

This is a feature article in which I discuss the benefits of equine therapy.

The Power Of Horse

By Gemma Hannon

As I sit in the saddle feeling each furry shoulder reaching forward one by one, listening to the soft clip-clop of each hoof as it hits the surface, I discover the therapeutic and calming side of my favourite sport.

At the mention of therapy, many people think of wooden tables, soft chairs, newly painted white walls, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee. The truth is therapy can take many forms. For some, it may be music, for others spending time with a loved one, but the type of therapy I'm most familiar with is therapeutic horse riding.

Therapeutic riding is an activity that uses the horse as a partner in the therapeutic process. The focus lies on gaining benefits from the unique neuromuscular stimulation whilst riding and handling the horse, and from building a relationship with the horse as part of a therapeutic team. It is proven to be beneficial for several people including people who have cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, learning disabilities, autism, Down Syndrome, mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression and acquired brain injury. The warmth and three-dimensional movement of the horse is transmitted through the rider's body, gradually making it more relaxed and supple, reducing spasms and improving balance, mobility, posture, and promoting better overall health.

I first became familiar with this form of therapy at a young age. When my mother, Karen Hannon set up her business for therapeutic riding on our family farm, we created a multi-sensory experience in a small woodland area including many different surprises like the gushing sound of a running stream or the crunching sound of the rocks as you stepped on them. As a child, the serenity and peculiarities of the place left me in awe. I spent my days venturing through shrubbery and building stick forts with my bare hands. Little did I know I was spending my time in a different type of newly painted white room with the smell of freshly brewed coffee.

As I grew older, I started to notice and observe the people that came to this 'therapeutic riding'. I became familiar with the children and young adults that came weekly. I didn't understand how riding the horse every week played an essential role in the lives of the children, but watched and witnessed some of the children slowly improve and strengthen. I have definitely witnessed some miracles. After volunteering to lead the horse for half an hour every Saturday, I got to witness the therapeutic riding process first-hand. It enabled me to learn and understand this process for the first time. My favourite part is noticing small improvements in balance and posture, or the ability to do the activities provided along the way like placing a ball through a plastic pipe.

After talking to Karen Hannon, who is a therapeutic riding instructor at Killulla Stud, I recognised the importance therapeutic riding plays in the life of a child or young adult with disabilities. "You have to recognise that each child is different and adapt to their needs", Karen explains. "The riders have to have a lot of trust for the horse and this can take longer to develop for some than others" Not only does therapeutic riding act as psychological therapy for these children with disabilities, but it also acts as a form of physiotherapy. The act of horseback riding rhythmically moves the rider's body in a manner comparable to a human gait, and recent studies identified small, but meaningful improvements in many areas including motor function, posture, gait, and quality of life. In conclusion, the review found that horseback riding caused significant improvements in every group studied.

I interviewed a couple of Karen's clients to gain a deeper insight into how horse riding affects their lives. Darragh, aged fourteen who is on the mild autistic spectrum, visits Killulla Stud every Friday. He spends time grooming, petting, and feeding the horses before his lesson. Both Darragh and his parents agree that therapeutic riding benefits him in many ways. "I love horse riding as it helps me feel relaxed and I love animals," Darragh says. Another client Sophie engages in therapeutic riding every Wednesday. Sophie has cerebral palsy and is a wheelchair user. She

loves animals and looks forward to riding every week. "I love that Sophie does horse riding as it is very good for her core muscle development given that she is a wheelchair user", states Adrian, Sophie's mother. It was great to see how important therapeutic riding is to these young adults and their parents.

Discovering therapeutic riding was incredibly interesting to me. It is local to my community and has benefited the lives of many people. Therapeutic riding Services are provided nationwide and I hope they can benefit more people in the future.