience correctly. Autistic children lack the ability to see things directly in front of them. They often look away or turn their heads sideways when listening. **Soft eyes** gives them a larger visual perspective which in turn helps them to organize thoughts and responses more appropriately.

Using the information on "**use of self**" helps instructors model the posture they are trying to teach to their students. Training volunteers in correct posture and balance when leading or side walking also give the students more correct visual input to help improve riding balance. Every therapeutic riding program will benefit from having their instructors trained in Centered Riding techniques. The language of Centered Riding is a valuable addition to every instructor's tool box, especially in the therapeutic riding field.

Photo: Judith Cross Strehlke and Kestril