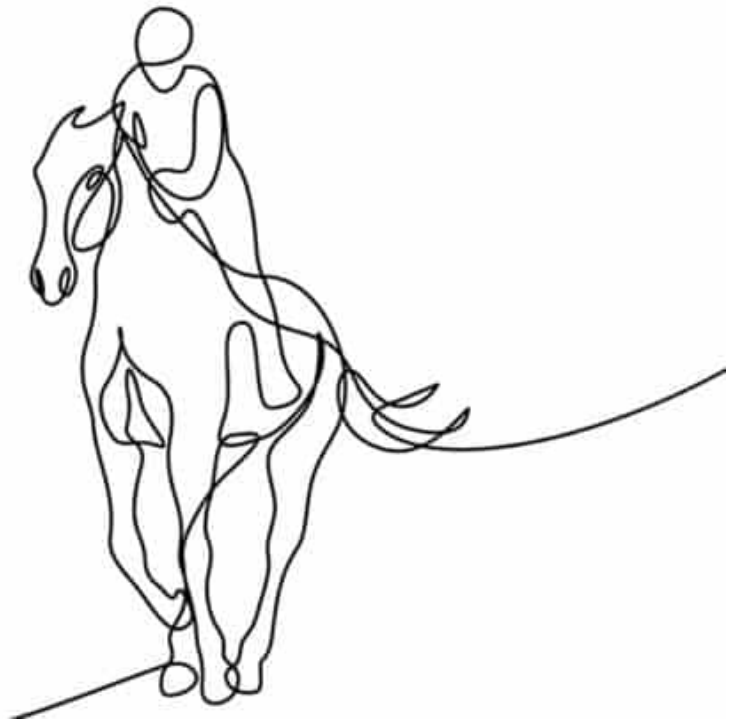


How Horseback Riding Helps My MS



One of the favorite parts of my weekly routine for the last 4 and a half years now is going to my hippotherapy, or equine-assisted, therapy sessions. Hippotherapy is a physical, occupational and speech treatment that utilizes the natural gait and movement of a horse to help with managing MS symptoms. There are so many advantages to riding a horse when you're living with MS, including improving balance, coordination and gait issues, as well as enhancing cognition.

There is also something to be said of the confidence booster and sheer joy I get from being able to control a 1,200-pound animal on my own. I drive nearly an hour to a very special place called Equestrian Connection, whose mission it is to improve the physical, mental and emotional well-being of children and adults with special needs through equine therapy. I make this long journey because of the "Balance for Life" program designed specifically for people with MS and offered at a very discounted rate thanks to privately funded scholarships.

Being eager to learn everything I needed to know to ride without assistance, within a few short months, that's exactly what I was doing.

I have to admit that when I first started riding, I had very little experience, so my instructor eased me into the independent riding I'm able to do today. I started out wearing a belt around my waist that an instructor would hold onto from one side, while another staff member walked next to us on the other side of the horse and a third trainer would then lead the horse around the barn. For the first couple of years of lessons, I was able to mount the horse independently, but as my mobility has worsened, I now need a lift to get me on the horse. This was more of a mental obstacle than a physical one at first, as once I'm on the

horse, I've become skilled enough to do everything I could when I was able to mount myself. In fact, I totally forget that my legs don't work very well when I'm riding high above the ground on this magnificent creature.



Therapy horses are extremely gentle and intuitive at this barn, but they still require an independent rider to be able to give them the right prompts. So, my instructor will give me a crop to tap the horse in the place where my heels would typically hit when my legs are too worn out to do this myself. My instructor typically has me do some stretching on the horse, leading me a couple of times around the barn until she takes me off lead so I can ride unassisted.

Like many people with MS, I struggle with cognition at times, so my therapist will give me a set of somewhat involved instructions that usually involve circling the horse in the corners of the arena, marching the horse over and around set up obstacles and more complex patterns that test my memory. To challenge me physically, my instructor will have me do up downs, which force me to lift my body out of the saddle in a rhythmic motion while I'm riding. On real warm days, just keeping the horse moving at a decent speed is a physical challenge as we're both sweating from the exertion.

Along with all the other things I do to keep my body healthy and strong, I feel like hippotherapy has truly enhanced my physical and mental well-being. My goal is to continue to improve my riding skills because having the opportunity to get better at anything at my age is truly a gift that I do not take for granted. The sense of accomplishment I get after a

good ride is immeasurable, and hippotherapy is a treatment modality I would highly recommend to anyone bring up to their doctors if you're struggling with mental and physical trials.

But the best part is it's so much **fun**.

Editor's Note: This blog has been transcribed and edited from its original form from the MS is Messy podcast. [Click here to listen](#).

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