

# MANAGEMENT OF THERAPEUTIC RIDING HORSES AND ANIMAL WELFARE

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## INTRODUCTION

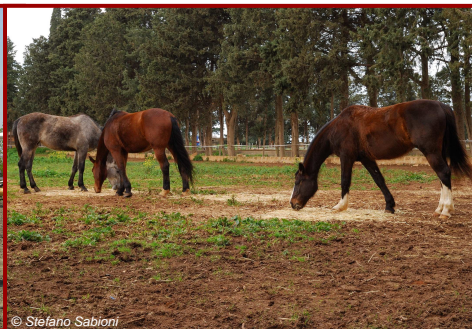
The captivity contains many factors conflicting with horse's motivation and adaptive abilities. Some specific features of Therapeutic Riding added to such factors risk to compromise animal's welfare. Any defensive response towards stressors (organic or psychic) is expounded with a NEI (Neural-Endocrine-Immunological) response. **The aim was evaluation of the management strategy of horses in a Therapeutic Riding (TR) centre in Emilia Romagna that was finalized to NEI equilibrium of the animals.** The "Natural Management" was directed to create the possibility of expression of full consistent behaviors, the more possible consistent under each interpretative level (phylogeny, ontogeny, neural-endocrine, adaptive).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

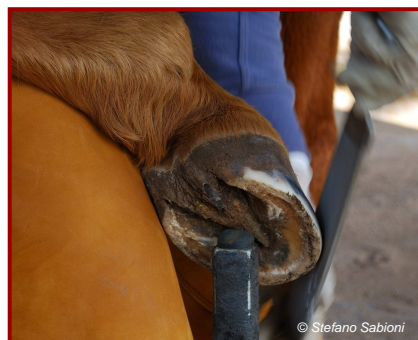
Assessment of stress related or abnormal behaviors in TR horse (n=8) was conducted, by interpretation of postural and expressive signals of communication. Horses were involved in TR activities for an amount of 150 patients per week. The animal management was expressly predisposed to improve their adaptive possibility towards stressors related to their job for 2 years .

Natural Management was accomplished at different levels: feeding, nourishment, movement (quantity and quality), social environment, and it consisted in:

**b) ethological management:** it was based on use of communication, correct application of postural-expressive languages, learning theory and social motivation of the horse, inspiring the training of the animals, their eventual behavioural therapy protocols and housing criteria of animals.



**a) natural diet** for timing of nourishment, balanced composition (optimum hay, fat and oils with a good balance between  $\omega_3/\omega_6$  fatty acids, low soluble carbohydrates intake, fruit and vegetables, healing herbs, dietary supplement) and correct posture during food intake.



**c) functional trimming of un-shoed feet** aimed to restore anatomical (vascular, nervous, corneas and connectivals) components, mechanical and biomechanical functions of equine foot (improved reaction to the floor impact, correct elaters of the foot, correct heel-landing, restored haemodynamic flow for the dissipation of energy and auxiliary circulatory pump).



**d) correct equestrian techniques:** constant training of animals aimed to psychic-physical relax and to improve gaits quality by a correct employment of dorsal and ventral muscular chains and by use of **harness not conflicting with equine biomechanics and physiology** (well-balanced saddles, use of bittless bridle).

## RESULTS

Our behavioral assessment highlighted particular moments of activities most stressing for animals, and some features of the rehabilitative intervention particularly conflicting with equine physiology and biomechanics.

**However those animals, under Natural Management strategy aiming at restoration of their physiological balance, have shown the possibility of expression of adaptive and functional responses, suitable with the TR activity context.**

## DISCUSSION

Our achievements suggested that Natural Management can be functional to the preservation of homeostasis.

More researches, based on objective parameters of wellbeing in relation to different management conditions, are requested: further parameters (endocrine, hematological, immunological parameters as expression of wellbeing of horses, in relation to different management conditions) are under evaluation and results should support our behavioral data.