

Test your horse!

If you're considering donating your horse to a therapeutic riding program, the following "games" can prepare your horse for a new career. But even if you and your horse will be together forever, these games can tighten the bond between you, give you unmounted "homework" for rainy days, and provide hours of entertainment for you (and for your horse, while he laughs at your ridiculous new requests).

With all of these games, start slowly and easily, and expect better and better results as time goes on. If your horse gets tense, scared, mad, or bored, just change the subject for a while. The more he enjoys his work, the better he'll do it.

- **Learn a new language:** There are dozens of great online resources about horse body language and how to use it (check out the links below). Therapy horses listen to their handlers' body language as part of the illusion that riders are independent and in control of their horses (they have silent, invisible back-up help from staff and volunteers).
- **Word, horse:** Voice commands are fun and easy. Start with basics like "Walk on", "Whoa", and "Trot", then get creative. Therapy horses need to respond to voice commands from riders who can't move their bodies to communicate, and "Whoa" is a terrific emergency brake for *any* situation.
- **Be a statue:** Teach your horse to stand square, with equal weight on all 4 feet. Therapy horses need to do this when riders get on and off, and when stirrups and rider position are adjusted. *Hint:* If your horse is reluctant to lift his feet for hoof-picking, check to see if he's standing square. He can stand on 3 feet, but not 2!
- **Three's not enough of a crowd:** Your horse can learn to appreciate being groomed by 3,4, 10 people at a time (depending on the size of the horse!). Therapy horses are often groomed this way when groups from local organizations come to visit.
- **Dodgeball:** Okay, few horses actually *like* this game, but being tolerant to balls and stuffed animals flying over and into them is an important therapy horse skill. Start easy and slow, and remember that once you've de-sensitized one side of the horse, you have to start all over from the beginning on the other side.
- **Poke me:** Touch your horse *everywhere*. Clients can find unusual places to touch a horse in no time flat. This is another de-sensitization game, but you just might find a hidden magic rubbing spot you never knew about, like the sides of the base of the tail... mmmmm itchies...
- **Help me out:** Lean into your horse at odd moments, and teach him the difference between pressure that says "move over" and pressure that says "support me". He will figure it out, and use it when a rider really needs a steady body to lean against.
- **You have WHAT?** Borrow crutches, a walker, a wheelchair, an IV cart, or an empty oxygen tank and teach your horse that these things are cool, and should be accepted

unconditionally. The people who use them get enough odd looks during the day; they deserve acceptance at the barn. When your horse gets really good, teach him to walk, halt, and turn while being lead by someone in a wheelchair (with passive back-up on the off side).

- ***Be a statue, again:*** Teach your horse to stand still while you mount and dismount, no matter how long it takes or how poorly you do it. Most therapeutic programs use mounting ramps that put the rider at least 3 feet above the ground, so find a safe place to replicate this new sensation for your horse. Have a horsey friend stand at your horse's head to steady him. He'll most likely have a volunteer holding him when he mounts for a lesson.
- ***Sack of potatoes:*** Ride poorly. Really, really poorly. Schlump in the saddle, lean to one side, tell your horse to do two things at once. He'll think you've lost it, but you'll know if he has the tolerance for therapeutic riders. Teach him to ignore random moments of imbalance, and kiss his nose when you're done. He'll forgive you.
- ***Diamonds and pearls:*** Teach your horse to wear jewelry, like big plastic rings around his ears, hats and helmets, bells in his mane and tail, a "cape" on his butt, and ribbons trailing off his saddle. We'll do just about anything silly to make a rider smile, and giant sunglasses on a horse look pretty silly, indeed!

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