

## Self-directed support in practice

### Vilma's story

**Background:** Vilma is a 32-year-old young woman who loves horses and ponies. She lives in a housing unit with 24-hour support services. Vilma exhibits characteristics of autism spectrum disorder, and her behavior can be very challenging at times: there is always one extra employee present at the housing unit in the mornings just for Vilma. The other half of Vilma's body is much weaker than the other. Vilma takes part in daytime activities a few days a week. Vilma speaks very little and can often be very impatient.

Before moving to the group home, Vilma lived in an institution. She visited a horse stable once a week to care for a pony named Teppo. She has also participated in equine-assisted therapy regularly for several years. However, after moving to the group home, Vilma's visits to the stables ended because there was not enough money for it.

**Self-directed support in practice:** At first, we used self-directed support to get a job for Vilma at a local clothing store. This experiment failed because of the high turnover of employees, however. After giving the matter some more thought, we remembered Vilma's previous visits to the stables.

Support was organized through personal budgeting as follows: We reduced the number of daytime activity days by one per week and transferred the money left over to the housing unit, which used it to enable Vilma's stable visits. Vilma is always escorted to the stables by the same employee, but once she arrives there, she is instructed by the stables' own employee. We experimented with this arrangement for a few weeks, after which the experiment was evaluated. All parties agreed that the visits should continue, as they have for just over a year now. Vilma spends 45 minutes at a time at the stables.

**What has changed:** Vilma is very anxious most of the time, but she always relaxes at the stables. She can focus just on the pony for the entire 45 minutes, which is a very long time for her. At the stables, Vilma does not get frustrated or upset when she is given instructions, but accepts guidance very well.

The employee says that even though visiting Teppo the Pony does not help with e.g. Vilma's outbursts of anger at home, the visits add a lot of content to her life. The stable visits are an activity shared by Vilma and the employee and a good topic of discussion for them. At home, Vilma wants to share her feelings of success with the other residents and employees.

Visiting Teppo is also physically important for Vilma. When tending to the pony, Vilma moves around in a way similar to physiotherapy. She has started to use both of her hands instead of just the stronger one when caring for Teppo without anyone urging her to do so. Vilma's other hand is much weaker than the other, so everyone was amazed when she started guiding the pony in a completely straight line. This requires Vilma to pull on the reins equally hard with both hands.

The employee responsible for supporting Vilma thinks about what the stable visits have added to Vilma's life. Although no major progress has yet happened at home, the employee sees huge potential for progress. One year is a short time to achieve great results. When the employee sits and watches Vilma humming to herself happily and complimenting herself, the thing that comes to mind is: *"If this can help reduce Vilma's anxiety and negative mood even for a short while once a week, doesn't that mean it's all worth it?"*