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## **Riding Heart to Heart: A Clinical Psychological Perspective on Therapeutic Human-Animal Bonding**

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### **Impact Statement**

There is an immediacy to gain better insights into the theoretical and applied relevance of mental health from an international aid perspective in humanitarian emergencies, which the present article aims to address. Interweaving evidence-based literature with lived expert experience, the review presents an urgent and compelling case for prioritizing psychological support in disaster relief situations and for triggering increased attention and intervention through proactive approaches to mental health.

In doing so, the results serve as a critical resource for educators, policymakers, and practitioners, while also providing action-oriented recommendations for effecting meaningful change in the delivery of mental health services to some of the most vulnerable populations during times of crisis. By stimulating dialogue and championing evidence-based solutions, this work will create change and contribute to the development of a community that is increasingly capable and committed to mental health-focused work in humanitarian contexts.

As the article seeks to give an excellent overview of the diagnostic implications of making a call to action, it can extend the dialogue and concerns related to CSC in order that it may not only be understood, but also acted upon in ways that impact the lives and well-being of the individuals as well as the communities that flee for refuge and support during a time of crisis.

### **Abstract**

This article summarizes the effects a rider has on the horse and how it would affect their performance as a whole. It also discusses the causes of injuries and how to correct them with basic horse-rider communication skills. This article helps to understand the need for further research on the psychological factors affecting the horse and rider. It explores how riders can communicate more effectively with their horses to enhance performance. Various journals were consulted for this review, including the Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, the Journal of Veterinary Science, New Perspectives on Equine-Assisted Interventions, the Journal of Veterinary Behavior, and Anthrozoös. Sixty-two articles were selected at the initial screening stage, out of which 31 were selected for this article. These articles show that the rider's effects on the horse are highly correlated, whether positive or negative. These studies demonstrate that with increased practice and time, horse-rider communication will improve, thereby enhancing performance in equitation and the horse-rider partnership.

**Keywords:** Advantages of Horse-Riding, Equitation, Horse-Human Interaction, Human-Horse Relationship, Injury in Riding, Psychology of The Rider, Therapeutic Riding

### **Introduction**

#### **The Effects the Rider Has on the Horse While Riding**

In other sports, athletes can perform at their best if their physical and mental abilities allow them to—any decision an athlete makes or any step they take depends on their perspective and training. However, when it comes to a sport like

equitation, it does not just depend on what an individual does, but it is always a relationship between the horse and the rider. Horses are very sensitive towards the mental state of their rider, mounted or while beside the rider, and also to the slightest change of mind or aid given by the rider. In such a case, the communication between them must be harnessed effectively, as it affects performance, since the horse can detect both positive and negative signs from the rider, such as self-efficacy and a relaxed, favorable emotional state.

In contrast, the negative is being anxious along with fear of performance and self-doubt, which would reduce the performance of the horse as its partner is signaling something negative, causing fear in the horse [1]. The horse is sensitive to its rider's psychological state and can understand them without any external action or cue.

Psychological skills such as relaxation (the equestrian has to be calm before the competition because raise in their heart rate affects the horses state of mind), attentional focus (a beginner would focus more on the position and diagonal whereas an advanced rider for show jumping or dressage would focus more on the map of the arena), following a routine in doing things would keep both the rider and the horse relaxed at the time of competition as they both are familiar with the process such as having specific set time of practice or routine steps of warm-up, self-talk and self-efficacy which help the athlete in knowing ways to gain confidence which would help in better performance which would in turn enhance self-efficacy to further perform better in other competitions hence these psychological skills are important for enhanced performance [2-4]. Almost all riders agree that horses react and change their behavior and performance based on the rider's mood while riding [5].

Additionally, high levels of correlation were observed between the rider's personality and the horse's behavior during the show [6]. According to the study done by it was known that the mental state and attitude of the rider or handler around the horse affects the response of the horse, since a more relaxed rider or person with a positive attitude keeps the horse relaxed when compared to a person with a negative thought process, which increased the heart rate of the horse when they stroked them [7,8].

### **Injury in Horse Riding**

The horse can sense the rider's and the crowd's fear, which can make it nervous and put both at risk [9]. It is known that the risk of injury for riders and others around horses is 20 times higher than the risk of injury from motorbike accidents [9]. Many factors were comprehensively indicated as the cause of injury, such as age, experience, and the health of the horse, where fear of the horse was the highest-rated. However, the actual cause of the increased risk of injury for both the rider and horse is an improper understanding of the horse and the training of the rider [10].

Therefore, understanding the horse's behavior and training accordingly is highly recommended to prevent injury, as horses that are not comfortable tend to be more aggressive toward humans [11]. Horse riding is one of the most dangerous sports due to miscommunication of aids or rider-horse relations [12]. It is not only the horse that needs to be free from distraction, but also the rider needs to have high concentration levels to understand the cues given by the horse and react quickly according to them to avoid miscommunication between the rider and the horse, which might affect the performance of the duo, leading to lower levels of confidence, further increasing the chances of self-doubt and injury, as the rider might not be mentally strong. Numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of a horse's confidence on its behavior.

However, there are very few studies on how human behavior affects the horse and its performance or response to the rider which paves the way to understanding the impact the rider has on the horse's behaviour [7,8,13]. Since horses are prey animals, they exhibit a heightened flight instinct when confronted with the slightest sign of danger from the leader, which is a social communication mechanism necessary for their survival [14,15]. Horses use their bodies as an aid for communication; they are experts at understanding as well as using their bodies to communicate in return which is why they react as quickly as possible to their rider's heartbeat, muscle movements, and body positions or aids given by the rider's body [16]. Horses can communicate their feelings to riders, which can help avoid injury and improve communication. The ear position of the horse is one of the most well-known signs of a horse's emotional state. If the ears are turned towards the front, it implies interest and happiness of the horse, whereas if they are turned backwards, it indicates a disturbed or agitated state. A calm horse that is ready to follow its rider has its ears positioned towards the sides [17]. The rider's position is crucial, as the horse is sensitive to how the rider sits on the saddle, which tells the horse what to do.

When the rider is in an asymmetrical position—meaning that the shoulder, hip, and heel are not aligned, or that muscular activity causes spinal instability, which often occurs in novice riders—there is a greater chance of injury occurring. There is a need for a deeper understanding and increased research to determine how psychological factors affect the performance of both the rider and the horse which would help create a better understanding and enhance performance [18-20].

### **Advantages of Horse Riding Therapeutic**

In general, animals such as dogs and cats are known as live antidepressants, which make humans feel happy and relieve

stress. Likewise, the partnership that develops between the horse and rider makes the rider feel more relaxed, helps them cope with stress and anxiety, and learn to manage their emotions, ultimately leading to happiness as they feel they can temporarily escape the outside world while riding and enjoy the experience. It also helps the rider stay calm and learn to be patient, as they realize that things do not always go as planned when riding, and continued effort is the only way to achieve their desired outcome. In addition to providing simple pleasure and coping mechanisms, horseback riding has also helped individuals with clinical disorders such as ADHD and depression to feel better. People have reported that only after riding do they feel a sense of calm where their mind seems relaxed, which was not achieved with any medication [21].

### Social

Horse riding also helps improve social factors, as people feel they have a companion, which makes them feel dependable. They can vent without being judged and receive support, ultimately feeling loved. Additionally, being part of riding clubs encourages riders to interact and share experiences with others who have the same passion, which further enhances their social well-being. Riding also helps in the developmental aspects of the rider, where they can improve body balance, concentration, and psychomotor abilities.

### Method

#### Search strategy

Various journals, such as the Journal of Sports and Exercise Psychology, Journal of Veterinary Science, New Perspectives on Equine Assisted Interventions, Journal of Veterinary Behavior, and Anthrozoös, were searched for articles on the effects that riders have on horses, as well as the psychological factors that affect the partnership between the rider and the horse. Keywords such as Human-horse relationship, Horse-human interaction, Psychology of rider, injury in riding, advantages of riding, Therapeutic riding, and Equitation were used. The data collected from the mentioned journals were reviewed, and relevant information was considered for further study.

#### Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

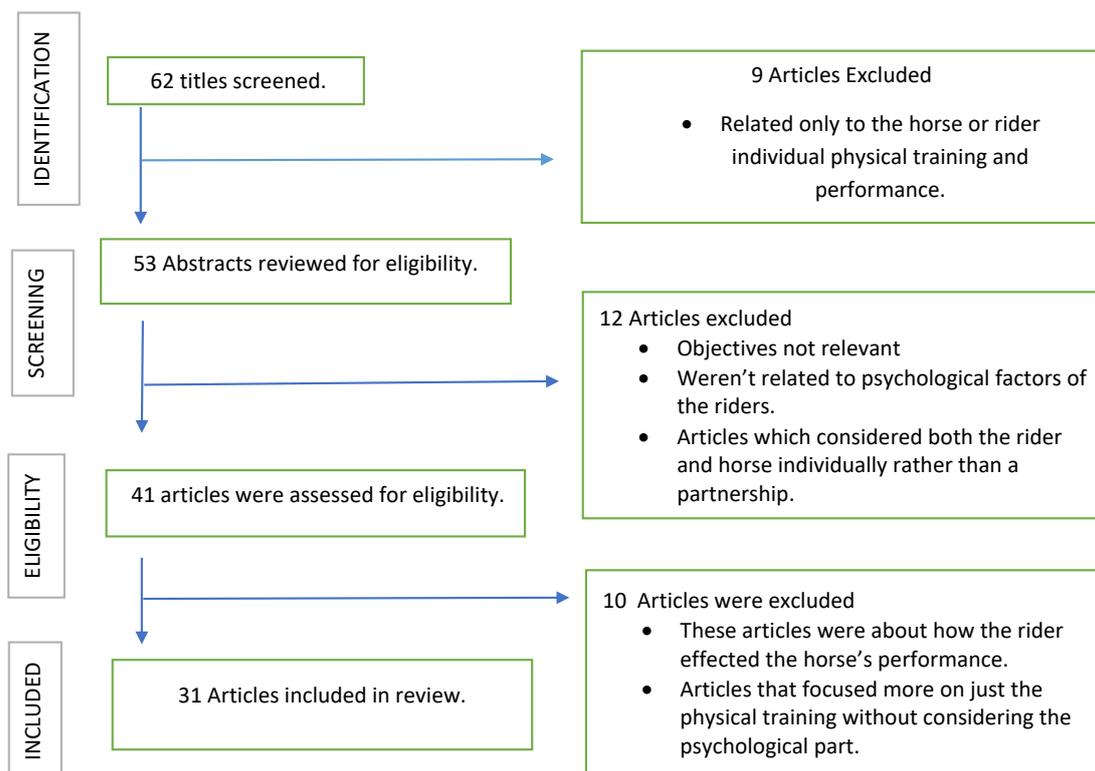
This article consists of: a) Research, review and viewpoint articles, b) article that give data for studies done on the effect a rider has on the horse, c) Articles that give information on how the rider affects the way a horse performs d) Studies include novice and advanced riders, d) Studies include all forms of riding such as Dressage, Show-jumping and leisure, e) Meta analysis, Quantitative and qualitative studies were considered for this article.

Studies were not considered in this review if a) they included non-equestrians, b) they were done only on the horse or human behavior without adding the relationship between them in the study.

**Author Note:** This study was not preregistered. Data and study sources are available for further reference in the reference section.

### Results

#### Study Selection



Dressage riders were trained in psychological skills over a six-week period. Although the scores of their competition did not increase, all the riders experienced a decrease in pre-competition anxiety and an improvement in concentration levels, which they attributed to a more responsive horse [18]. A study was conducted to investigate the effects of an equestrian's mood states on the horse using a 30-item POMS questionnaire, which was completed a few minutes before entering the ring. Riders were divided into 13 novice and 13 advanced-level groups based on their experience in dressage, as per the British Dressage guidelines. The study found that advanced-level riders exhibited a lower level of confusion compared to novice riders, and the effect size was also large, acting as a moderator for their performance [19].

A study was conducted involving 186 athletes who participated in an online survey to understand how psychological skills are utilized in the training of equestrians. Results of this study showed that even though goal setting and confidence improvement were used the most ( $P = 0.017$ ) and relaxation was reported to be used the least ( $P = 0.017$ ) in comparison to other psychological skills, they did not show much difference between the usage of the two ( $P = 0.52$ ). This study revealed that equestrians employed different psychological skills, tailored to their experience level and the stage of the competition. This proved their hypothesis that trainers were not using many of these psychological skills in their training incorrect, as the majority of the coaches used PST while training [22]. A study was conducted to assess the mental skills used by equestrians before an event, utilizing a psychological inventory for equestrians that was developed in two phases. A sports psychology inventory was developed to assess the mental skills of equestrians, comprising 32 items.

There were 668 respondents for this inventory, which yielded results showing that advanced-level riders demonstrated higher mental skills compared to novice-level riders [23]. A study was conducted on 40 students to assess how horses react towards humans based on their attitude and behavior, using an experiment where all the samples had to walk the same mare around a set course. Both the horse and the human were assessed using a set of tests and observations. The humans were initially given a questionnaire to test their attitude and confidence, which improves with experience. Then they were assessed by behavioural observation, which involved observing the horse's behaviour towards the human, including the hand position and lead tension with which the human was leading the horse. The horse was assessed by observing its reaction to each human, as indicated by ear movement, head position, and whether the horse showed any resistance while being led through the arena. From the results of the questionnaire, it was observed that the ear movement ( $r = -0.68$ ) of the horse decreased when led by humans with a positive and strong attitude, and with less lead tension ( $r = 0.32$ ). The only variable that showed significance among the variables of human behavior ( $\beta = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was the attitude humans had towards the horse, which showed reduced resistance (0.83), lowered the head (-0.50), and had their ears facing forward (-0.59) [24].

An investigation was conducted to study the impact of human nervousness on horses, involving 27 riders and 37 horses in an experiment. The heart rates of both riders and horses were simultaneously calculated. When the rider transitioned from one point to another on a regular ride, both heart rates were normal. Later, the rider was informed that an umbrella would open at one point and was asked to ride, but the umbrella was not opened as promised. This resulted in an increased heart rate of the rider, which simultaneously increased the heart rate of the horse, which was caused just due to the thought of the rider that the horse would fear the situation, even though nothing happened. Physically, the rider was more prone to shorten the reins just before the spot where they were informed of the umbrella opening, which only got the horse alert and prepared for any sudden occurrence of danger, which eventually increased its heart rate, just like the riders, which showed how the rider's nervousness affects the horse [24].

## Discussion

Equestrian sports rely on the horse-rider bond and the rider's ability to manage their emotions and thoughts without affecting the horse. With time and practice, riders typically develop the ability to manage their psychological factors, allowing them to better manage emotions and other thoughts. At this point, they realize that their mindset can affect the horse and performance more than they do. Riders need to understand the importance of communication and how sensitive horses are to their thoughts and the slightest postural changes. Unlike other sports, equestrian riding requires an equal partnership between the horse and the rider, meaning that even if one performs poorly, they both suffer together. In equestrian, a performance cannot be judged solely on the rider's skills or the horse's training. A satisfactory performance is only possible if the partnership is strong, even if both the rider and horse are strong individually.

Since there is a great emphasis on forming a partnership, riders need first to understand their horse, ensuring the horse trusts the rider and vice versa, which helps build confidence and bonding within the partnership. The rider would usually understand what the horse is trying to communicate with each sound or body movement, gained through time and experience. For example, they would know when their horse is doing a joyful ride and when it would buck, just by looking at its ears, head position, and tail swishing. The rider needs to be aware of these signs as well as the horse's emotional state and readiness to ride.

All these signs can be understood by the rider only with time and interest they take in forming the partnership, which is challenging because each horse is different, moves differently, and fears different things. Therefore, the rider must become familiar with the horse and let the horse trust them, thereby avoiding falls and injuries and gaining a better understanding of the horse's behavior. Such a bond can only be achieved with much time, effort, sensitivity to the horse's

movements, and patience, and it can never be forced. If this bonding does not occur, both the rider and the horse are at risk of injury. Knowing that horses use their bodies to communicate, the rider needs to thoroughly understand that even the slightest movement of theirs will be taken as a signal or communication by the horse they ride. It would eventually convey what is asked for by the rider, consciously or unconsciously, by using their body as a means of communication.

Apart from the physical aids, a rider's psychological factors and thoughts play a vital role in performance, as it is known that a rider's mind and heart rate directly affect the horse's mind and heart rate. Psychological skills training for riders has helped them build confidence in their ability to succeed. The rider must not only believe in their ability to perform the task at hand but also understand that the feat is possible only when the horse is willing to do the same. The horse will only jump the fence if the rider believes they can. If the rider has fear and a lack of confidence, then it is nearly impossible for the horse to perform a task that it could have done with a confident rider. Since horses are known to be very quick at recognizing what the rider's mind says, the rider needs to be positive, confident, and never nervous or fearful, as the horse will reflect the same while riding.

Even if the rider and the horse are both exceptional individually, excellent performance in the arena will only occur if there is effective communication and a strong relationship between the human and animal partners. The best horse and rider are said to be those who can ride around the ring without any signs of communication or aids. They move together as one, so smoothly and effortlessly, a result of many sessions of practice and an understanding of each other, which forms the perfect horse-human relationship. These qualities would lead the rider and horse to ride gracefully.

### **The Symbiotic Relationship: Understanding Rider-Horse Dynamics**

The rider's connection to the horse is not just physical but also psychological and can have a significant impact on performance. Effective communication, wherein emotional signals and cognitive states are of paramount importance, is fundamental to this relationship. If a rider displays confidence and relaxation, his horse will often reveal a calm and relaxed disposition, becoming more agile and responsive. If, on the other hand, the rider feels anxious or frustrated, this creates tension; both the efficiency of the ride and the risk of accidents may decrease. A deeper understanding and appreciation of this phenomenon can help us to optimize equestrian exercise and underscores the significance of achieving a harmonious state of mind for both horse and rider.

### **Enhancing Performance Through Effective Communication Strategies**

A dialogue between horse and rider is crucial in achieving optimal equitation performance. Appreciating the nuances of body language, vocal signals, and aids makes a significant difference in how the horse responds and behaves. By employing methods such as routine warm-ups, encouraging positive behavior, and paying close attention to the cues the horse provides, riders can create a partnership built on trust and effective communication. Furthermore, incorporating mental training techniques, such as imagery and relaxation, can enhance both the rider's and the horse's performance under stress. Riders who focus on these strategies will significantly improve their effectiveness, resulting in a more effortless and enjoyable ride.

### **The Psychological Impact of Riding on Horses**

The psychological effects of riding need to be studied; the attitude of a rider can have a significant impact on a horse and its success. A rider's state of mind ubiquitously affects the horse's desire and behavior. Studies have shown that horses react differently depending on the emotional state of their human riders. A confident and unafraid rider can make the horse feel secure and safe, while a scared and insecure rider may cause stress to the horse and generate unsafe behavior, leading to lower performance. Understanding these psychological drivers is crucial for utilizing training techniques that promote the mental well-being of both the rider and the horse, resulting in a more productive and enjoyable riding experience.

### **Recommendations for Future Research in Rider-Horse Interactions**

The development of equestrian sports has significantly increased the demand for research into the psychological factors that influence interactions between horses and riders. Further investigations include a detailed examination of communication styles and how their compromise affects equine behavior, as well as a comparison of winning and losing training techniques in terms of resilience, both in the minds of riders and horses. Furthermore, investigating the connection between rider personality and horse behavior over different competitive contexts could reveal some interesting information. In the context of riding, a research-based approach could enable the equestrian community to develop more effective training programs that consider psychological factors, ultimately benefiting both riders and horses in terms of performance and welfare.

### **The Bidirectional Influence of Emotions**

The horse has a profound connection with its rider, as the rider's emotions affect how the horse feels—it is a two-way street that requires being in tune with each other. When a rider approaches their horse with a sense of "presence," the horse is made to feel at ease, becoming more secure and performing better, or at the very least, more willingly. By contrast, if a rider is radiating anxiety or fear, a horse is affected because of the rider, resulting in a host of stress-related problems and thereby creating a less-than-perfect ride. Studies on these emotional dynamics emphasized the need for riders to tap into their emotional intellect and sensitivity in order to support the establishment of a sympathetic 'feeling'

relationship with their horse.

### **Communication Styles: Bridging the Human-Horse Gap**

Communication skills are one of the key features in human-rider-horse interaction. Horses are highly attuned to body language, including even the slightest body movements and sounds made by their riders. Hence, a rider needs to be aware of their signaling and behavior.

Contrasting communication styles can either reinforce or undermine a partnership, illustrating the principle that opposites may indeed attract. Through the analysis of riding techniques and their impact on equine behavior, it is possible to formulate customized strategies that enhance this interaction. Education of riders in appropriate communication methods may improve understanding and cooperation, and subsequently, the performance of both rider and horse.

### **Personality Traits and Performance Outcomes**

Riders' personalities influence their relationships with horses. The extent to which characteristics such as resilience, patience, and empathy influence a rider's approach can provide clues on how to make our performance tasks more effective. Understanding these characteristics enables the rider to work on their strengths and improve weaknesses, leading to a more positive relationship with the horse.

### **The Human/Equine Therapeutic Relationship**

The depth of connection between humans and horses has always been known in the healing, intuitive, and profound processes. It is a silent conversation of movement, trust, and emotion that transcends equestrian sports, which are already highly recognized for their athletic qualities. This final chapter examines the relational bond between the rider and the horse through a psychoanalytic lens, highlighting how this interspecific collaboration facilitates emotional regulation, trauma processing, and shared psychological understanding.

The concepts of Emotional Resonance, the Human-Horse Bond, and Therapeutically Powerful Connections are central to therapeutic horsemanship. Therapeutic horsemanship is all about emotions. Horses are naturally attuned to non-verbal cues, sensing subtle changes in your body language, muscle tension, and even your heartbeat. Riders who are often out of touch with their emotional states are reflected in the horse's behavior. A horse can pull back or retreat if a rider approaches it with apprehension or reservation. In contrast, a relaxed and focused presence causes the horse to answer with trust and cooperation. This resonance serves as a mirror, reflecting life through which the rider can perceive and summarize their thought patterns from the past.

### **Communication Beyond Words**

Unlike therapists or human partners, horses are not dependent on speech. This absence of language creates a different feeling related to breath, rhythm, and influx. A slight change of the rider's weight, relaxing the hands, or the pace of the breath can direct the horse, just as words can maneuver a conversation. Riders learn to speak with their bodies and to listen with their skin. In these silent exchanges, many people, especially those with trauma, have a space to rebuild trust without the demands of speaking. The horse serves as a nonjudgmental witness, present but never interfering.

### **Psychodynamic Regulation in Motion**

According to psychodynamic theory, unconscious processes play a significant role in emotional life. In riding, outside sources are tapped. The horse's equally immediate response to whatever the rider is feeling creates a feedback loop: A rider who becomes anxious may feel resistance from the horse, which, naturally, heightens her anxiety. However, this cycle can be broken with support and direction. Riders learn to manage their nervous systems—to slow down their breathing, root themselves in the saddle, and make eye contact with the horse. These approaches mirror grounding therapeutic techniques and provide a rider with a living, moving exposure to co-regulation. For its part, the horse becomes a therapeutic partner and emotional barometer.

### **Case Reflections: Heart-to-Heart Encounters**

In another instance, a young woman who suffered dissociation from past abuse could barely bring herself to do traditional talk therapy. However, in her first session, she had an emotional breakthrough. The horse stopped under her, tossed its head, and blew. That moment—a simple breath—enabled her to feel seen in a way words could not. In another instance, a PTSD-suffering veteran was allowed to reconnect with safer and leadership feelings through mounted exercises promoting slow, intentional movement. These moments are when the horse becomes a silent co-therapist, positioned to elicit presence, awareness, and emotional trust.

### **Trust/Vulnerability/Mutual Presence**

For any human to ride a horse is an action of incredible trust. The rider emotionally and physically devotes himself to caring for an animal several times his size. Also, the horse must trust the rider and not drag him around with unfairness, unclearness, and emotional inconsistency. This reciprocity of vulnerability constitutes the heart of the healing alliance. It shows the rider that leadership is not about control, but connection; there is power in presence. This relationship becomes a living structure, an alive form that contains a secure pattern of attachment for those recovering from betrayal, trauma, or emotional neglect.

The beauty of this bond lies in its ability to transcend spoken word; it taps into a level of emotional truth that may be difficult to achieve in other forms of therapy. Riders cultivate their capacity to trust, self-regulate, and emotionally connect by returning to resonance, movement, and mutual attunement. A psychodynamic understanding of this connection helps us to understand riding not simply as a sport or leisure activity, but also as a deeply emotional partnership—a domain in which healing occurs through every breath, stride, and shared heartbeat.

### **Prevention of Injury and Emotional Intelligence in Riding**

Practitioners in equestrian settings frequently focus on preventing injury through biomechanics, effective training methods, and attention to safety. However, often overlooked, emotional intelligence significantly contributes to risk reduction and the rider's safety. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how to foster that same awareness in both the horse and rider as a preventive measure against avoidable accidents and to enhance our experiences together in this partnership, known as riding.

### **The Significance of Tension for the Risk of Injury**

Many riding injuries come not from external obstacles but from internal states—fear, frustration, and dissociation. A nervous rider can hold the reins too tightly, signal the horse with conflicting messages, or stiffen up when the horse makes an unexpected move. Horses will feel the tense rider, and it can cause unpredictable actions. Emotional self-awareness helps riders identify their state before getting on the bike. Focusing on nervous habits—such as tight shoulders, shallow breathing, and racing thoughts—riders can ground themselves with an increased sense of calm that can improve safety.

### **Horse Emotions and Misinterpretation**

Just as riders experience mood swings, horses have their moods, reactions, and traumas. A mishandled horse offended by a seemingly harmless cue will become defensive. Emotional intelligence requires us to control our own internal experience and read and respect that of the horse. A rider who believes that a horse is being 'disobedient' without considering the horse's emotional state is more likely to exacerbate the problem. This is when they sustain these injuries from misunderstandings. Programs that focus on interspecies empathy break this cycle by helping riders understand equine body language as a form of communication, rather than interpreting it as a sign of insubordination.

### **Emotional Dissonance and Disconnection**

Some people separate from their emotions as a survival technique, especially after falls or malicious acts. Emotional repression can be an effective way to regain control in the short term, but it is a risky approach in the long term. Riders who are not connected may miss subtle cues, such as a reluctance to walk, pinned ears, or changes in breathing, and unknowingly push their horse when it is not safe to do so. Facilitating emotional awareness enhances a rider's ability to be present, make accurate judgments, and respond safely when threats are imminent.

### **The Safe Zone**

Creating Emotional Co-Regulation by Karen Barrow. Credit Nanna Heitmann for The New York Times. A safe ride is not the absence of danger, but the presence of connection. When a horse and rider are regulated and connected, their signals flow smoothly. Developing this co-regulation requires more than just mechanical training. Emotional intelligence encompasses breathing in unison, pausing during moments of irritation, and maintaining a state of openness and awareness. These lower the risk of injury and foster greater trust and cooperation between horse and rider.

### **Psychological Recovery After Injury**

Moreover, when injuries do happen, the process of recovering from them is not only physical. Riders frequently bequeath emotional scars—fear of getting into the saddle again, guilt over the incident, or shame of losing. Young athletes can develop chronic anxieties that impact their future performance if they do not have the space to confront those forces. Performance. By bringing psychodynamic tools into recovery—whether journaling, imagery, or trauma-informed counseling—riders can slowly rebuild confidence and a sense of bodily trust. Emotional recovery following an injury is not divorced from physical rehabilitation—it is a requirement.

### **Teaching for Safety with Affective Understanding**

Riding schools and training programs often rely heavily on rules and routines, potentially overlooking the emotional realities of equestrian work. Emotional education, which includes reflective debate, group debriefing, and one-on-one coaching, helps create safer environments in equestrian work. Riders who understand their emotional patterns are better equipped to regulate their state during challenging rides so they know when to stop, reassess, or ask for help. In equitation, injury prevention is a matter of hearts and minds, not just heads and feet.

EQ is a crucial factor in injury prevention within equestrian sports. As students learn to connect and listen to their own and their horse's "inside brain," they create a safer, more communicative, and more emotionally secure riding experience. By psychodynamic awareness, we are asked to recognize that every injury has an emotional resonance, and every safe journey rests on an emotional base. In equitation and life, proper safety starts with knowledge, not just of the body, but of the heart.

Somatic Countertransference and Body-Based Empathy During Equine Meetings Traditional psychotherapy is often bathed in words to help navigate inner terrains, whereas equine-assisted therapy offers an embodied pathway to heal. One of the most profound psychodynamic phenomena in this space is somatic countertransference—a body-based reaction experienced by the therapist or rider when interacting with the horse. Thus, it discusses how the body (and not language) emerges as the medium through which most emotional exchange is conducted, especially with clients (or riders) who find it challenging to articulate their trauma.

### **Defining Somatic Countertransference**

Somatic countertransference is the bodily response of the practitioner or rider to the client's or horse's unexpressed feelings. Horses frequently reflect their state or the rider's unresolved emotional material in their bodies. The sudden sensation of a tight chest or a feeling of nausea may not represent a physical problem at all: it could be an emotional communication being delivered nonverbally. Psychodynamically, the rider's body becomes a listening instrument—not only for movement and balance, but for deeper affective resonances.

### **The horse is a somatic agent**

Horses live in the moment, expressing their instincts without worrying about the past or future. Having their fight-or-flight response, their finely tuned nervous systems frequently mirror what the rider unknowingly carries around. A horse can shy, bridle, or tense when suppressed anxiety in a rider lingers, although outward tension may be undetectable. Such behavior establishes a potent feedback loop, where the horse's body reacts to the rider's body, and the rider's body begins to pay attention to and interpret these responses. In this sense, the horse also serves as a somatic catalyst, reminding the rider of feelings that have been dissociated or denied.

### **The Body That Comes First**

The trauma lands in the body, right where we fall. Riders with underlying trauma may be unable to process what they are experiencing, but their bodies do not forget. A tight grip, gasping for breath, or frozen posture in the saddle can convey a story that words may not be able to. As the horse reacts to these signals, whether with a sensitive response or resistance, the rider is encouraged to become aware of their body. They should start being prompted, "What am I feeling in this moment?"—a question that sets the stage for somatic healing. The horse in this process is not just a fellow traveler in motion but a co-therapist versed in somatic language.

### **Ethical Issues in Somatic Work**

The use of somatic countertransference calls for particularly thoughtful ethical navigation. The healer must differentiate between the horse's or client's physical experience and their physical reaction to the service. Without awareness, there is a possibility of misunderstanding or emotional entanglement. Reviewing psychodynamic training equips the empathetic therapist with containment, reflection, and supervision so that somatic empathy enriches rather than overburdens the therapeutic edifice. It is particularly critical in horse-based therapy, where the lines between emotional, physical, and between-species experiences can become fuzzy.

"The Body as a Site of Knowing" discusses the relationship between trauma and bodily awareness. The Body as a Site of Knowing Trauma survivors will often describe feeling disconnected from their bodies. Through somatic engagement, equine therapy can work to reestablish this connection. Riders understand that trembling is not weakness, but release; that tension is not failure, but information; and stillness is not avoidance, but presence. Over time, a riding arena becomes a sacred space where the body is revered as a vessel of knowledge and a conduit for healing. In this light, somatic countertransference is not a burden, but a gift, leading both therapist and rider into deeper attunement.

Somatic countertransference reveals that in equine therapy, the most profound truths are often felt before they are understood. By tuning in to the body's subtle voice—and the horse's visual reenactment of those states—riders can gain insight into blocked emotions and lost memories. This chapter supports the notion that healing is not merely mental or psychological, but also corporeal. Translating psychodynamic insight into movement, breath, and touch, the horse's wisdom and the rider's sensitivity meta-triangulate inter-psychic and intra-psychic processes. Together, they form a silent language of healing, connecting hearts, muscles, and souls.

### **Recommendations for Improving Human-Horse Relationships**

To improve the human-horse relationship, the focus should be on promoting a positive attitude and confidence in riders. The education of inexperienced riders should focus on both technical riding and the psychological aspects of horse management and care. This may include things such as equine behaviour, trust, and practical communication workshops. Manzano also points out that the more children are exposed to different types of settings and situations, the more confidence they will build and the less anxious they will become, for kids and animals. Promoting mindfulness in riders can help them become more emotionally attuned to their horses and, therefore, less reactive. Additionally, routine and positive reinforcement training can strengthen the connection between horse and rider, making it a safer and more enjoyable experience for both.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Questionnaire Sample**

Attitude Evaluation: The rider's confidence, experience, and general attitude towards horse riding were assessed using a series of Likert scale questions. Respondents rated their agreement with statements such as:

#### **I Feel Confident When Riding a Horse**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

#### **I Have Sufficient Experience in Handling and Riding Horses**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

#### **I Enjoy Spending Time with My Horse**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

#### **I Believe I Can Effectively Communicate with My Horse**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

#### **I Often Feel Anxious When Riding or Working with Horses**

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

These questions aimed to gather insights into the overall mindset of riders and their relationship with equine partners, aiding in the exploration of the factors influencing rider confidence and horse behavior.

### **Appendix B: Behavioural Observation Checklist**

Parameters to assess human behavior towards horses: body language, leading rein tension, and distance from the horse.

### **Appendix C: Data Analysis Techniques**

Statistical methods: The statistical methods used to analyze the relationship between rider attitude and horse response were Pearson's correlation coefficients and regression analysis.

### **Appendix D: Protocol for Measurement of Heart Rate**

Heart rate monitoring methodology, including specifics on equipment used, timing, and procedure for data collection during the experiment.

## **Author Biography**

Dr. Prince P. Sreedhar is a post-doctoral fellow in Clinical Psychology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), USA. He holds multiple advanced degrees, including a PhD in Clinical Psychology, an MPhil in Clinical Psychology, a Master of Science in Applied Psychology, a Master of Public Health (MPH), a Master of Social Work (MSW), and three MBAs in Airport and Airline Management, Hotel and Tourism Management, and International Business Management. Additionally, he holds undergraduate degrees in Psychology (B.A. Hons.), Commerce (B.Com.), and Business Administration (B.B.A.).

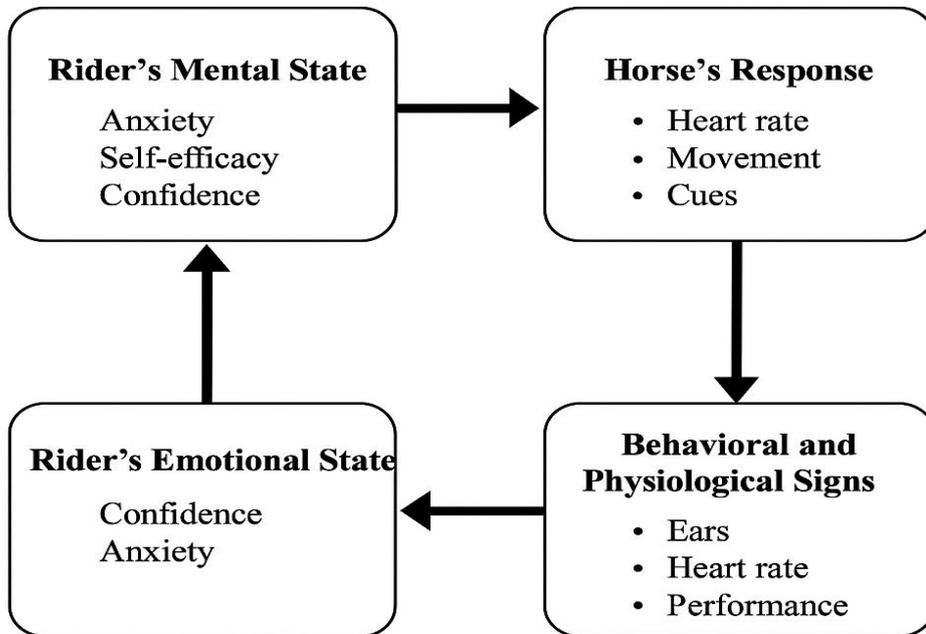
Dr. Sreedhar is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians (FRSPH), the British Psychological Society (FMBPSS), the International Society for Development and Sustainability (FISDS), the Indian Public Health Association (MIPHA), the

International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP), and the International Psychological Association (IPA), among others. He also holds the distinguished titles of Certified Hospitality Supervisor (CHS) and Certified Hospitality Manager (CHM), awarded by the American Hotel & Lodging Educational Institute (AHLEI).

His work centers on integrating psychodynamic frameworks into global nursing education, trauma-informed care, and humanitarian mental health practices. He has contributed to multidisciplinary international humanitarian efforts, merging psychological insights with public health strategies to enhance mental healthcare in conflict-affected areas. He actively participates in PsyArXiv and other open science platforms.

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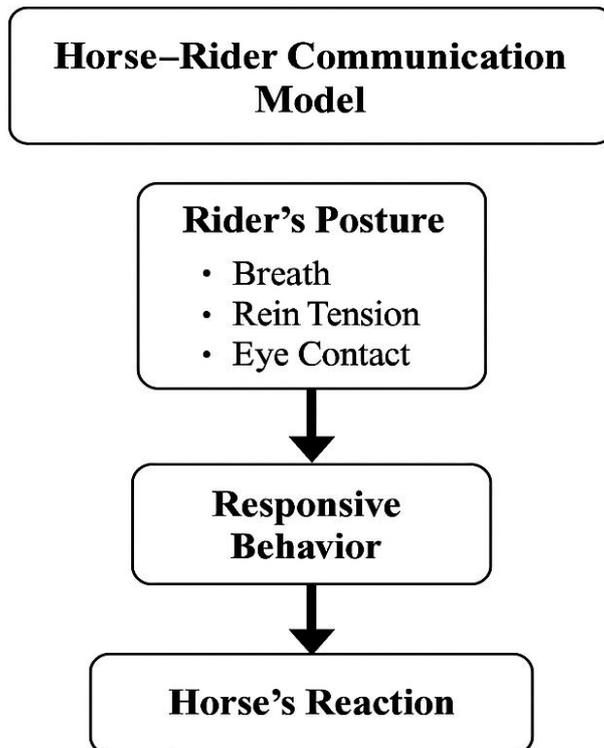


**Figure 1: Mind-Horse Feedback Loop**

This diagram illustrates the bi-directional influence between a rider's mental state and the horse's physiological and behavioral response, such as anxiety, heart rate, and movement cues.

Skill Area	Novice Riders	Advanced Riders
Self-confidence	Low to Moderate	High
Routine Usage	Inconsistent	Highly Consistent
Focus/Concentration	Variable	Sustained
Emotional Regulation	Developing	Well-managed

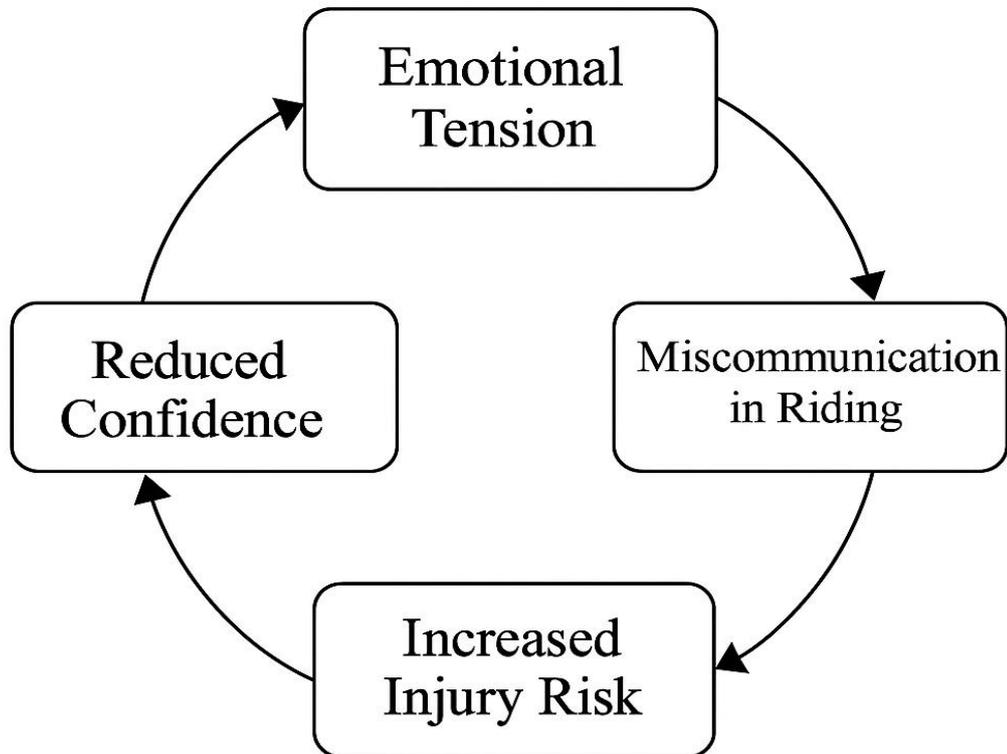
**Table 1: Comparison of Psychological Skills Between Novice and Advanced Riders**



**Figure 2: Horse-Rider Communication Model**

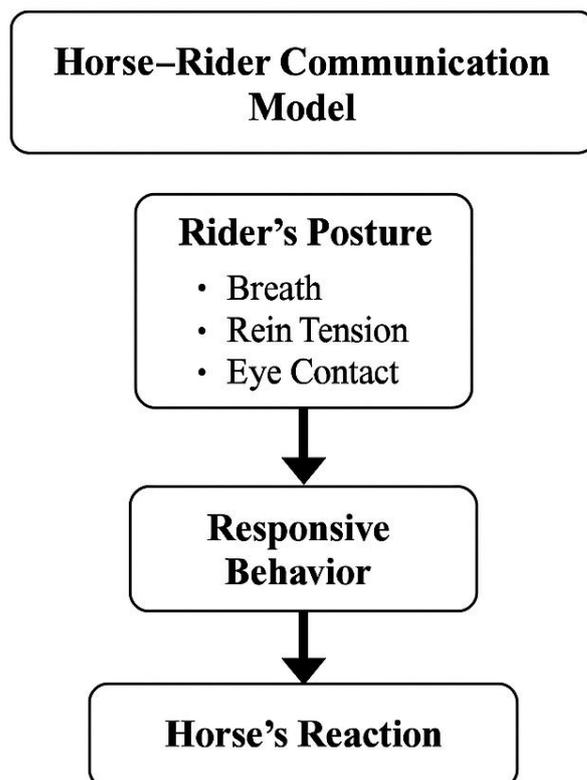
A flowchart demonstrating how non-verbal cues such as rider posture, breath, rein tension, and eye contact communicate intent to the horse, leading to responsive behavior.

# Psycho-Somatic Cycle of Emotional Tension and Riding Performance



**Figure 3: Psycho-Somatic Cycle of Emotional Tension and Riding Performance**

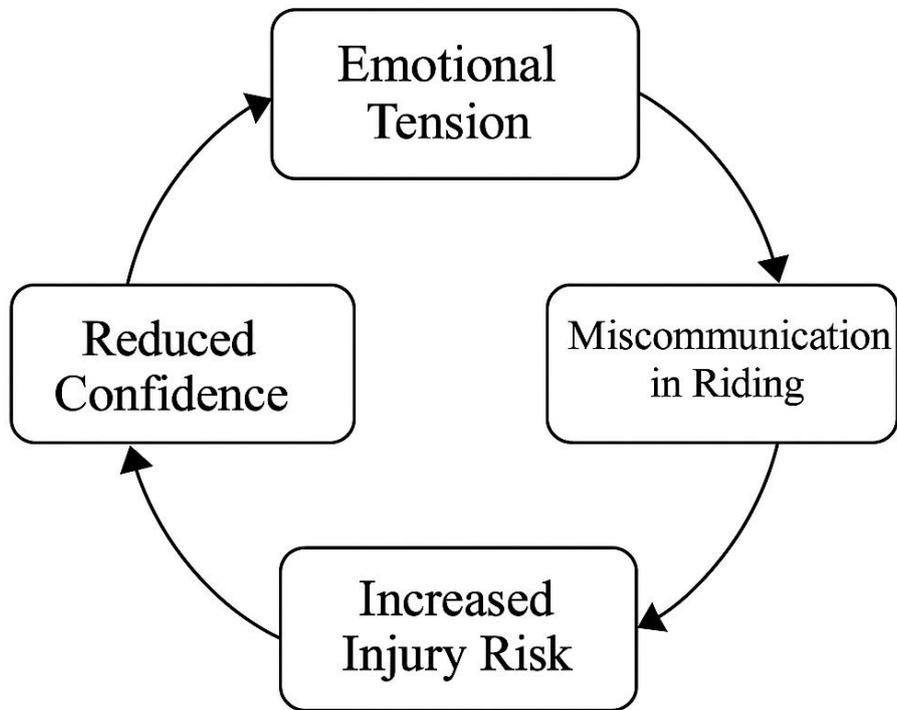
This cyclical diagram will represent how emotional tension leads to miscommunication in riding, reduced confidence, increased injury risk, and further emotional strain.



**Figure 2: Horse-Rider Communication Model**

A flowchart demonstrating how non-verbal cues such as rider posture, breath, rein tension, and eye contact communicate intent to the horse, leading to responsive behavior.

## Psycho-Somatic Cycle of Emotional Tension and Riding Performance



**Figure 3: Psycho-Somatic Cycle of Emotional Tension and Riding Performance**

This cyclical diagram represents how emotional tension leads to miscommunication in riding, reduced confidence, increased injury risk, and further emotional strain.