

# Eating Disorders Helped by Equine Therapy

*How horses support and enhance eating disorder recovery in patients  
from the Bio-Psycho-Social aspects of the disorder*

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# Hershey Kiss Experience



- What colors do you see, details you can describe?
- What does the wrapper feel like? The crinkles? The paper tag?
- What noises can you create with it?
- What does it smell like?
- Where do you taste it best? Front or back of tongue, side of mouth?

*Was this easy? Any emotions?*

*People with ED's have heightened experiences with this.*

*Mindfulness is an important aspect of eating disorder recovery*

## *DSM diagnosis of ED's*

- Anorexia: restricting intake; low body weight; intense fear of gaining weight; distorted sense of body and weight
- Bulimia: recurrent binges plus compensation through vomiting, fasting, exercise, diuretics/laxatives at least 1x/week for 3 months.
- Binge Eating Disorder: episodes have 3 or more of the following
  - More rapidly than normal; feeling uncomfortably full; large amounts when not hungry; secretive eating b/c of the embarrassment of the amount eaten; feeling guilty after eating. And no compensation
- OSFED: Atypical Anorexia, Purging Disorder, Night Eating, ARFID

*What causes  
an eating  
disorder?*

**Biological**

**Psychological**

**Social /  
Environmental**

# Biological

- Genetically determined temperament, BMI, metabolism
- Weight set point and bone structure
- Onset of puberty, menopause, and body changes
- Neurotransmitters: less stable dopamine and opioid response
- Autonomic nervous system reactivity (heart rate, digestion, respiratory rate, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal)
- Attraction to sweet or salty
- Hypothalamic centers in the brain monitoring appetite
- Natural balance of eating and movement

# Psychological

- Personality factors: avoid emotions, avoid setting boundaries
- Variety of foods available
- Stress and mood
- Learned responses and coping skills
- Unconscious thought processes
- Expectations and interpretations
- Behavioral inflexibility – always have to have the “right way” done
- Identity and self image
- Perfectionism
- Co-morbid diagnosis

# Social / Environmental

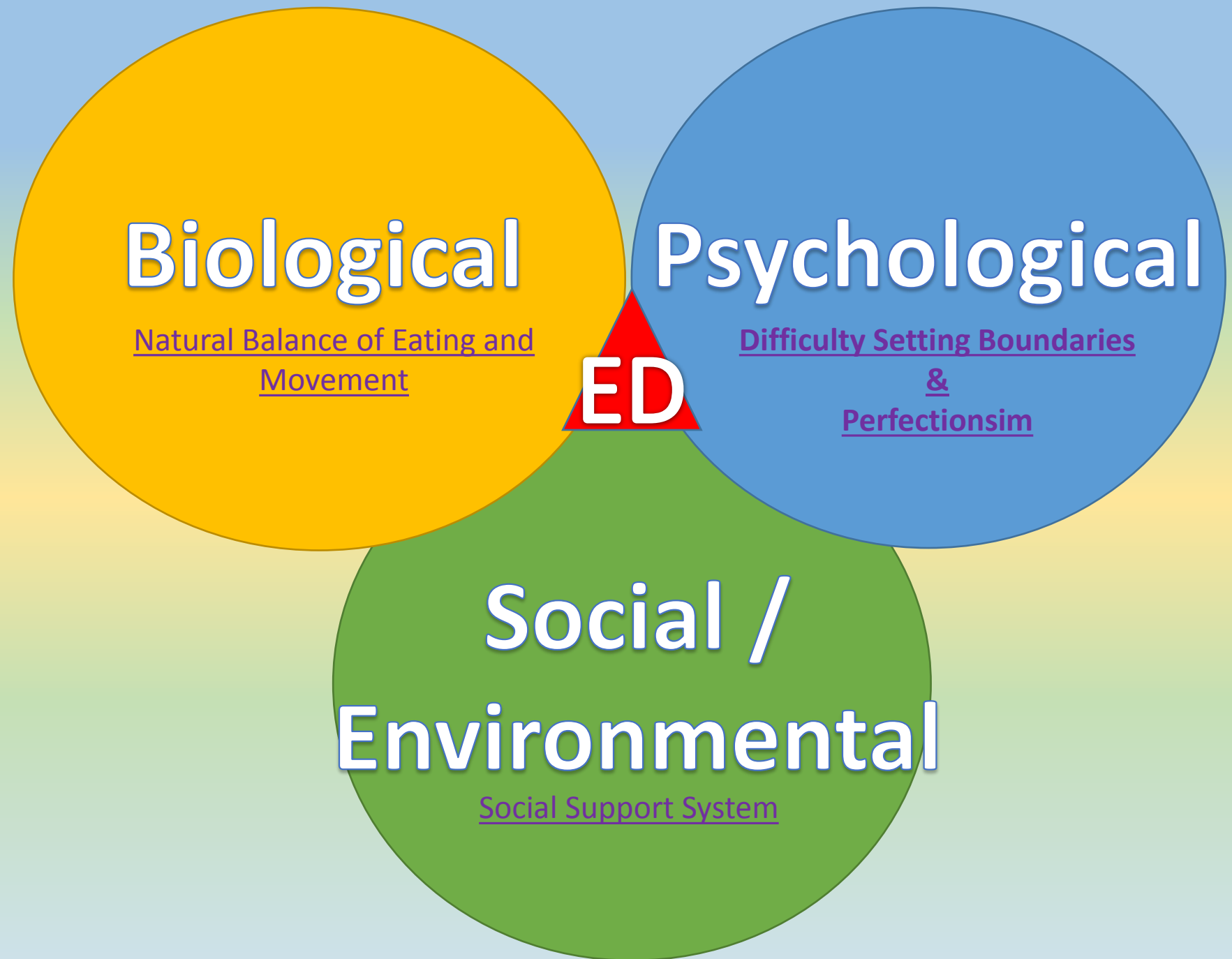
- Cultural factors – on food preference and on body image
- Pressure to “fit in”
- Normalization of dieting
- Media influence, weight stigma
- Childhood experiences, including bullying
- Social support system
- Trauma or Adjustment events
- Resources available

*“Genes load the gun, the environment pulls the trigger”*

*~Scott Kahan, MD*

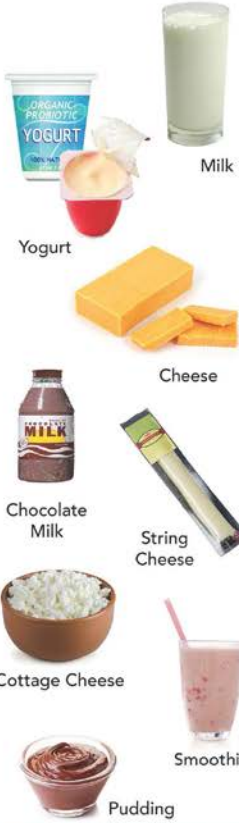


*What causes  
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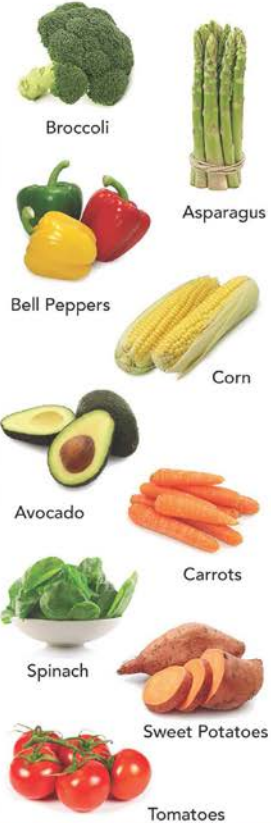


## Dairy

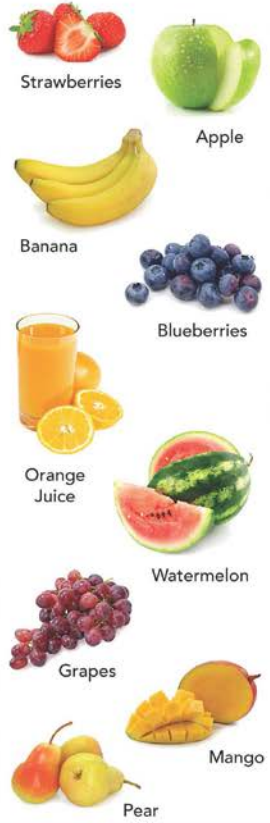
Milk, Yogurt, Cheese



## Vegetables



## Fruits



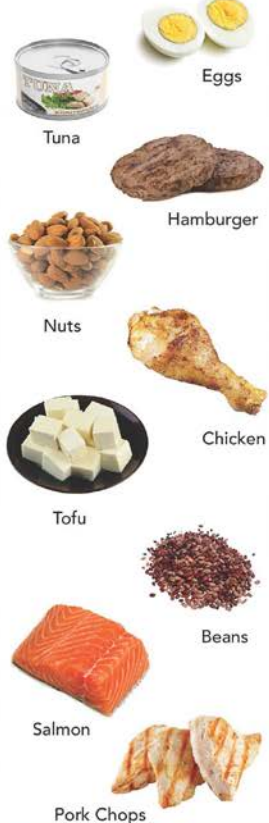
## Grains

Bread, Cereal, Pasta



## Protein

Meat, Beans, Nuts



# Natural Balance of Eating and Movement



- Naturally grazers but we manage their food
- Stalls, pasture, paddock
- Supplements
- Digestive needs
- Exercise regimen

***When we mess with the natural balance and homeostasis of eating and movement, we need to manage the consequences***



# *Comparing medical complications for* *Humans* *and* *Horses*

- Bone thinning
- Heart issues
- Digestive problems
- Brittle hair, dry skin and nails
- Low body temperature
- Seizures
- Inflammation/rupture of esophagus
- Infertility
- Dental erosion
- Muscle wastage
- Heart disease
- Decreased gut bacteria
- Digestibility decreased
- Cold intolerance
- Impacts pregnant mares and nursing foals
- Dental erosion

# Refeeding in Humans and Horses

- During starvation, body reserves of fat and protein are used for energy. Likewise, electrolyte and mineral stores, especially phosphorus, decrease.
- Whenever the animal eats again, these levels shift and can cause complications
- Refeeding syndrome in horses can result in colic, diarrhea, and laminitis, and in humans inability to breathe, high blood pressure, heart failure etc. In both, it can even cause death.

# Activity Ideas to focus on when working with food issues

- Food is fuel – educate on the horses' need for different nutrition
- Normalize eating balanced meals
- Allow clients to feed, and be mindful while doing so, at dinner time
- Observe grazing in pastures
- Observe gaits in natural environment – none are judged or wrong
- Body Scale Card and Processing, idea cited by Equine Approach LLC
  - Measure height and weight, scale the horse's body type, process the impact that had on their opinion of the relationship/likeability with that horse
- Ideas from audience?

# ED's and Avoiding Assertiveness and Boundary Setting

- Caretakers, Peacemakers, Passive, Self Loathing, Unworthy feelings come from mental, emotional, physical and / or sexual abuse; learned family dynamics, praise for compliance, avoiding anxiety etc
- Self Esteem and issues of deservedness
- Secretive eating, bingeing, purging, over exercise.
- While eating disorders avoid, horses are about honesty and openness



# Ideas for Assertiveness Activities?

- Need to adjust posture, having the right to take up space
  - Picking hooves, leading a horse and indicating direction turns
- Becoming more comfortable with physical, emotional, informational boundaries and saying “no”
  - Observing the herd in pasture – which horses show which boundaries or lack of?
- Need to SAY what one needs, having the right to ask for help
  - Lunging a horse would require appropriate tone, non verbal body posture, and using a common language the horse knows
- Ideas from Audience?

# Perfectionism

- People with ED's tend to be unhappy with themselves, but the ED enhances a sense of control and happiness and reduces anxiety
- Perfectionism and negative urgency predict the development of ED's
- Values achievement and sense of discipline
- All – or – nothing thinking, cannot tolerate unknown
- Perfectionism allows the person to control how others perceive them

# Ideas to challenge perfectionism?

- Validate the discomfort, plus use of humor during exposure to the “grey area”
- Have the client set standards which are likely unattainable
- Experience the unconditional regard when not being perfect
- Need to tolerate not completing the task fully or “perfectly”
  - Use the horse as a creative pallet, encourage creativity, not the end result. Paint on the horse using a brush or hands. There is no erasing/ washing off. Practice fear of getting started, trepidation of it not looking the way they want, tolerating it being there
- Ideas from Audience?

# Social Support System

- Eating disorders are isolative
- Stem from feelings of rejection or shame/guilt
- Fear of asking for, and accepting, help
- Personification of “Ed”; the breakup voice doesn’t want change
- Lack of Social Skills needed in interpersonal effectiveness
- Previous relationships may be controlling

# Ideas to address fear of asking for support

- Practice verbal and non-verbal social skills to initiate closer relationships with people
- Respecting physical boundaries
- Challenge helplessness
- Activities that require initiative and directedness to express needs and rights more effectively
  - Have the family saddle a horse with only the patient giving verbal commands from afar. Create barriers to communication such as adding music at different volumes, letting patient only face the horse 3 times total, and/or allow the family to ask questions only after 5 minutes of not being able to.

Ideas from Audience?

# Resources

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