

Tea with a Pony

Meaningful activity for people living with dementia

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Summary

This study describes the origins and development of the 'Tea with a Pony' sessions which began at Cotswold Riding for the Disabled Association (CRDA), based at Cheltenham racecourse, in early 2018. The group had been conscious for some time that we only reach a small proportion of potential participants. More specifically, we were aware of the increasing number of people living with a range of life-changing conditions, particularly dementia, for whom horse-riding may not be suitable but who might be helped by some other form of animal-assisted therapy involving horses.

Meanwhile, in early 2018 CRDA took on loan a 20-year-old pony, Mr Dibbles. It soon became clear that he would not be able to cope with the usual workload with riders. But he was charming and very friendly, and the idea emerged to use him in a non-riding capacity. This is when Tea with a Pony was born.

First Steps

A local care home well known to one of CRDA's trustees was invited to a pilot session and was delighted to take part. This session involved about a dozen residents, four family members and four carers. Six of the residents were wheelchair users. The session began with a cream tea in the viewing gallery of the indoor school, during which the guests watched a scheduled lesson. After tea the guests moved to the sensory garden. This space is intended to engage most of the senses (taste is optional!) through a variety of means.

Effect on Participants

Examples of positive effects on participants, gathered from over a year's worth of sessions, are too numerous to record in full – this is a small illustrative sample:

A lady whose father and grandfather had ridden as jockeys at Cheltenham, on return to the care home she painted a picture of Bobby the pony (see right)

For some participants, the connection with horses is much deeper. One lady who had been around horses for much of her early life, and whose brother was an amateur steeplechase jockey, progressed from Tea with a Pony to riding. Her daughter reflected: "It seems to have helped her memory, I'm not sure how, but it has, and, more than anything, it's



been like a light has turned back on again. It's the warmth of an animal, an animal that trusts you – the present fades away and it takes her back to just warm memories.”¹

Practicalities and Lessons Learned

Below are some of the practical lessons which we have observed during the first year of Tea with a Pony:

- Keep it simple
- Keep it small
- Keep it affordable
- Encourage family members to accompany participants whenever possible. We have found this to be enriching for all concerned
- Use bought cakes. Even though we have a ready supply of homemade cakes courtesy of our volunteers, we have decided that for Tea with a Pony, where we are in effect selling food, we only offer bought cakes/biscuits as this makes it straightforward



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¹ This and subsequent direct quotes are taken from BBC Breakfast: Tea with a Pony 15 March 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxvMm6gA8MM>