

Published in Somatics in 1998
“Equine Somatics”

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The human-horse relationship has existed for approximately 6,000 years. Archaeological sites in the Ukraine show evidence of early horse domestication. Highly prized throughout human history, horses have been used for many purposes. The human-horse relationship is by nature somatic: It is the integration of two minds and two bodies, the mind and body of the rider and the mind and body of the horse. Riding is most effective when there is maximum somatic integration of both horse and rider. As human mind-body integration can be enhanced, so too can equine mind-body integration be enhanced. The

Equine Somatics

result is a greater harmony between horse and rider, an interspecies relationship.

I have worked with a number of equestrians over the years from a variety of riding disciplines, teaching them somatic education. Approximately two years ago, Dennis Reis of Reis Ranch invited me to come work with the riders in his month-long horse riding clinic. Reis is a former rodeo rider who teaches what he calls Universal Horsemanship. Universal Horsemanship is similar to what others call natural horsemanship, which works with the natural tendencies of the horse.

I agreed to come and we developed a plan for my visits. I would come one evening to do postural assessments and practice some of the somatic principles relevant to riding. The next visit I would guide them in a session of somatic exercises and somatic yoga as they began their riding day. Finally, I would come for a day of individual hands-on somatic sessions, addressing their specific somatic issues and goals.

After a couple of visits, Reis asked me whether I thought hands-on Hanna Somatics could be done with horses. I told him that it probably could be done and I would give it some thought as to how to do it. After ruminating about it for a period of time, suddenly it came to me how it could be done. I was very excited. I called to tell him I had figured it out

REFLECTIONS OF THE EDITOR

and I would come show it to him next time I was in town.

Horses are prey animals, hard-wired for the startle response. Humans also experience the startle response. When horses are startled, a brain-stem mediated polysynaptic reflex occurs, causing muscle contractions, adrenaline level increases, heart rate increases, and so forth. This is the fight-or-flight response. Horses are frequently startled from birth on; it is a survival mechanism. As the muscles contract, horses move or run. Some of the muscles are stretched; the stretch reflex is triggered and the muscles are recontracted. Horses become more and more chronically contracted. Over time horses, like humans, develop characteristic postures, movements, and behaviors. They also develop pain, discomfort, and restricted movement.

I drove up to Reis Ranch and arrived just in time to see Dennis Reis, Shirley Park, and Tristan, Park's magnificent thoroughbred horse, standing beside the barn. Park had been interested in somatics and somatic yoga for humans and had

been working with it herself for some time. She was intrigued by the prospect of using hands-on somatics with horses and graciously agreed to try it with Tristan.

I explained some of the somatic principles as we began. Horses have many reflex movement patterns, but they do have voluntary motor control. Voluntary movements require a different part of the brain from that required by involuntary movements. We began with the left forelimb and continued exploring various moves with Tristan. Tristan seemed to enjoy it, and the experience was quite promising. Tristan responded just like the soma that he is: Tristan *could* experience hands-on somatics.

In some ways horses are very much like humans, and in other ways they are quite different. Many of the structures and functions are the same. Based on thousands of somatic sessions with humans and a study of horse anatomy and kinesiology, I developed a basic protocol for working with the major equine muscle groups. On my next visit to Reis Ranch we took Tristan through the entire protocol. It took about an hour. Park worked with Tristan as I gave the instructions, and Reis made suggestions from his vast knowledge of horses. It was a profound experience for all of us.

Since then we have tried it with horses and riders of all ages. They all respond to the degree that they are able. About halfway through the protocol, the horses become deeply relaxed. They stand quietly; their eyes glaze over; their lips hang loose; they lick their lips; their ears fall to the side; they sigh occasionally, and so forth. After the somatics session, they walk more easily and their muscles move more fluidly. During subsequent riding sessions they seem to respond more readily to rider requests. Riders report enhanced bonding with their horses.

We share the globe with other species; we are all very interdependent. The more we are aware of other species as sentient beings, as the Tibetan Buddhists say, the more we can treat them as important partners in the balance of nature. The more we can appreciate their basic natures and the interdependence of life, the more likely we are to create the interspecies relationships necessary for survival. ☞



Eleanor Criswell Hanna

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