



Session Volunteer Training Manual

SunCatcher Therapeutic Riding Academy, Inc.

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Welcome to SunCatcher Therapeutic Riding Academy

Thank you for your interest in becoming a volunteer at SunCatcher. This manual will give you the basic information and tools you will need to be safe and involved as a volunteer! Our volunteers' commitment to this program and participants inspires and encourages us every single day, and we thank you for showing up and making a positive difference for so many. We hope you too will be encouraged every time you are at SunCatcher!

Our Vision

SunCatcher Therapeutic Riding Academy, Inc., desires to contribute to the quality of life in our community by building connection, belonging and possibilities using the healing power of horses.

Our History

SunCatcher Therapeutic Riding Academy, Inc. is a nonprofit organization founded in 2000 by Jerry and Linda Smedshammer. At that time, everything came together to turn their dream into a reality of using horses to help individuals with special needs. SunCatcher originally started as a traveling service with 4 horses, 30 riders and 10 volunteers the first year. Their travels included taking horses to Spearfish, Belle Fourche, Rapid City and surrounding areas for all types of events, until finding their current home on South Airport Road outside of Rapid City in 2010.

Instructors

Our team of experienced instructors are dedicated to facilitating each equine-human experience in the safest ways possible, with the unique customization that each individual may need, that results in building connection, joy and possibilities for all involved.

Instructors oversee all lessons. All directions come from the instructor, including the assignment of participant to horse, volunteers to participant, method of mounting and the structure of the lesson. Unless notified otherwise, all volunteers must defer to the instructor's decisions. This is extremely important to ensure everyone's safety.

During our various therapy sessions, the instructor is there to ensure the safety of everyone involved including the client, volunteers, therapist and horse but the therapist directs the session. At various times there may be a Student Instructor teaching a class, but always under direct supervision of a SunCatcher Instructor.

Participants

A participant is any person participating in a SunCatcher program. SunCatcher serves approximately 80 participants each year, and facilitates more than 200 equine encounters for those in our communities.

All of our participants have a medical provider's clearance for their level of participation, and all have at least one unique challenge, special need, or disability that Equine-Assisted Activity and Therapy (EAAT) is helping them with. These challenges may be physical, mental, emotional, or situational; and not all of these challenges are obvious. Each session group of participants will be different, and their volunteers will receive the necessary information about how to best assist each individual and horse in that session.

About Equine Assisted Activity and Therapy (EAAT)

Therapeutic Horsemanship uses equine-assisted activities for the purpose of contributing positively to the well-being of people with disabilities. The benefits of equine assisted activities are often far-reaching and evident in many areas:

Physically, the horse's movement has a dynamic effect on the rider's body. The horse stimulates the rider's pelvis and trunk in a manner that closely resembles the normal walking gait of a human. This movement can be used to produce specific physical changes in the rider. The benefits to our riders include normalization of tone, improvements in both posture and balance, and increased strength.

Sensorially, the movement of the horse can help with a variety of sensory integration issues. A horse with a smooth gait and consistent pace can provide needed input to help a rider establish both rhythm and balance. A horse with more movement in its gait may be able to provide rider stimulation to help organize and integrate sensory input. Movement exploration while on the horse can help to improve a rider's overall body awareness.

Emotionally, the success of overcoming fear and anxiety can help a participant realize greater self-worth and increase self-esteem. The ability to achieve different skills will also have a positive effect on a participant's self-perception. For some participants, the facility and barn environment, the bonding that takes place with the horse, and the development of new skills are critical components of success of experience. The relationships which develop between participants, volunteers, horses and staff are integral to the positive experience at SunCatcher.

Cognitively, the horse provides many of our participants with the motivation to learn many new things. Educational goals such as letter recognition and sequencing can be incorporated into session activities.

Socially, EAAT enables individuals to interact with their peers and other adults in a group setting, while riding and enjoying related activities are both fun and challenging.

EAAT provides all individuals an environment in which to excel, gain independence, and build self-esteem.

Programs at SunCatcher

Therapeutic Horsemanship, Mounted and/or Groundwork incorporates equine education literally from the ground up, with participants learning about equine safety before engaging in mounted or groundwork sessions. All sessions are facilitated by an experienced instructor and encourages each participant to flourish and thrive as they weekly build upon the skills they learn alongside their horse. Therapeutic Horsemanship is also an integral part of our **Special Olympics Equestrian** sessions.

Equine Assisted Therapy is a medical treatment strategy conducted by a licensed occupational, physical, or speech therapist that is trained in the behavior and movement of the horse and how that movement can impact people with special needs. The therapists are assisted by trained volunteers. These sessions are limited and based on therapists availability, and must have a physician's referral to that therapist.

Equine Assisted Learning and Mental Health Sessions incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. The participants learn about themselves and others by participating in challenging ground activities with the horses and then process or discuss the feelings, behaviors and patterns they observed. The team may consist of the participant, instructor, therapist and horse. These sessions may also involve mounted activities. *Volunteers are limited and required to have additional training and/or background clearance.

Volunteering at SunCatcher

Commitment

Our sessions are 99% volunteer-staffed, and most sessions cannot safely happen without your help—**THANK YOU** for your commitment to showing up and ensuring that we can help each participant safely enjoy their equine interaction that day!

Basics:

1. Based on enrolled participants, you will be asked to help at a set time each week that also works with your schedule.
2. Please come 10-15 minutes before your assigned session starts, to assist with participants as they arrive.
3. You will be provided training and be approved for different volunteer and session tasks; we will never ask you to do something you do not feel you can safely assist with!
4. Please let us know as early as possible if you will be unable to help with your assigned session, so we can fill that gap with another trained volunteer, and still be able to help all participants enjoy their session.
5. Occasionally poor weather will move us from a horse-centered session to a classroom-session, but we can still use your help!

We use the Wranglr App ([schedule.wranglr.app](https://www.schedule.wranglr.app)) to communicate to volunteers, participants, and staff; and we will help you set this up and provide training so you can use it efficiently.

Volunteering Basics at SunCatcher

Safety is of utmost importance during all equine activities. We ask that you use good judgment around other participants, staff, volunteers and the horses. All of our staff are highly competent, and their instructions must be followed. If you don't know something or are unsure, please ask.

Please familiarize yourself with the following safety precautions:

- No running or yelling in the tack room, saddling area, or around any of the horses.
- **No smoking/vaping anywhere on SunCatcher property.**
- Do not stand directly behind a horse.
- Children must be supervised at all times.
- **Alcohol or illegal drug use is strictly prohibited.**
- No abusive, threatening or violent behavior.
- No one may mount, dismount or ride a horse unless approved by a staff member. No one may mount without the use of mounting blocks or ramp. Anyone on a horse **MUST** wear a helmet.
- **Please do not feed our horses without permission.** Many of our horses have specific diet restrictions, and there is always the risk of being bitten.
- **Always lead a horse with a halter and lead rope.**
- No participants will be in the corrals catching horses.
- Only approved staff and volunteers will catch horses and clean hooves—
SEE BOARD IN TACK ROOM.
- Keep a safe distance between horses— at least 2 horse lengths apart at a minimum.
- **Arena gates must be shut when horses are in the ring.**
- In the case of a loose horse, fallen rider, or any other emergency, do not panic. Rider safety is our highest priority. Directions will be provided by an instructor.
- **No cellphones in the arena during lessons.**
- No photos may be taken without permission. Some riders may be sharing an arena with others who have not given their consent to be photographed. Our rules are in place for the safety and protection of all of our participants. Anyone failing to comply may be asked to leave and/or dismissed from our program.
- All individuals under the age of 18 must wear a helmet when working around horses.
- No pets are allowed at the facility without written permission from staff.

Confidentiality

SunCatcher maintains a strict policy of confidentiality. All volunteers are asked to respect our participants' privacy in any setting away from lessons. This includes avoiding discussion of participants by name or in any way that might disclose their identity or their disability. SunCatcher preserves the right of confidentiality for all individuals in its program.

Physical Fitness

Volunteers assisting in sessions need to be able to walk with and/or help support a rider for up to 45 minutes, and in many cases will be asked to run along slowly as the horse trots for a few minutes at a time. If you have physical limitations that prevent you from meeting these requirements, simply let your instructor or volunteer coordinator know, and we will find you the appropriate job!

Attire

Please wear close-toed shoes/boots and outdoor clothes suitable to the season. See Code of Ethics for more guidelines.

Consistency

We ask all volunteers and participants to do things the "SunCatcher way" to maintain consistency for our horses and all participants. This helps us keep our processes simplified and safe for all.

Volunteer Input

Your comments and observations are very valuable to us. Please feel free to drop a note in the comment box or visit with the Executive Director, Instructor or Volunteer Coordinator. All conversations will be held in confidence. Numbers are posted throughout the facility.

Key suggestions for Volunteers:

- Introduce yourself to your rider and volunteer team. Get to know them.
- Learn with your rider; get to know the tack and parts of the horse.
- Enjoy yourself. An anxious volunteer can make a horse tense and a rider nervous.
- Limit conversation during the lesson. Direct the rider's attention to the instructor or therapist

A Day in the Life of a Volunteer

Before the Session

1. Sign in on the Wranglr app.
2. Check with an instructor and/or wrangler if there is any task they need help with before sessions.
3. Prepare the horse with a thorough grooming. Do NOT clean hooves if not cleared to do so.
4. Assist the wrangler as needed in carrying tack to each horse. (*You will assist most participants saddle their horse, with the wrangle and instructor assisting. **Never cinch a horse quickly or tightly—the cinch will be tightened a final time by the instructor just before entering the mounting ramp.***)
5. Greet the participants as they arrive, and follow the instructor's directions as you help your participant groom, saddle, and assist with leading your horse down to the arena, or over to Hope Trail.

6. Please visit with your participant as you help them ready their horse, giving them specific praise and being vigilant to their safety.

During the Session

1. To avoid distracting or confusing the participant during the session, volunteers are asked to talk only when necessary. (*Occasionally you will need to repeat the instruction or demonstrate a movement to your participant—BUT it is important to remember to give the participants time to process the request or command - some may need more time to process information and then respond.*)
2. The instructor cannot see everything that is going on, and we rely on your eyes and ears in the arena! Please relate pertinent observations to the instructor.
3. Please leave your phone in your vehicle or on airplane mode during sessions—even a vibrating phone can distract and interrupt a session.
4. Please talk to the instructor outside of sessions, and in privacy, if you have questions, concerns, or observations. See posted numbers of others you can reach out to if necessary.

After the Session

1. Assist your participant with leading the horse back to the tack room, unsaddling as instructed, and brushing down their horse as they complete their session.
2. Check with the wrangler or instructor for any further instructions.
3. If staying for another session, please hydrate, reapply sunscreen, and sit down for a minute! (*Please give the instructor time to make their session notes before chatting them up*).
4. When leaving for the day, please check out on the Wranglr app.

Session Lingo:

A big part of our sessions involves consistency in how we speak with the participants and horses. Phrases we will use include:

- **Walk on** is used to ask the horse to move forward at the walk
- **Whoa** is used to stop the horse
(**And...whoa** can be used to stop the horse but also give them time to "prepare" to stop)
- **Easy** is used when you want the horse to slow down
- **Trot** (and a kissy noise) is used to ask a horse to trot
- **Back** is used when you want the horse to back up

Tone of voice is also very important. A quiet gentle, tone can be used to soothe a nervous horse. A firm and assertive tone can command a quick response from the horse. Watch your vocal tones, and encourage your participant to use gentle, peaceful words when speaking to their horse also.

Session Volunteer Job Descriptions

Horse Lead

Volunteers with horse handling experience may be asked to be horse leaders. As a leader, the volunteer is responsible for handling the horse throughout tacking, the warm-up, the mounting procedure, the lesson and dismounting.

Methods of Leading

Active leading - The leader is totally responsible for all movements of the horse. The horse is getting all the aid from the leader, not the participant.

Supportive leading - The horse is still on a lead line, but the leader is not actively giving the horse cues. The participant will be giving the horse aids for walk-on, halt and steering, but may not be proficient enough to be completely independent. In this way, the participant can practice skills while the leader makes sure the horse is following the cues given by the participant.

Passive leading on or off lead - The leader continues to stay by the horse's head, but virtually does nothing to control the horse. When the participant is ready the lead line will be removed. This is a big step for many participants. It's their first big move to independence yet the leader is still close by to help when necessary.

How to lead a Horse

1. With hand closest to horse, hold lead as marked. Hold the extra rope folded in a figure 8 in your free hand. Position yourself on the horse's left beside the horse's head, staying behind the nose and in front of the shoulder unless otherwise directed. Look ahead and be aware of the horse's focus.

2. Be aware of what your rider is asking the horse. When appropriate, wait for your rider to ask the horse to “Walk on,” “Trot,” or “Whoa” allowing the rider as much independence as possible. You direct the horse after the rider has attempted to.
3. Keep 2-3 horse lengths distance between your horse and another horse.
4. Allow enough room for the side walkers on both sides of the horse, paying attention to the side walker along the rail and when navigating obstacles. Also be aware of overhead obstacles when on the trails.
5. In the event of an emergency, the leader is responsible for the horse. Stay with the horse and follow the instructor’s or therapist’s directions.
6. Do not allow your horse to graze during a session, unless the instructor has given directions to do so.

Side Walkers

Side walkers are focused on the rider and what he/she is doing. They must stay within reach of the rider and be aware of everything that’s going on with the rider while assisting the rider in completing the tasks as directed by the instructor.

How to Sidewalk

Different methods are used with individual riders depending on their needs. Common examples of side walker assistance follow:

- Walk beside the rider’s leg assisting only when needed. Be sure to stay in position.
- Provide support at the rider’s ankle by using the “heel hold.”
- Provide support at the rider’s thigh by using an “Arm over the thigh hold.”
- Provide support at both the ankle and thigh.

Note: When there are two side walkers, be sure both use the same hold.

Interacting with the Team as a Side Walker

- If a problem arises, tell the horse leader and the instructor or therapist immediately.
- If the rider slips in one direction or another, have the rider regain position in the center of the horse. If necessary, ask the leader to halt and allow the rider to reposition and then continue.
- Encourage INDEPENDENCE. Only assist your rider when necessary.
- If you need to change sides with the other side walkers, ask the leader to bring the horse into the center of the ring and stop. Side walkers change sides one at a time, by walking in front of the horse. Never leave the rider alone or unassisted.
- Limit conversation when the instructor or therapist is trying to teach.
- If your rider is wearing a safety belt, do not hold onto the belt unless instructed to do so.

From the Horse’s Point of View

We, the hard-working horse herd at SunCatcher, have a few thoughts we’d like to share with you.

We love our jobs! We enjoy people and are very proud that we can help so many of our participants accomplish so many things! To help us stay happy please keep the following in mind...

1. Only tie at quick release post ties.
2. Please don't kiss, poke, and prod me in the face constantly.
3. **Inconsistency is the biggest annoyance with us horses.** We've got many different people doing the same thing many different ways- that's hard for us! We thrive on consistency. We need to know what is expected of us and need to have our boundaries clearly defined.
4. I can sense when you are anxious, sad, or distracted, and I may react to your mood! If you work on being calm, gentle, and focused, it helps me also stay calm, gentle, and focused. Thank you!

Emergency Procedures

In the event of an emergency during a lesson, all leaders must immediately stop horses and assume halt position in front of horse. side walkers must assume the arm-lock position on all participants.

If a participant loses his/her balance during a lesson:

- Leader stops horse.
- Side walkers try to keep participant in the saddle by stabilizing participant with arm-locks over the participant's thighs.
- If possible, gently push the participant back into the saddle.

If a participant must be removed from the horse (Emergency Dismount):

- Leader should stop the horse and the participant will be dismounted to ground quickly and quietly. Designate which side walker will do the emergency dismount. This is most often the tallest and strongest or in some cases the volunteer who is on the side that the participant is already falling to.
- Participant's feet should be removed from the stirrups. 2nd side walker will assist participant's leg over the horse.
- If the horse will not stand quietly, the leader should circle the horse around him/herself as the inside side walker bear hugs the participant around the waist and slides the participant off and away from the horse.
- Once the participant has been dismounted, leader should circle the horse away from the participant (so hindquarters are NOT towards the participant) or back the horse away from the participant.

If a participant falls from the horse:

- Side walkers should make sure both of participant's feet are out of the stirrups.
- Side walkers should try to catch or soften the participant's fall if possible.

- Leader should halt the horse and move the horse away from the fallen participant by either circling so that hindquarters are NOT towards participant or backing the horse away.
- NEVER move a fallen participant - wait for the instructor or therapist.

Things to keep in mind:

- Communicate with everyone involved in the emergency in a calm, concise manner.
- If a horse suddenly pulls backwards, DO NOT pull against him. Slowly and calmly follow the movement of the horse until he stops.
- All of those involved with an emergency situation should stay calm and do the best that they can to keep the rider as safe as possible.

In the Event of a Medical Emergency:

The safety and wellbeing of all individuals is a priority. By following basic safety procedures most emergencies can be avoided. However, if an emergency does occur, please try to remain calm. Take a deep breath. In all emergencies, only a trained individual may apply first aid (a staff member who is certified in first aid and CPR is always on-site during program activities). A volunteer may be called upon to assist.

Below is a general list of guidelines to follow during an emergency:

- Survey the scene for safety.
- A staff member trained in First Aid/CPR attends to the rider
- A volunteer may be asked to retrieve the First Aid kit and the blanket from the box in the barn aisle or from the tack room area.
- The horse leader attends to the horse, leading it far from the participant if there has been a fall. Talking to the horse in a soft, soothing tone may assist in calming it.
- If other participants are present, they may be asked to stop what they are doing and leave the scene if possible. The instructor will decide on a plan of action.
- If further assistance is needed, a designated person will be instructed to call 911 and tell the dispatcher what happened, the condition of the injured person, what help is being given, the location of the injured person and directions to SunCatcher. Emergency information is posted near the tack room.
- A designated person will retrieve the injured person's medical file so that it is available for emergency and medical personnel if necessary.
- A person will be designated to open all gates to the accident site after all horses have been secured. This person will wait at the top of the driveway to tell EMS to turn off lights and sirens, and to direct them to the location of the injured person.
- The Instructor will notify the parent, guardian or case worker.

Parts of the Horse

