

MAIN ASPECTS OF THERAPEUTIC RIDING AND VAULTING OF INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

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1. Autism as a pervasive developmental disorder

Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder, which pervades the whole personality and lasts throughout the life. Autism is defined by impairments in communication, social relationships and flexible organisation of behaviour and interest. The patterns of actual symptoms is determined by triad of impairments, the severity of the disorder, the level of overall mental abilities, and the often-present additional impairments. The spectrum of autism is quite wide: it includes persons with multiple handicaps, who have practically no contact with the environment, as well as persons with occasionally excellent intelligence, who have mild autism and just may seem strange and lonesome people. The educational and treatment needs of all individuals with autism, however, have some shared features: only with an intensive developmental programs aimed at communicative, social and cognitive skills can result in the highest possible degree of independence, autonomy and social integration. Therefore, on the basis of these shared needs, we can think of this population in an integrated way, and we can help them via unified therapeutic principles.

2 Why therapeutic riding is a useful additional therapeutic tool in individuals with autism

It belongs to the specific way of life characterising most individuals with this disorder that they spend relatively little time with activities involving physical exercise, they have difficulties in organising their spare time in a useful and valuable way. They, most often, do not have at all real age-peer-relationships. Therapeutic riding in itself, is of course not a cure for autism, but can significantly improve these daily problems of these individuals.

Therapeutic riding can be applied even in those severely impaired individuals, who are impossible to involve and develop efficiently by other, more traditional methods. Though there can be an initial habituation period with many difficulties, following this, however, even individuals with little intrinsic motivation, with serious behavioural problems become more interested and involved while being on the horse. An elementary level of communication may emerge in a previously completely isolated individual, a contact is getting established with the environment, and behavioural problems begin to decrease both in quantity and quality.

TR can be applied as an autism-specific technique, in line with the commonly used intervention strategies suited for autism – but it is essential to include elements from other autism-specific intervention methods.

3 Features of autism which are important in relation to teaching and additional therapy

It is now a well-known fact that individuals with autism have an impairment in their so-called Theory of Mind ability. ToM ability is the ability to attribute mental states (thoughts, emotions, desires, and so on) to other beings, and to explain and predict their behaviours on the basis of these attributed mental states. In typical humans, this ability is essential in social life, in predicting and understanding other persons' behaviour. In the TR this ability is also

very important, because this help us to foresee the behaviours, reactions of the horse, so enables us to prepare for these reactions in time. Since individuals with autism do not have this ability, or it is impaired, they have lasting difficulties in predicting the behaviours of the horse. This cannot be fully managed by teaching and practising the individual.

Many individuals with autism lack intrinsic motivation for activities and accomplishment, and it is also difficult to delight them in the usual, ordinary ways. We, however, experienced that a part of these individuals following initial difficulties and panicking, when getting used to the routines of the riding school, find riding a pleasant and motivating activity, come happily to the riding sessions.

We found, however, that there exist another part of individuals with autism, who cannot get used to riding as an activity and the riding school, even after several attempts of habituation. For them it is better if we look for other additional therapeutic forms, such as music or swimming therapy.

Many individuals with autism have a limited understanding of speech, even if they use speech relatively well. These difficulties should be managed by using visual means of communication. We must be careful when designing the tools for visual communication, because the level of cognitive abilities must be taken into account individually, and because the visual signs must be so designed that the individual were able to recognise them from a considerable distance and when being in motion. So, usual classroom tools are often inappropriate.

Since they may often misunderstand verbal instructions, these must be short, clear and unambiguous.

We often see surprising peaks and abysses in the patterns of intellectual abilities of these individuals. It is important not to focus on the so-called savant-skills (extraordinarily good narrow abilities), but improve those fields of mental functioning which are impaired in the individual but are essential to human life.

4 Typical assets we can build on

Rule-following, insistence on routines. This characteristic of autism, behavioural rigidity, has its advantages and disadvantages in TR. We can reasonably expect that the individual will keep the rules and regulations of the riding school and the sessions when he/she understood and learnt them. On the other hand, however, they will show little spontaneous insight about necessarily appearing exceptions, when rule should be applied flexibly. Instead, they will most probably apply the rules automatically and rigidly, which may occasionally cause problems.

Special interests. Most people with autism have their own, individual fields of strong interest. These have most often strange and surprisingly narrow focuses – such as being obsessed by numbers. In TR we can use these specific interests to motivate the person – for example, if the therapist is able to involve numbers in all elements of the riding session, the individual will enthusiastically take part in the activities. It must be kept in mind, however, that these fields of interests are different in every each case of autism.

As we mentioned earlier, visual information and visually well-structured environment is especially important and informative for these individuals. If the subject is already trained in

using such tools, and we design the visual help in the riding school on an individual basis, then we can avoid many potential behaviour problems. By making the environment clearly arranged and predictable, we make it emotionally secure for the given person with autism.

5 Typical difficulties which must be counted with

Impairments in sensory processing. We often see both hyper- and hypersensitivity in autism. It is important to keep in mind because it may easily happen that the person with autism gets injured but he/she does not mention it to us, and does not even display it in any recognisable manner. It comes from their hypersensitivity that it may be quite useful to limit the amount of stimuli in the environment, in order to avoid unnecessary irritation of the subject.

Attention problems. It is quite important to be a step ahead the patient in order to prevent dangerous situations and accidents. We must keep him/her busy, in order to keep his/her attention under control, but we should not give too much or contradictory tasks, either, because that could run over their limited attentional capacity.

Difficulties with imitation. If verbal commands and accompanying demonstrations do not suffice to solve the given task, then we have to prompt tightly the individual by physical means – for example, by holding and leading his/her hands.

Flight. It often happens that individuals with autism flee from institutions. Since many riding schools are not fenced in, an extra care must be taken about this possibility.

6 Preparing for and starting the riding therapy

The first visits to the riding school and the first therapeutic occasions have specific importance. This is so, because individuals with autism strongly insist on sameness in their daily circumstances, so they may show fear and panic in novel situations, and they behave in an extreme manner in these stressful situations.

If, having been prepared appropriately, we succeed in getting our patient acquainted with the new situation and the relevant expectations, then we can trust in that our therapeutic sessions will be successful. It may be useful to practice the use and wear of the safety helmet prior to the first session, so we can avoid wasting riding occasions due to difficulties with introducing such a new object.

7 Specific aims of the sessions

By and large, we use the same methods as in any therapeutic riding and vaulting intervention with handicapped individuals, but in a specific arrangement and with specific focuses, tailored to the specific needs of the given individual with autism. As we mentioned, the focuses must be set on:

- ? communicative development,
- ? social development, and
- ? more flexible organisation of behaviour

Communicative development

The riding school is an appropriate setting for teaching communicative skills even on a very elementary level. Using pointing and eye-contact, orientating towards the partner can be taught as well as augmentative and alternative communication (based on usage of objects and/or pictures, and so on).

Beyond training various forms of human communication, if the person's intellectual capacities allow that, we have to teach also how to interpret the communicative signs of the horse, and how to send such signs to the horse.

Social development

The work in the riding school is an essentially social situation. The patient can manage the tasks if and only if he is able to co-operate with others. For example, someone must be asked to open and hold the door of the stable while the person leads the horse out of it. Those vaulting exercises when two or more children work together with the same horse also require smooth co-operation.

On a more sophisticated level, working with the horse requires one to observe carefully his own physical and psychic condition as well as the physical and psychic condition of the horse. Only via such observations one can become able to infer the expectable reactions of the horse from the observable minute signs. This is the way one can establish a psychic and kinetic harmony with the horse. An individual with autism can gain a lot if he/she is able to begin this process: such observations and practices help him/her understand his/her own

reactions better, as well as give an opportunity to practice how to predict actions from situations and minor behavioural signs.

For many individuals with pervasive developmental disorders, horse is easier to accept as a partner, since the horse is not a part of the often so requiring social environment, does not mediate hard-to-understand social expectations, and is more ready to “accept” the typical individual than many human peers.

This is true not only for the horse, as a partner, but to the riding school, as a social environment, too. People working in a riding school are usually more tolerant, are more ready to accept non-conventional behaviours and reactions. This provides a more settled and less stressful human social environment than most other social institutions do.

Flexible organisation of behaviour

The riding school situation itself, as a novel scene of life and a highly variable environment, supports the development of more flexible organisation of behaviour and a better adaptation to changes.

While being seated on the horse, there are not two moments which provide the same sensations. As riding takes place in the open air, continuously changing natural environment provides a much more pleasant and acceptable variability than a crowded street in the peak hours.

All activities with the horse can be so designed that it require precisely that amount of independent work which is appropriate for the given individual in the given phase of the therapeutic process. For example, such degrees of independence can be introduced from small

steps of grooming, through exercises with a horse on a lead, to an independent control of the movements of the horse.

8 A few examples for applying visual strategies in the TR

As emphasised earlier, visual help is crucial in autism. Visual help makes information processing easier, it provides concrete reference for verbal instructions, and it remains accessible throughout the whole duration of information processing.

Daily schedule can be applied at home as well as in the school and in the riding school. It informs the patient about the order and locations of the activities. It gives autonomy to its user, and reduces stress and fear, by making daily life more predictable. The level of symbolisation in the daily schedule can be set according to the individual's cognitive abilities – the possibilities range from using real objects to written notes.

The process of the riding session can be also represented by symbols, which are in accordance with the level of symbolisation in the daily schedule. The information so provided must be as detailed as the needs of the individual necessitate that. For example:

step 1 grooming

step 2 tackling the horse

step 3 getting on the horse

step 4 riding the horse

and so on

For every each activity, further help can be provided by further algorithms on the scenes of the activities. For example, the steps of grooming can be shown in details in the stable.

“First-then” board. Most individuals with autism will dislike some activities or tasks related to riding. Their unwillingness can be easily overcome by using “first-then” boards. These are about A3-sized boards, on which we represent the unpleasant activity, as to be done first, but also we represent the next activity, which is preferred by the given individual. So, the patient can easily understand or remember, that by completing the unpleasant work, he/she can take part in a pleasant activity.

9 Closing remarks

Finally, let me emphasise two points.

First, I would like to call your attention to the importance of knowing autism, as a very specific disorder, in depths. In order to be successful in the riding therapy with individuals with autism, human empathy and general experience with TR and with other handicaps are not enough: knowing well the specific intervention needs and specific problems of people with autism is indispensable.

Second, it may seem that TR with subjects with autism requires much preparation, care, knowledge, attention and extra work. This is true, but this extra effort is not unbearable, and, as my own experience as well as that of my colleagues showed, leads to valuable success.