

Horses for Heroes

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By Greg Coy



JONESBORO, Ark. (FOX13) -

Getting back in the "saddle of life" can be difficult for some wounded Gulf War veterans. Their injuries require therapists to think outside the box to create effective therapy.

At Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, medical professionals are using horses to help our returning wounded warriors heal their bodies so they can return to a more normal life. It's called hippo therapy. The rehabilitation tool is a live animal; a horse.

MORE: [ASU programs help vets find peace after war](#)

It's been around since the 1960s, treating patients with physical and emotional challenges.

MORE: [Arkansas State Physical Therapy webpage](#)

At Arkansas State, therapists are teaming man and horse once again to heal war injuries and maybe help legitimize hippo therapy in the eyes of insurance companies.

Derek Patsey left for a yearlong tour in Iraq, whole and healthy, but returned bruised mentally and battered physically.

"I have joint issues with my hips, my knees, my ankle," Patsey said. "I have had knee surgery. I had to have three shoulder surgeries."

He didn't enjoy conventional therapy of weights and rubber bands; it hurt his body, didn't help his soul.

"I was going through pain by doing the conventional therapy," Patsey said. "I wasn't feeling as good when I got through with it."

ASU therapists decided to try another method, so they called in the "ace." Cowboy is a trained horse used in hippo therapy. Arkansas State is one of the few schools in the nation to offer this program for vets and others with disabilities.

"Hippo therapy is an effective therapy treatment strategy," said Dr. Roy Lee Aldridge, Jr. "I see folks with a lot of orthopedic issues, a lot of neck, back pain, extreme pain in shoulders, knees, ankles."

Here's how the treatment works: The gait of the horse, how it shifts body weight, is very similar to how we humans walk on two legs. Without the use of his legs Patsey rides high in the saddle strengthening muscles in his stomach, back, and even shoulders.

"The three-dimensional motions of a horse's pelvis actually challenges the patient in a way that I can't do in a clinical setting," Dr. Aldridge said. "It helps with my hips, my shoulders because of the movement of the horse. It really loosens things up and helps you feel better."

The hippo therapy program at Arkansas State is part of a controlled study with funding from the Department of Defense. The department wants to see if the therapy can be clinically proven to be effective.

For Patsey the therapy sessions with Cowboy improved his quality of life. "I was able to get back out and fish. I was able to do stuff in the yard with my kids, able to walk today."

Soldier and horse separated by modern technology have been brought together again; not for combat, but to heal and find peace.

"I could be having a real bad day and come out here and just being around the horse is soothing," said Patsey.

Read more: <http://www.myfoxmemphis.com/story/23937898/horses-for-heroes#ixzz2kXDkvxUo>