

GLOSSARY OF PHYSICAL & COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

The following are brief, non-medical descriptions of some disabilities and conditions of participants one might encounter in a therapeutic riding setting. This is not a complete list of disabilities one may encounter, nor is it intended as a comprehensive explanation of a specific disability. Rather it is a general overview with an explanation of how therapeutic riding can be beneficial.

Some of our students may have more than one condition, such as cerebral palsy paired with cognitive delays. If you have any questions or concerns about a particular student, please ask the Instructor.

Arthritis

Inflammatory disease of the joints.

Types: Osteo, rheumatoid and juvenile rheumatoid.

Characteristics: Pain, inflammation, stiffness, joint degeneration, and loss of movement.

Benefits: Gentle rhythmic movement to promote joint mobility, strengthen muscles, and relieve pain. Improved self-esteem and independence.

Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)

A persistent state of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Characteristics: Easily distracted, lack of focus, high energy levels, easily excitable, poor self-awareness and self-regulation.

Benefits: The horse is a strong motivator to stay on task and practice self-control. Movement of the horse helps stimulate postural control and focus. Improved self-esteem and independence.

Autism Spectrum Disorders / Pervasive Developmental Disorders

Impairment of social and communicative skills, behavioral dysfunctions, inattention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity, and cognitive dysfunction. Accompanying conditions may include speech impairment, sensory integration dysfunction, learning disabilities, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and seizures.

Characteristics: Poor social skills, behaviorally challenged, odd patterns of behavior or speech, resistance to change/transitions, anxiety and depression. See AD/HD, Sensory Integration Dysfunction.

Benefits: Relationship with the horse and the team builds social skills, independence and greater self-worth. The horse is a strong motivator for behavior modification. Movement of the horse helps postural and verbal stimulation.

Cerebral Palsy

Brain damage occurring before, at, or shortly after birth. It is a non-progressive motor disorder.

Types and Characteristics: Spastic – hypertonicity with hyperactive stretch reflexes, muscle imbalances and imbalanced equilibrium. Increased startle reflex and other pathological reflexes.

Athetoid – extensor muscle tension, worm-like movements, abnormal posturing and slow and

deliberate speech. Ataxic – poor balance, difficulty with quick, fine movements and are often described as having a “rag doll” appearance. Common associated conditions: cognitive dysfunction; seizures; hearing defects; visual defects; general sensory impairment; perceptual problems; communication problems; emotional disturbance; learning disabilities.

Benefits: Normalization of tone. Stimulation of postural and balance mechanisms, muscle strengthening and perceptual motor coordination. Improved self-esteem and independence.

Cerebral Vascular Accident – Stroke (CVA)

Hemorrhage in brain, which causes varying degrees of functional impairment.

Characteristics: Flaccid or spastic paralysis of arm and leg on same side of body. May impair speech, sight, balance, coordination and strength.

Benefits: Promotes symmetry, stimulates balance, posture, motor planning, speech and socialization.

Cognitive Disability (aka Mental Retardation)

Lack of cognitive ability to learn and/or perform at age-appropriate levels. Degree of retardation is referred to as educable, trainable, severe or profound retardation.

Characteristics: Developmentally delayed in all areas. Short attention span, easily frustrated.

Benefits: Stimulates group activity skills, coordination, balance, posture, gross and fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination. Provides a structured learning environment. Builds self-esteem, confidence and independence.

Down Syndrome (& other genetic disabilities)

A genetic disability caused by a hereditary chromosomal abnormality or mutation.

Characteristics: Developmental or cognitive disability, speech delays, poor muscle tone, altered physical appearance, heart and other health-related problems.

Benefits: Stimulates group activity skills, coordination, balance, posture, gross and fine motor skills. Provides a structured learning environment, builds self-esteem, confidence and independence.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

Progressive neurological disease with degeneration of spinal column tracts, resulting in scar formation, and eventual loss of function.

Characteristics: Most commonly occurs in the 20 to 40 year old range. It is progressive with periods of exacerbation and remissions. Symptoms include: weakness, visual impairment, fatigue, loss of coordination and emotional sensitivity. Associated problems include impaired bowel and bladder function.

Benefits: Maintains and strengthens weak muscles and provides opportunities for emotional therapy.

Muscular Dystrophy (MD)

Deficiency in muscle nutrition with degeneration of skeletal muscle. Hereditary disease that mainly affects males.

Characteristics: Progressive muscular weakness, fatigues easily, sensitive to temperature extremes. Common associated conditions: lordosis, respiratory infection.

Benefits: Provides opportunity for group activity, may slow progressive loss of strength, stimulates postural and trunk alignment and allows movement free of assistive devices.

Scoliosis

Lateral curve of the spine with a “C” or “S” curve with rotary component.

Characteristics: Postural asymmetry, may wear scoliosis jacket or have had stabilization surgery.

Benefits: Stimulates postural symmetry, strengthens trunk muscles.

(Note: Severe scoliosis is a contraindication for therapeutic riding.)

Seizure Disorders

Seizures are the result of, and the manifestation of, a disruption in the normal electrical activity of the brain. Seizures are often not the primary diagnoses, but an additional medical problem resulting from another condition such as autism, brain injury, cerebral palsy, infection, etc.

Characteristics: They may appear as a momentary loss of consciousness, convulsive body movement, and/or sensory disturbances.

Benefits: Offers team building and a sense of belonging. Provides the student with a feeling of empowerment and control over his/her body.

Sensory Integration Dysfunction

Hypersensitivity (or hyposensitivity) to one or more senses (vision, touch, smell, hearing, taste, movement and position).

Characteristics: Aversion to loud, sudden noises; tactilely defensive or seeks deep pressure; poor motor control; sensitivity to light; easily over-stimulated by visual or auditory stimuli; seeks oral stimulation; unable to block out “white noise”; easily confused or overwhelmed; difficulty regulating behavior. See also Autism.

Benefits: Therapeutic riding provides input to all the sensory systems, particularly movement and position awareness. Movement of the horse helps regulate processing of stimuli, improves focus and decreases sensitivity. Improves self-awareness, self-regulation and independence.

Spina Bifida

Congenital failure of vertebral arch closure with resultant damage to spinal cord. Characteristics: Varying degrees of paralysis of the lower limbs coupled with sensory loss.

Common associated conditions: Infection, lordosis, scoliosis and hip dislocations, hydrocephalus, and incontinence.

Benefits: Stimulates posture and balance, improves muscle strength and self-image.

Visual / Hearing Impairments

Partial or total loss of vision or hearing.

Characteristics: Vision impairment: spatial awareness, movement and postural problems, lack of independence. Hearing impairment: communication challenges, limited social opportunities.

Benefits: Stimulates group activity skills, coordination, balance, posture. Improves communication skills. Provides a structured learning environment. Builds self-esteem, confidence and independence.