

HORSE POWER

HOW EQUINE THERAPY BENEFITS OLDER ADULTS

INTRODUCTION

Horses and humans have a long history together, so it should come as no surprise that horses are remarkably attuned to human emotions (Librado et al., 2024). Horses react to our facial expressions and body language, and can even detect when a human facial expression does not match their tone of voice (e.g., a smile paired with a stern word).

This connection between humans and horses serves as a foundation for equine-

assisted therapy and wellness programs that involve participants interacting with a horse with guidance from a trained professional (American Hippotherapy Association, 2024; PATH International, 2024).

This review focuses on the wellness benefits of equine-assisted programs for older adults.



EQUINE-ASSISTED PROGRAMS AND WELLNESS

Although much of the research on equine-assisted programs has focused on children and other specific groups (e.g., veterans or adults with substance use disorders), there is growing support for its use with older adults. Possible benefits fall into three categories: physical, psychological, and physiological.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Research findings show that horseback riding can provide balance improvements because a horse's rhythmic gait challenges a rider's center of gravity, requiring the rider to engage postural control and trunk stability (Badin, 2022). Balance exercises are especially important in older adults to help with stability and prevent injury.

It has also been shown that interacting with horses can have rehabilitative benefits for people living with the effects of having a stroke or multiple sclerosis. Interacting with horses has also been shown to have many benefits for people with memory loss due to Alzheimer's and other dementias. An action as simple as grooming a horse can positively enhance well-being.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Research further shows benefits to social-emotional wellness, specifically decreased stress, improved emotional regulation, enhanced empathy, and improved quality of life (Scopa et al., 2019). Horses can form long-term memories of specific humans, allowing for exchange of positive emotions between human and horse (Scopa et al., 2019). These

long-term memories help humans and horses to bond and form emotional attachments, aiding in increasing an older adult's social wellness when visits are consistent or frequent. Additionally, bonding typically happens outdoors, helping to "ground" people in the benefits of being in nature.

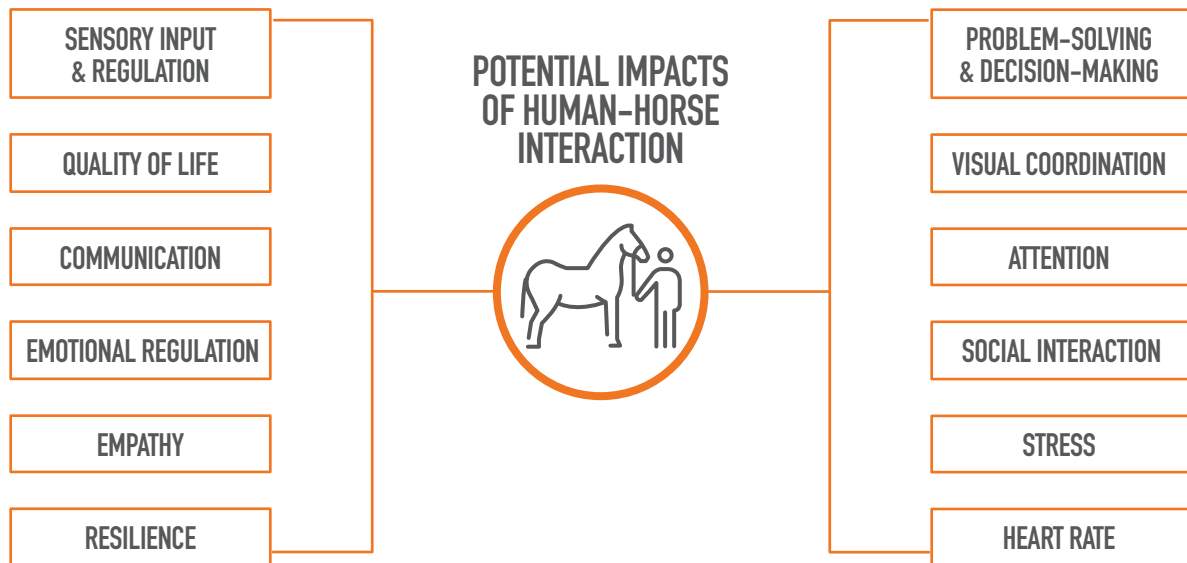
Improvements in attention, social interaction, and visual coordination have also been reported following equine-assisted programs (PATH International, 2024; White-Lewis, 2019). These programs have also been used successfully to strengthen leadership skills, improve resilience through improved ability to work through life challenges, enable empowerment, enable problem-solving and decision-making, and improve communication (PATH International, 2024).



PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Many of the benefits of equine-assisted programs occur through interactions other than riding (e.g., grooming). Touching and close physical contact may trigger physical responses that decrease stress and fuel happiness and pleasure (Badin, 2022; Rigby, 2023).

It has even been shown to be associated with increases in alpha-wave brain activity, indicating improved relaxation and concentration (Badin, 2022). More than the physical interaction, it may be the emotional connection between horse and human that leads to greater well-being.



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Give equine-assisted interactions a try! There are many ways to interact with a horse, such as grooming, walking alongside the horse, haltering a loose horse, cleaning the horse's hooves, horseback riding, horse carriage driving, or simply petting one. While even a single session can be beneficial, the longer the interaction, the better.

2

There are hundreds of centers across the United States that provide equine-assisted programs. Look for a certified equine instructor using the directory managed by [PATH International](#).

3

Although safety incidents are rare, older adults who are interested should work with a certified instructor to ensure that proper protective equipment is used, guidelines are reviewed and followed, and the horse's temperament matches the task. Prior to horseback riding, the participant should consult a physician and practice techniques such as mounting and dismounting (Peters et al., 2020).



AN EQUINE PROGRAM IN ACTION

Mather Institute's parent company is Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization with award-winning senior living residences. Mather understands the benefits of equine wellness, which it offers residents of The Mather, its Life Plan Community in Tysons, Virginia.

The unique, six-part program provides residents with opportunities to be close to, pet, lead, and groom horses. Each session also uniquely incorporates other wellness elements on-site at the stables, such as creative reflection through watercolors or writing, meditation, and socializing.

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I FIND HORSES TO BE VERY CALMING—THERE'S A REASON PROGRAMS LIKE THIS USE HORSES.

They offer a large, firm, comforting presence. (I think they smell good, too.) ... I tell people how great this program is—I can't get enough of horses. Just being around these animals, and touching them, is wonderful.

– Cynthia

Resident of The Mather

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Cynthia took a riding class in college and has ridden several times throughout her life.





“

I EMBRACED THE WHOLE PROGRAM, AND ESPECIALLY LIKED THE BEGINNING OF EACH SESSION, WHEN WE'D SET THE TONE WITH A MEDITATION.

We'd sit in a circle outdoors, where we could see the horses and the ranch around us, and focus on the environment. It was a very calming experience. I liked being in the country and being able to relax and absorb that environment. That feeling stayed with me after we went back to The Mather.... To me, the major component was the escape to the country. I chose to live in a busy urban environment, and I love it—but to spend some time in a calm, quiet, and nourishing setting was wonderful.

– Georgia

Resident of The Mather

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Growing up outside of Denver, Georgia had a horse as a child. She remembers riding horses all day with her cousin.

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Staffed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, Mather Institute is an award-winning resource for research and information about wellness, aging, trends in senior living, and successful industry innovations. The Institute conducts cutting-edge research, often in collaboration with leading universities, with the goal of informing, innovating, and inspiring. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.SM

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