



Using Horses to Help Veterans Recover From Trauma

Horses have long been used in helping people recover from traumatic experiences. In fact, the American Hippotherapy Association notes that ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, recognized as the father of modern medicine, references in his writing the therapeutic value of horseback riding.

At Lift Me Up! in Great Falls, Virginia, the staff and volunteers are focused on using therapeutic horseback riding to help people of all ages and abilities gain (or regain) confidence, strength, and self-esteem through their programs.

Each year, approximately 200 students participate in a program at Lift Me Up!, and in total take about 3,000 lessons. Volunteers contribute a large amount of support to the organization, totaling around 10,000 hours each year, which Lift Me Up! calls “the ‘manpower’ behind the ‘horsepower.’”

The organization has a special program dedicated to military personnel and veterans called Back in the Saddle (BITS).

“It was a goal of mine and our board of directors to make this happen,” Georgia Bay, executive director of Lift Me Up! and a PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) advanced instructor and mentor, says of the BITS program. “One of our board members several years back was retired military, and he believed passionately that riding would benefit injured military people.”

BITS was uniquely created to address whichever specific issue that a wounded or traumatized current or former military member experienced. This can include those who have traumatic brain injuries, physical injuries, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The therapy relies on the equine-human relationship and how the two connect with each other to ultimately help the person work through the issues he or she is facing.

Bay remembers an experience she had with a military rider from the BITS program who asked her how horses respond to stress or threats.

“I explained that horses, being beasts of prey, have a ‘run away first, figure out what it is later’ approach to things,” she says. “But as they build up trust with us, they can look to us for reassurance that it is safe and they don’t need to run away.”

The rider told Bay that what she just described was his PTSD. “Maybe that is why I get along so well with the horses,” he told Bay. “We are kind of



Each year, approximately 200 students participate in a program at Lift Me Up!, and in total take about 3,000 lessons. Volunteers contribute a large amount of support to the organization, totaling around 10,000 hours each year, which Lift Me Up! calls “the ‘manpower’ behind the ‘horsepower.’”

the same.”

After their conversation, Bay remembers that the rider then appeared to have a closer bond to his horse.

“I think he felt that empathy and, with it, built a better relationship with his equine,” she says.

Bay often sees successes unfold at Lift Me Up!, and the outcomes are bittersweet for the team there.

“When our military riders improve and feel better, we find that many of them find jobs, move to new homes and we have to say goodbye to them,” she says. “We are happy to see them enjoying success, but we are sorry to see them go. We do get fond of the riders.” •

Story by Tara Shubuck
CFC #70459



Heidie Rothschild with Radar

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIFT ME UP!

PHOTO COURTESY OF LIFT ME UP!