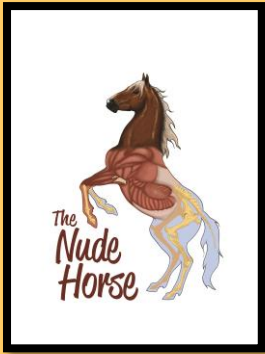


Beyond Prey & Predator



“Mindfulness”

**By The Nude Horse
(Equine
Epidemiologist)**

Understanding the natural position horses have in the complex animal kingdom helps us enter into a very unique partnership with an animal of prey with humans as potential predators. Horses are in-between fully domesticated ‘pets’ like dogs and cats that live in our homes, yet they are unlike agricultural animals kept for consumption and maintained at arm’s length. Horses offer a glimpse into the wild world, yet are curious and willing enough to allow us to train and tame them.

To train a flight & fright based animal in a prey/predator relationship requires a handler to be always ‘mindfully in the moment’ when with a horse.

Horses have been surviving in the wild successfully based on their strong cooperative social structure, so we need to learn how to enter this social structure and provide calmness, fairness, be an intelligent leader to protect them and secure their trust in us enough for their perceived survival. Becoming these things to your horse allows them to seek us for comfort in situations that would otherwise be fearful and trigger the flight & fright responses –these unwelcomed responses are often exhibited at shows, loading onto floats, riding in new locations and tackling new tasks asked from the handler.

Horses live in the moment, are large, powerful and thus potentially dangerous. These days many horse trainers are becoming aware of the importance of being ‘mindful’. They do exercises based on breathing, relaxation and body awareness. They are becoming non-confrontational in their methods (coined ‘natural horsemanship’ by some) working with an understanding of the horse ethology, as opposed to old school methods of domination.

How is ‘mindfulness’ achieved?

Try adjusting your breathing to the pace of your horse; switch off the world around you (especially your mobile phone). Aim to connect with your horse



with your eyes and your breath, look with him, not at him; a predator will stare at their prey.

Spending time with your horse when unable to concentrate can be called having a ‘monkey mind’. Without concentration you begin to let wandering and disjointed thoughts occupy your mind, perhaps rushing through activities, being unaware of the tension the horse or yourself may be feeling. Your horse may likely respond inappropriately, basing their decisions on past experiences, fear or even past trauma (returning to a state of flight or fright), they are unable to tap into your comfort for reassurance.

By contrast, have you seen a ‘mindful’ person enter the paddock and their horse comes up eagerly to greet them? There is a visible connection between both the horse’s eye and that of their handler; they both exude calmness, a relaxed state of mind a mutual trust between them.

One might start with spending time learning to keep their attention focussed over a sustained period of time through relaxation techniques, this in turn serves to develop concentration, calmness, flexibility in controlling ones thoughts and ultimately leads to a state of being able to be ‘connected or mindful’ to the moment.

Entering the paddock with no purpose other than to sit and observe or play with your horse, allows new skills sets to develop (no halters or leads just a carrot or apple). Try to renew the relationship through fresh eyes. Allow your horse to see you as a friend rather than a ‘work’ only companion. Play breeds curiosity – a behaviour sadly ‘trained out’ of many horses, they switch off and become disconnected.

It makes sense that awareness of our body language and the capacity to monitor one’s behaviours and emotions is necessary to enable this unique prey/predator partnership to flourish.

An equine dentist says “I used to be focused on getting as many horses in a barn done as I could. Now I am focused on getting as many horses as possible mindful, relaxed and telling me what they need.



Is there reason to believe being mindful makes any difference?

Two interesting cases studies conducted with young person's considered at risk due to their psychosocial disadvantages and backgrounds demonstrate how practising 'mindfulness' enabled a difficult situation to be corrected in both cases, with the horse's acceptance.

"Frey's therapist had relayed Freya would often put herself at risk with her peers and engage in risky behaviours outside the residential home. Once up on the mare named Ruby however, Frey's distracted behaviour appeared to wane a little and she became quieter in her body language and manner, seeming to suddenly realise she was perhaps vulnerable on top of the horse. This appeared to enable her to listen to and take instruction more readily and we took some opportunity to introduce her to some 'invisible riding' techniques. In the round pen we initially led Freya around on Ruby, the mare seemed to understand that she needed to remain extra attentive and alert today, perhaps picking up on Frey's emotional and physical state. We started off with some simple stretching exercises in order to help Freya find her balance, tune in to the different parts of her body and gain some more confidence, as well as being fun.

Next we introduced some simple 'body scan' exercises where Freya concentrated on each part of her body in turn, starting with relaxing her feet, moving up her body until she relaxed her shoulders and neck. In order to make this more fun and engaging I demonstrated these walking next to Freya, who copied the exercises riding on Ruby's back. Once Freya had found her balance and was more relaxed we suggested she closed her eyes and ride Ruby with her eyes shut in order to really tune into Ruby's movement. This is not as easy as it may appear but it is a really useful exercise for refining balance and for following the movement of the horse. Together we demonstrated to Freya how she could slow her breathing down, and breathe in and out in order to influence Ruby's pace, and learn how to bring her to a halt and to walk on again just by the smallest body movement and breathing. This exercise takes a lot of sustained concentration and body awareness, together with real intention; it will not work unless you are completely committed and mindfully

I want the horse to trust and to like me." He further states that he could "feel" the horse's mouth if he just slowed down and took time to be present with them.

When trying to work mindfully with a horse it's helpful to have a clear schedule. In other word don't work your horse when you have to rush or are mentally or emotionally distracted. This breaks down the mindful partnership and the horse resorts to its natural flight or fight responses.

The same goes for not insisting on working your horse when he/she is not mentally or emotionally fit to do so. Like humans they can be affected by stress, hormones, herd dynamic changes and wellness issues. Often the hardest but most important thing you can do it 'walk away' calmly and try again another time or day.

Working mindfully with your horse can start with these simple steps created by B.S., M.A. Mary Ann C. Simonds in her article "Mindfulness With Horses"

- Look "with" not "at" horses (predators lock eyes on their prey).
- Empty your mind and centre your mind to be present.
- Synchronize your breath with your horse's breath.
- Use calming signals such as eye blinking to connect with your horse.
- Slow your brain wave down from Beta to Alpha frequencies.
- Turn off your cell phone and bring your attention into the moment.
- Spend time just "being" with your horse, like eating, sleeping and play.
- Use music to relax and connect you and your horse while riding.
- Be happy and friendly when in your horse's presence.
- Spend time helping your horse feel good and release tension through hands-on massage.
- Use relaxation techniques such as aromatherapy, breathing, flower essences for you and your horse.*

*<http://holistichorse.com/in-the-field/minfulness-with-horses/>

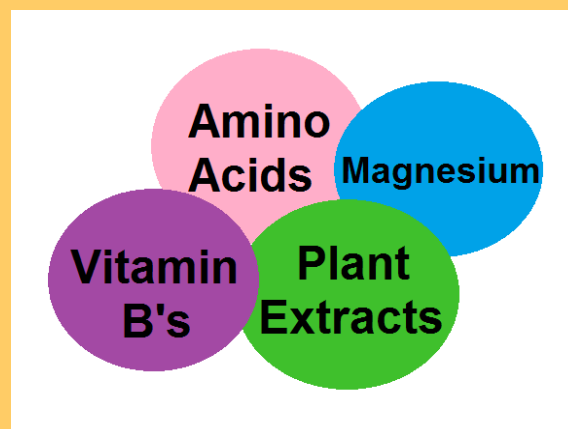
embodied. After a few attempts we knew Freya began to get a sense of this feeling as she gained more ability in co-ordinating her body language together with her breathing and concentration. In turn Frey's confidence in her newly found body awareness grew and Ruby responded accordingly, causing Frey to exclaim "look she slows down when I'm just thinking it now". Later as we finished the session Freya stretched down from Ruby's back to hug her around the neck beaming it's like she can read my mind"."

The second one is "Cinderella approached Duchess in a rather dominant, almost aggressive manner which caused the mare to walk purposefully away from her, refusing to be caught. Cinderella immediately became angry and frustrated walking off throwing the head collar down exclaiming "stubborn cow". I sat down next to her and to her surprise it seemed I praised her for her actions telling her that sitting down and not chasing Duchess was in fact a very good strategy and one of the tactics I may try with a horse who didn't want to be caught. I suggested we sit in the field and relax for awhile and try to just observe Duchess and the horses without necessarily trying to catch them, but at the same time bring some awareness as to how she felt Duchess may be feeling. After sitting quietly for quite a long time with only the sounds of birds and the wind in the trees in the background and with Cinderella appearing to be ignoring me she finally said 'she probably doesn't want to leave the others and suppose she doesn't know me yet". I asked Cinderella what different approaches may help Duchess to want to be caught and she replied "well probably getting to know me a bit more first as she knows she can trust me." We followed this with a short discussion about horse's body language and whether Cinderella could see if there were any different approaches she could try to help Duchess learn to trust her. With this Cinderella agreed to try approaching Duchess together with me in a slower more controlled and less aggressive manner and did then succeed in carefully putting the head collar on. The other mare Ruby then followed us into the yard where Cinderella put the head collar on her too without a problem, her body language reflecting a much more gentle approach towards the horses who responded accordingly."#

#www.psychosocial.com/IJPR_17/Horses_and_Mindfulness_Burton.html

What if still your horse is still behaving nervously and seems ill tempered after practising 'mindful' techniques?

Some horses may indeed be additionally suffering from dietary deficiencies, pain or severe trauma. Ask your vet to rule out any illness, pain or gastric ulcer issues, along with testing for dietary deficiencies.



Supplementing with nutrients that have been demonstrated to reduce symptoms of anxiety and stress hormones, along with supporting normal cognitive functions that assist building the brain's chemical messengers called neurotransmitters can be beneficial. **Caution** must be exercised not overloading with nutrients such as high quantities of magnesium for example whereby 'slurred' behaviours can potentially endanger the safety of you and your horse. Magnesium can throw off absorption of other vital nutrients leading to other health issues. Look for a balanced blend of amino acids, vitamin B's (not with Vit B12 in combination as it blocks out the functions of the other B's), small amounts of magnesium and select beneficial plant extracts.

Getting dietary support right and working on a mindful attitude can lead to better mental performance and a more positive response to stressful situation whether at work or play.

Excellent follow up reading by horse trainer **Mark Rashid** is recommended through his many books. Rashid's philosophy involves understanding the horse's point of view and solving difficult problems with communication rather than force. His methodology emphasises the relationship between horse and the rider as a partnership, in which the horse willingly takes direction from the rider, rather than a dominant rider directing a submissive horse.