



Asociación  
Española de  
Equinoterapias



Horses Teach me How to Find my Way  
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## The importance of Grooming in equine assisted therapeutic/educative/recreational activities.

Grooming is to take care of the horse welfare through daily actions such as:

1. cleaning the coat, mane, tail, hooves, and the horse in its totality, checking for wounds and parasites,
2. feeding, taking care of their movement and training needs,
3. cleaning their stable and checking out their environment to be free of dangers.

Moreover, it is a great chance to establish connexion with the animals.

### General background

Structuring the equestrian environment on the base of the natural equine hierarchy we can have an horizontal organization.

Concretely:

Everybody, humans and animals, have to pay attention to everybody else welfare. Everybody has to take care of the safety of the natural as well as the artificial environment. Responsibility to lead the herd, also individually, would be taken by who is most attentive and caring. As a matter of fact, the hierarchic position in the herd is based on the level of attention and readiness for a correct/adaptive reaction to the environment as well as to all other participants, for common security, welfare and learning/training.

Hierarchy is not fixed. There is a constant challenge of everybody towards everybody else aimed to increase the effectiveness of the whole herd. Trainers, educators and therapists need to be constantly attentive and active in driving the attention of all other participants towards the needs of the whole herd. The goal is to have fun together in safety.

This way, being the last in line of the hierarchy it means to receive more attention and challenges from the herd. Challenges are always aimed to improve attention and to develop adequate reactions to the difficulties that each one may face in our own life. Adequate reaction is the one that allows to overcome obstacles to reach our goals - with the help of others only when needed - without damaging anybody nor the environment. So there is a big chance to understand, that there is actually no first and no last place, just a lot of different skills and tasks.

In this context it is possible to divide the participants in few categories:

1. Horses and other animals cannot be expected to take any responsibility.
2. Professionals (trainers, therapists, educators and the coordinator or the owner of the stable) they all tend to do all the tasks.

3. Users/learners, apprentices, volunteers also try to do all the tasks but they are inexperienced and the difference between the first and second group of humans depends exclusively on the level of attention and responsibility that each one can take towards the welfare of the whole herd and the environment.

*Note about the professional environment.* Trainers, educators, therapists, and the coordinator, have to be paid for their professional work. Students and patients should pay for the service. Volunteers should help the professionals without being paid (either because they are not ready yet to work professionally or because they cannot afford to pay for the service). Besides this difference, everybody should do or try to do the same tasks, each one till their own limits.

### **Why grooming?**

Starting any equine assisted activity session by grooming allows both the humans and the horses to “tune” on the feelings and the needs of each other. This leads to a better communication and a deeper mutual understanding, which ultimately helps in carrying out the tasks and the exercises of the session.

Grooming is therapeutic and educative since it implies facing and coping with strong emotions such as fear or shame, it implies paying attention to and keeping in consideration the others. It implies an improvement of the social relations, and thus an improvement of the quality of life.

It can be done also by persons with very limited mobility or very low intellectual/social skills.



### **How does it work?**

The professional by varying their position and their involvement in the task can regulate the session between the two extremes of completely assisting the users and letting them have an experience on their own.

For example; for those who don't have fear of the animals and are somehow experienced in grooming tasks, the professional can observe the whole situation from outside, while for those who are fearful or very inexperienced the professional can stay in between the horse and the user showing how to carry out the tasks without letting the person to do anything.

This method also gives us a hint about which strategy is better to use basing on the different types of disability of the users.

Everybody, carrying out tasks with horses, should be free, at every moment, to decide how big their distance from the horse should or can be.

### **Where and when?**

The strategy to be used depends on the setting: horses living in a herd or in individual boxes, living in a stable, in a paddock, or in the meadows, how many horses are there in a herd/group, if

we move inside the horses area or if we put them outside of their “comfort zone”, if they are free or tied, how is the mood of each horse on that particular day (besides their normal behaviour and level of training), and so on ...

And it depends also on the different skills and situations of the users, as we have already seen.

Notes for the professionals: during the whole period of grooming, mainly if we move in a herd of free/untied horses, we should always let the user/person a possibility to relax, or just to observe the task from a safe place.

Also, especially for new participants, it is very encouraging if we can give a short introduction of everything before we start ... about the area, the horses names and places, and so on. Just as a short clarification about the sense of the task.

It will help to discover the skills to be developed and make them more conscious about how to approach the task and carry out their role.

When programming the session with a particular user, it is important to consider how many staff people and support is necessary and how much independence is possible to give to the user.

The Grooming can be divided in 4 steps, throughout which it gets progressively more challenging.

#### 1 – Coat

After the very first moment when the person and the horse get in touch, which is normally frontally, face to face, we usually start by grooming the coat. With the curry comb it is possible to give the horses a very pleasant massage and rub all those areas that are out of reach for them. The horses will let you know where they like to be curried by their face expressions and eventually they will rub you gently to show gratitude. If the horses start scratching some specific point of their coat, you can rub that same area after them, so they notice that you are attentive to their needs.

#### 2 - Mane and tail

Mane and Tail require more attention than the coat. They can both be cleaned with a hair brush, paying attention no to pull out too much hair. The horses notice this attention or the lack of it. Since some people are afraid to be kicked by the horses, brushing the tail is a moment where they challenge this fear and, day by day, they learn to trust the horse. Anyway, when carrying out this task it is always safer not to stand right behind the horse, but in a side position.

#### 3 – Hooves

Cleaning hooves without forcing the horse requires a good communication and mutual trust. The person needs to transmit

to the horse the confidence needed to voluntarily lift the hoof. It has to be considered that the horse is giving away 25% his basement and putting himself in a vulnerable position. If the tail makes some people face and deal with the fear of kicks, hooves are the ultimate challenge for them, since they represent the object of the fear itself.



#### 4 – Genitals

Cleaning genitals leads people to face feelings of shame, often related with personal hygiene/care difficulties or taboos. Even though the horse feels no shame about this part of the cleaning, the reaction to the shame felt by the person can lead the horse to refuse the cleaning.

*Note:* Talking with the horses during the whole process helps establishing communication. The horses recognise when our underlying feelings or intentions change as well as they will notice and pay attention to our moments of silence.

### **Final considerations.**

What can be learned or improved by grooming?

*In the physical area:* coordination, precision, accuracy, general attention and attention to details, balance, strength regulation, muscular tone regulation, trunk stability, speed, physical contact, body language (both interpretation and expression), endurance, breathe control, technical skills such as combing, currying, scratching, grasping, holding ...

*In the psychological area:* attention, concentration, awareness of ourselves and of the environment, including other animals and persons, perception and definition of reality (space-time, present Vs future and past, which exist only in our mind as projection and memory), emotional control, overcoming fears and taboos, facing and coping with difficulties and differences, speech and language skills, leisure relaxation, breathing space, freedom, sentiments of love, self control, self acceptance and appreciation of oneself ...

*In the social area:* non verbal and verbal communication skills, personal and social skills such as order, hygiene, programming and evaluating, problem solving, conflicts solving through dialectic assertiveness (with humans) or through firmness, improvisation, creativity (with the horses), improvement of the familiar relations and of social relations, acknowledgement and respect of habits or behaviors ...

*In the equestrian area:* grooming, feeding, lounging, training through groundwork and riding (training has not been considered in this article).

### Credits:

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