

The role of hippotherapy in autism

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This talk is not about

- I will not talk to you about how good hippotherapy or therapeutic riding is for people with autism because those of you who do this kind of work already know that.
- I will also not talk about research of my own. I am a clinician practicing Narrative therapy and Equine Assisted Narrative Therapy (A term recently used by David Epston, one of the founders of Narrative Therapy and by Colin Emonson)

This talk is about

- Some new research findings of other people that attracted my attention, triggered my curiosity and prompted me to experiment with new ideas and practices in my work with horses and autistic people.
- Insider knowledges of autistic people which I hope that may be useful in your hippotherapy / therapeutic riding practice.

Insider vs expert knowledges

- Insider knowledges are considered to be of special importance in Narrative therapy which is an approach that privileges the client's experience, voice, theories, ideas, knowledges and generally every effort they do to overcome their problems.
- Expert knowledge is also valid and useful but they are positioned at the same level as the insider knowledges in narrative therapy. This positioning shows a lot of respect for people who seek help from us.

Intense World Theory 1

- The progression of the disorder is proposed to be driven by overly strong reactions to experiences that drive the brain to a hyper-preference and overly selective state, which becomes more extreme with each new experience and may be particularly accelerated by emotionally charged experiences and trauma. This may lead to obsessively detailed information processing of fragments of the world and an involuntarily and systematic decoupling of the autistic from what becomes a painfully intense world. The autistic is proposed to become trapped in a limited, but highly secure internal world with minimal extremes and surprises (Markham & Markham 2010).

Intense World Theory 2

- It is also likely that providing an enriched environment and a directive teaching and aggressive rehabilitation program may in fact accelerate the progression of the disorder.
- The child should be introduced to new stimuli and tasks gently and with caution, retracting at any sign of distress. The adoption of a responsive rehabilitation program would ensure that the teacher works carefully to avoid triggering adverse reactions. Introduction to strangers should be controlled, brief, indirect, and as inert as possible (Markham & Markham 2010).

Does that remind you of anything?

- Don't we do the same thing with horses when we try to train them?
- We don't overwhelm them, we present to them one thing at a time and we do it gently.
- Many horse trainers have talked about the approach of advance and retreat. We don't crowd the horse, we do one thing at the time and we do it slowly and carefully and if the horse cannot bare it or reacts, we retreat and then make another effort gently.

Intense World Theory 3

- An important consideration in any rehabilitation program as predicted by the Intense World Theory is the complication of hyper-emotionality, which may be well masked from the observer and which would demand even greater care in how the autistic is handled. Punishments may be greatly amplified for the autistic and imprinted rigorously and indefinitely into the future (Markham & Markham 2010).
- My comment: any inappropriate behaviour on behalf of the therapist or the helper may be perceived as a punishment by the autistic person. And they never forget. They have an extraordinary memory.
- Does this remind you of anything?
- Horses also have an amazing memory and unless they become familiar with the things that caused them fear, they never forget.

hypersensitivity to experience and overwhelming fear response

- As posited by Henry and Kamila Markram of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, suggests that the fundamental problem in autism-spectrum disorders is not a social deficiency, but rather an hypersensitivity to experience, which includes an overwhelming fear response (*Szalavitz*).

Autistics lack empathy?

- In terms of the caring aspect of empathy, a lively discussion that would seem to support the Markrams' theory appeared on the Web site for people with ASD called WrongPlanet.net, after a mother wrote in to ask whether her empathetic but socially immature daughter could possibly have Asperger's.
- "If anything, I struggle with having too much empathy" one person commented. "If someone else is upset, I am upset. There were times during school when other people were misbehaving, and if the teacher scolded them, I felt like they were scolding me."
- Said another, "I am clueless when it comes to reading subtle cues, but I am **very** empathic. I can walk into a room and feel what everyone is feeling, and I think this is actually quite common in AS/autism. The problem is that it all comes in faster than I can process it." (*Szalavitz*)

Increased perceptual expertise

- Increased perceptual expertise may be implicated in the choice of special ability in savant autistics, and in the variability of apparent presentations within PDD (autism with and without typical speech, Asperger syndrome) in non-savant autistics (Mottron et.al. 2006).

Hyperfunctioning autonomic system?

- We sketch a hypothesis about autism according to which autistic children use overt behaviour in order to control a malfunctioning autonomic nervous system and suggest that they have learned to avoid using certain processing areas in the temporal lobes.
- The large reductions in sympathetic activity that we observed could explain why autistic children so relentlessly seek out self stimulatory actions. They are seeking to control an autonomic system that, in spite of its name ('autonomic' means 'self-governing') fails to govern itself and seems to require certain behaviours on their part for its regulation. Hence, the advice often given to parents, namely to prevent their children from self stimulating, may be unwise. At the very least, children may need to engage briefly in relaxing activities when their arousal levels become too high (Hirstein et al, 2001) .

Practically

- If we stop autistic people from doing stereotypic movements or even if we stop them from hitting themselves, we intervene in the regulation they themselves are doing to keep their body function in a balance.
- Yet the prevailing advice until that research was done, was to prevent autistic people from doing stereotypic movements. In doing so we may be bringing them to a more difficult position by adding more stress on them...

Insider views of autism 1

- ‘Intellectual training also requires skilled educators who draw out a child's strengths rather than emphasizing learning deficits, Grandin said’ (Crawford 2007).
- My comment: autistic people do have strengths, they do things right, but only if we are willing and curious and on the lookout to see them we may notice them.
- ‘My senses were oversensitive to loud noise and touch. Loud noise hurt my ears and I withdrew from touch to avoid overwhelming sensation’ (Grandin). - oversensitivity to experience.
- If the therapist pushed too hard I threw a tantrum, and if she did not intrude far enough no progress was made. My mother and teachers wondered why I screamed. Screaming was the only way I could communicate. Often I would logically think to myself, "I am going to scream now because I want to tell somebody I don't want to do something“(Grandin).

Practically

- When an autistic person screams they are communicating something to us, their behaviour is not just another symptom of the disorder.
- If we try to find the thing that they don't want or can't do or that annoyed them, then we may become more able to dance more harmoniously the therapy dance together...

Insider views of autism 2

- I often misbehaved in church, because the petticoats itched and scratched. Sunday clothes felt different than everyday clothes. ... My parents had no idea why I behaved so badly. A few simple changes in clothes would have improved my behavior. ... Some tactile sensitivities can be desensitized. Encouraging a child to rub the skin with different cloth textures often helps. The nerve endings on my skin were supersensitive. Stimuli that were insignificant to most people were like Chinese water torture (Grandin).
- 'Pressure is calming, and many people with autism will do things like wear tight belts or very tight clothes.'
(Grandin in interview with White)

Practically

- Is it time to think about the materials with which riders come into contact in the therapeutic riding programs?
- Could we possibly have a variety of textures of clothes, shoes, tack equipment to use?
- Could we assist autistic people to become desensitized to the materials we use?
- Could we try to imagine how these materials feel on their skin?

Insider views of autism 3

‘The movements of the hands and of the body are a safety valve that allows the autistic child to calm down itself and channel the accumulated energy to movement in order not to end up in throwing a tantrum or to exhibiting aggressive behaviour. Therefore, it is expected to become uneasy, aggressive and oppositional in case you prevent it from performing it’s stereotypic behaviours. In these moments you can use deep skin pressure and massage to help it relax’ (Perla Messina, President of the Greek Association of Asperger and High Functioning Autistic Adults)

Fixations of autistics as gateways for their learning?

- 'Let's say that a child loves trains -- that's a very common fixation. Well, read a book about trains, do math problems with trains, read about the history of the railroad. In other words, if a kid loves trains, you can somehow drag a train into just about every subject in school to get him motivated to study it. Fixations are tremendous motivators. Look at someone like me. Curie, who discovered radium; she certainly was fixated on what she was doing. A little bit of fixation gets things done' (Grandin in interview with White)

Isn't it surprising how close are the findings of the above studies and the suggestions of these theories to the insider knowledges, experiences and advice given by autistic people themselves?

Isn't it surprising how many things horses and autistic people have in common?

Shy, silent, oversensitive to experience, curious, with rare talents, with overwhelming fear responses and with extraordinary memory

Great progress is achieved in the human – horse relationship since we started to try to understand how horses feel and react to environmental cues and communicate.

Learning the silent language of horses and responding appropriately, has allowed us to establish intimate partnerships with them and enter the hippotherapy – therapeutic riding dance in our effort to assist people in need.

Is it time to integrate in the triad
'therapist – horse – autistic person'
these new learnings about the
often silent language and unusual
behaviour of the autistic person?

Are we ready to move beyond our comfort zones and experiment with these ideas that allow space for our contingent responses to the great diversity of each autistic body's and mind's needs, difficulties and marvels?

Thank you.

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Discussion: Questions and comments by conference participants

- Comment 1: One participant said that she was discussing earlier with another participant about the similarities between horses and autistic people.
- Question 1: So if we leave autistic people being comfortable with their behaviours, then what is our part in therapy, just we leave them be like that? Do we contribute or what?

- Answer 1: Thanks for asking. We 've got responsibility when we do therapy. We are not observers. We are participants and our role is active. What this theory suggests and what I personally suggest and try to apply in my work is not to rush to impose my agenda o the autistic person and do whatever I think is right to do. I am trying to be on the lookout about signs that may indicate about the cause of the autistic person's discomfort and try to provide an environment that makes them feel comfortable.

- Answer 1 continued:

And when we try to train horses, we just don't let the horse do whatever it wants to do. Because we humans have decided to put the horse in an arena or in a stable or something like that. When horses are in nature they will do whatever they KNOW to do by their instinct. And children they don't come in this world with their own decision, they don't fall from the sky. Some people decide to have children. And children they don't decide to have autism or whatever difference or problem. It is our responsibility to try to help them. So we try to help in a way that is acceptable by them. We try to inspire them and to invite them in our world which is different. They need to learn social skills to survive.

- Question 2: I also found really interesting the parallel between horses and autistic people. What if we put them together? I have in mind that the autism spectrum is a very broad spectrum and that horses are a huge range and we see that even within narrow herds. It would be very interesting I think to take this theory much further with some hard evidence which I think it needs. Including if anything that we see about the communication between them that needs to be recorded.

- Answer 2: I am not aware of research that has been done on this topic, about the communication between horses and autistic people, but anecdotally from autistic people I know, they tell me and I have observed that they communicate really well with horses. Not little kids, because little kids are in a process of evolving their skills. Young and older adults with Aspergers, high functioning autistics, they communicate really really well with horses. Temple Grandin is one example and she has been involved with a lot with horses and with many other animals. I suggest that you read her book 'Animals in translation' which is great, I found it very enlightening. But yes research should and needs to be done on this field because autistic people somehow bridge the gap between animals and people.

- Question 3: You said that when an autistic kid is screaming or hitting is communicating in a way 'I don't want to do that'. But sometimes I think the kid is spoiled. How can you difference that and how much time do you give to that?
- Answer 3: There is a possibility that some kids either autistic or not may be spoiled. When we are conducting a therapeutic riding session we have a responsibility to get things done. So if a child is behaving aggressively towards either people or animals, personally I won't tolerate that at all.

- Answer 3 continued: I will tell the child ‘I don’t like what you are doing, that’s not safe, take time to think or relax’ or if a child doesn’t talk, I will physically try to move them in a safe distance from the horse and other people and later try again to get the child in contact with the horse and the TR team. This approach takes time. Maybe you need to spend a few sessions just for the initial contact of the child with the horse and the team. But it’s very important for this initial contact to be done slowly and in a positive manner for all involved – people and horses – rather than rushing to get the child on the horse to ride. That’s what I suggest.

- Comment 2: I would like to add that sometimes you need to know well the parents, because they know clues about these stereotypic and manipulative behaviours.
- Response to comment 2: Yes they are the people who best know this child. In narrative therapy (in which I have been trained) we privilege the parent's and the family's views, ideas, suggestions and solutions. We do not try to impose on them our expert knowledge. We try to cooperate with them to do things together. And yes they know the clues to such behaviours better. I always consult with parents.

- Comment 3: Going back to screaming or shut down, that is a form of communication rather than being spoiled or anything else. I think it is mostly our fault or our misconception because people are autistic we regarded it as a symptom rather than as a communication process. In any other case we would think 'he is trying to communicate something'. We should begin to say, ok, look at the kid as a kid, forget the autistic, forget the label, forget everything, just try to communicate and intervene when it's possible. Would you agree with that?

- Response to comment 3:
Definitely. Absolutely. I don't remember who said that but it comes from systemic and cybernetic approaches an idea that says 'You can not not communicate. It's impossible not to communicate.
- Comment 4: I was working with a 12 year old autistic and we had a lot of problem to communicate with him because he had a lot of stereotypic behaviours. He likes to put something circular in his hand and shake it. So one time because nobody could communicate with him and he was doing this all the time, I took a ball, not his ball but another ball and I simulate what he was doing.

- Comment 4 continued: That was the first time when he stopped and looked at me, really looking at me, it was fascinating and he took my ball, did it again and then gave it back to me. It was the first time we communicated and had something in common. He started to try to have something in common with me.
- Response to comment 4: You spoke his language! Thanks for sharing, that's a great example!