

THE SUCCESS OF HEARTBEAT'S HIPPO THERAPY PROGRAM VALIDATED STATISTICALLY

In 2010, Heartbeat Serving Wounded Warriors initiated a clinical, cutting edge Hippotherapy program, appropriately named Back in the Saddle Warriors. The American Hippotherapy Association (AHA), founded in 1992, defines Hippotherapy as “the movement of the horse as a strategy by physical therapists (PT), occupational therapists (OT), and speech-language pathologist (SLP) to address impairments, functional limitations, and disabilities in patients with neuromusculoskeletal dysfunction.

Essentially, warriors perform different physical therapy maneuvers while on the horse. This requires them to perform a number of maneuvers and respond to the horse’s movements at the same time. The net effect is improved muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, strength and flexibility. Horses and humans have something in common, a pelvis that works and moves the same way. Both have identical hip movements when walking. Sitting on a moving horse allows the warrior’s body to move naturally. It strengthens muscle groups. Staying upright on a horse requires balance, coordination and muscle strength. Injuries from war may have affected those abilities and these can be helped by this therapy.

Although the horse is utilized as a physical therapy tool, the animal can offer much more. The warriors respond emotionally as well as physically to the horse. These animals are gentle and sensitive, and have a unique ability to sense human emotions. This special bond helps warriors work through difficult issues. This can build confidence and change their outlook on life. In short, it can help bring healing.

This therapy is presently being used for warriors with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), spinal cord injuries, loss of limbs and other injuries due to shrapnel damage. Heartbeat has always believed in the success of the program because of the qualitative data received by the participating warriors, but now we have quantitative data to validate our belief.

Data was collected in the form of pre therapy and post therapy evaluations for 6 different aspects: pain, anxiety, flexibility, physical tension, mood and ability to focus. Each warrior would rate each aspect on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being no pain, no anxiety, very flexible, relaxed, good mood and good ability to focus. A rating of 10 represented maximum pain, high anxiety, tight, tense, negative mood, and poor ability to focus. Data was collected from December 18th, 2012 to November 2nd, 2014 and included 173 therapy sessions.

After comparing all of the before and after data in a paired t-test, the results showed an extremely significant difference with a p value of .0001. Therefore, the warriors showed significant improvement in terms of pain level, anxiety, flexibility, physical tension, mood and ability to focus. Heartbeat is continuing to keep evaluations on all warriors involved in the program and will look at different relationships to evaluate.

Heartbeat is very excited to know that our program, Back in the Saddle Warriors, has made such a difference in so many warriors’ lives.