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THE MISSING PIECE IN AUTISM DIAGNOSIS: COULD WE BE OVERLOOKING THE GUT MICROBIOME?
Researchers use horses to help humans challenged by Alzheimer’s disease.

For years, equine-assisted therapy has been a staple in helping veterans cope with their physical war-related injuries and struggles, their struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and in helping disabled children build physical strength and create emotional connections. Now researchers are turning to horses once more to help those affected by Alzheimer’s disease and other dementia conditions.

During an Alzheimer’s caregiver support group meeting, Charlotte Driver came across a flyer for horse-involved therapy. Having cared for both her father and father-in-law during their struggles with Alzheimer’s disease, and caring for her mother, also diagnosed with the disease, Driver had no illusions about the disease and its impact on families. So, now that her husband Richard was diagnosed with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI), a condition that precedes Alzheimer’s, Driver was open to any therapy that might slow the progression of Richard’s eventual cognitive decline.

BY PAT RAIA
In the 90s when my father and my father-in-law had it, not much was known about Alzheimer’s disease and nobody talked much about it, so I was interested in anything that might delay the disease,” Driver recalls. “My husband loves horses, and I thought it would be good for us to go as a couple, so I said, “Why not?” With no effective therapies on the horizon, that’s the same question researchers have been asking themselves.

“The incidence of Alzheimer’s disease is increasing by 10 percent every year and we’re seeing people diagnosed with it at a younger and younger age, so people are afraid,” says gerontologist Nancy Schier Anzelmo, principal of Alzheimer’s Care Associates, LLC. “Everybody is looking for that magic pill and we keep coming up with nothing.”

So Anzelmo, along with Paula Hertel, MSW, and Elke Tekin, founded The Connected Horse, a nonprofit organization established to create tools to reduce stress, enhance communication, and improve the quality of life for individuals living with early stage Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias as well as for their caretakers. “We wanted to do something new,” Anzelmo recalls.

After a pilot program with Stanford University’s School of Medicine and its Red Barn Leadership Program, The Connected Horse partnered with the University of California at Davis (UCDavis) Medical School’s Alzheimer’s Disease Center to gather data gauging the effectiveness of equine-assisted therapy at improving the quality of life for Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers. The study would also obtain data to determine whether such a therapy program might delay the progression of dementia-related diseases in general.

According to Sarah Tomaszewski Farias, PhD, ABPP-CN, professor of neuropsychology at UCDavis, the role of the school’s Alzheimer’s Disease Center is to help recruit patients and their caregivers, as well as to supply consent forms and maintain project-related dates. “One objective of the program is to help people connect in a new way,” she said.

The Center for Equine Health at UCDavis’s School of Veterinary Medicine provided the workshop site and horses for the project. According to Claudia Sonder, DVM, the horses used in the project are members of the university’s 200-horse herd. All the horses are experienced in interacting with humans who have little or no horse-handing experience, and they are all “senior citizens” themselves. “It’s a way for geriatric horses and geriatric humans to both benefit,” Dr. Sonder said.

The program begins by matching early stage Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers with a horse from the university’s herd. “We have Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers walk down the aisle of stalls and tell us which horse appealed to them and why,” says Sonder. Then in subsequent five-hour sessions offered during the course of three weeks, the workshops focus on allowing the human volunteers to interact with the equines in a number of ways. After the initial human to horse introduction, workshop participants move on to brushing and grooming the horse, then walking with it on a lead line. Eventually, each patient and caregiver team moves to an enclosure with their horse, which is now allowed to move around at liberty without the lead line.

But why do researchers believe horses are well suited to Alzheimer’s and dementia therapy? “The question is, how can something that is so strong be so gentle?” asks Liz Williams, workshop facilitator for The Connected Horse. According to Williams, horses are well suited to therapeutic situations because they present a unique ability to take cues from their environment and to mirror the emotions of others.

“Horses are social geniuses and their senses of sight, hearing, and smell are encyclopedias—they read signals from other horses in the herd—from their facial expressions and their posture,” Williams says. “That’s how they survive

Which is which?
As Alzheimer’s disease and dementia occur more frequently, the terms are often used interchangeably. But according to the Alzheimer’ Association, there are very real differences between the two. In fact, the organization says that dementia is not a specific disease, but is instead a general term to describe a variety of symptoms associated with a decline in memory or thinking skills that diminish a person’s ability to effectively perform routine activities. Those with dementia may exhibit:

- Short-term memory loss including the inability to recall the location of personal possessions such as a purse, wallet, or car keys, or the failure to remember to keep appointments, pay bills, or how to prepare an often-made meal.
- A decline in communication skills and visual perception
- A diminished ability to pay attention
- An inability to exercise reasoning and judgment

Alzheimer’s disease accounts for between 60- and 80-percent of all dementia cases in the US, and is the most common form of memory loss that seriously interferes with daily life. In addition to general symptoms of dementia, early symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease may include:

- A change in mood or personality
- Withdrawal from social or occupational activities
- Difficulty understanding visual images and spatial relationships

Symptoms of both Alzheimer’s disease and dementia are progressive and worsen over time. Neither condition is a normal result of aging, the Alzheimer’s Association says. Source: The Alzheimer’s Association // alz.org
**Participate**

The Connected Horse Project seeks individuals affected by Alzheimer’s disease or other dementia, and their caregivers, for a new round of workshops slated for April 24, May 1, and May 8 at the University of California at Davis. Participants should have little or no horse-handing experience.

Those interested in taking part in these workshops should contact recruiters by visiting connectedhorse.org and clicking the contact button; calling 916-708-4904 or emailing info@connectedhorse.org.
in the herd.” All that information is also expressed in the way horses reflect human emotions and behaviors as they relate to the animal. As a result, horses ultimately help humans improve their own communication skills and overall awareness. “They promote positivity and self-confidence,” Sonder says.

“The horse is actually facilitating the active engagement and mirroring the humans’ emotions and behavior, and [human participants] are interacting with a 1200-pound animal,” explains Williams. “The horses encourage mindfulness in the humans, help them to calm down, and open up new neuropathways.”

Most fundamentally, The Connected Horse research project capitalizes on its ability to get Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers out of their routine environments and into new ones. But Anzelmo also believes substantial benefits occur when both patients and their caregivers realize that their shared experiences constitute their “new normal.”

According to Anzelmo, those affected by Alzheimer’s and dementia frequently fall in to a cycle of dependency, while their caregivers often develop a need to control themselves, their charges, and even the disease itself. “They get stuck in roles,” Anzelmo says. “The workshops especially help caregivers realize that they may be giving their husbands, wives, or relatives care that they either don’t immediately need or even want.”

Hertel recalls one woman who did just that. “She paid every bill, went to every appointment, did everything to protect her husband,” Hertel said. “Then she had an ‘aha moment’ when she realized that you don’t have to control everything and she said, ‘The horse taught me that all I have to do is love my family.’” From that day forward, the couple took trips together and began to share new experiences with one another.

Meanwhile, Sonder recalls how facilitators capitalized when horses refused to respond to human overtures. “There is a chance that the horse will not come to you, so when that happens we ask caregivers, ‘have you ever had days when you didn’t want to have to care for the other person?’” Sonder says. “We also ask people in the program what they learned about themselves that day and what they learned about horses.”

For Charlotte and Richard Diver, the workshops’ benefits are simpler still. “I was really nervous about being around the horse at first, but then I realized that when I relaxed, the horse relaxed, too,” Charlotte said. “It gave me a better understanding of my husband’s needs.” Richard says the workshops are all about communication. “I always had conversations with my wife and my mother-in-law,” Richard Driver says. “Now I also listen to them better.”

Ultimately, researchers hope that data derived from The Connected Horse project can produce tangible and sustainable results. “We do have medications that are approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and we do have some medications in clinical trials right now, but we won’t have that data for a while,” Farias says. “We need to find an option to help people right now.” Anzelmo believes that equine-assisted therapy is the answer. “We see people every day with benefits from this,” she says. “How long are we going to wait?”

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By the numbers
It’s no secret that Alzheimer’s disease and dementia exact a high cost on those who have been diagnosed with either disease and for their caregivers. But according to the Alzheimer’s Association (AA), the economic impact of diagnosing and caring for those with Alzheimer’s is staggering as well:

- More than 5 million Americans are currently living with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia.
- Alzheimer’s is the 6th leading cause of death in the US, and one in three seniors in the US have Alzheimer’s disease or some other dementia when they die.
- Alzheimer’s and dementia cost the US economy $236 billion. That number is expected to increase to $1 trillion by 2050.
- More than 15 million people in the US provided 181 billion hours of unpaid care for family members struggling with Alzheimer’s disease. That unpaid care is valued at $221.3 billion.
- Families spend an estimated $5,000 each year caring for members affected by Alzheimer’s disease. At the same time, nearly one-half of all caretakers work increased hours, take on an extra job, or postpone their own retirement to afford the cost of caring for an Alzheimer’s-affected spouse, parent, or relative.

Source: The Alzheimer’s Association // alz.org