

# DEVELOP A *harmony* HABIT

*3 simple steps to harmony with your horse...*

*By SUZE KENINGTON*

**Y**our trot rhythm sounds out hypnotic drum beats on the earth. You turn left down the hill and into the trees with pure intention rather than physical aids. Your body loves this feeling – effortless harmony. This feels like the way horses and humans were designed to connect in the wordless dialogue of bodies in shared motion. As you reach the lake you slow to a walk with no more than a breath. You both drink in the watery vista and as your beautiful horse enjoys a mouthful of the cool liquid your heart is full and your mind is quiet except for one gentle thought that drifts in on the northerly – “it’s so good to be alive”.

## **Stop time! I'm having a magic moment!**

The promise of blissful harmony, keep us coming back despite the time, money, physical and emotional investment that comes with having horses in our lives.

But why is harmonious connection effortless sometimes and at other times seemingly impossible? Is it them? Is it you? Is it the alignment of the planets and some pixie dust you happened to inhale on the way to the paddock?

Some people's riding life doesn't see them lurching between harmony and conflict. Are they just lucky?

No. Moments of blissful harmony are not gifts from the horse gods to keep you coming back mystery lameness after mystery lameness.

## **Life keeps getting in the way**

The problem is both horse and human are constantly reading, reacting and responding to our inner world (thoughts and feelings) and outer world (situations and environments). Sometimes those reactions are anything but harmonious. They can be downright scary for both us and our horse.

So does experiencing conflict mean our horse-human relationship is destined to become irreparably broken? No, quite the contrary.

## **Conflict contains the seed of destruction and the seed of greater unity**

Some form of conflict, be it minor, is inevitable on an almost moment to moment basis. Our horses are most definitely not automatons, mindlessly heeding our every wish – they

have instincts, preferences, opinions and personalities and we wouldn't want it any other way!

How we hold and resolve those conflicts either builds or breaks down our connection – think of it as a 'Mutual Trust Account' where you make deposits and withdrawals based on how you handle conflict. Deposits are made during sensitive 'relationship friendly' conflict resolution. Withdrawals happen when we erode trust. If you withdraw too much your account goes into overdraft – not an enjoyable, or for that matter, safe place for either of you...

## **Own your Human-ness, or it will own you**

Humans and horses have more in common than appearance would suggest. We are both mammals and therefore rely on emotional bonds to stay alive. No love – no food or nurture – no life. Both our nervous systems are designed to live in groups to meet our physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs.

Why is this interesting in the context of conflict resolution? Well, in short, relationships matter a great



deal to both of us. Horses are a peace loving, sensitive and family oriented species that are easily frightened – their nervous system is preset to flight not fight. We are both hard-wired for connection – it's essential for survival. Conflict takes its toll at all levels of both our beings. Lack of love causes physical and emotional dis-ease for herd dwelling species like horses and humans.

We both feel conflict deeply and, despite what we see in the media, we are both genetically programmed to want to resolve it as quickly as possible. Harmony means comfort, safety and survival. Sounds simple doesn't it – resolve conflict as quickly and kindly as possible for the good of both of us and 'get back to grazing' as Linda Kohanov so nicely puts it.

In conflict resolution we are occasionally faced with a choice. Do we prioritise immediate results over relationship? Well in some cases the answer is yes. If we are riding on the road and a logging truck approaches with exhaust brakes on full growl, after our horse has just shied into the middle of the road because of a killer turkey lurking in the toetoe, then we need to forgo politeness for survival and get off the road by means fair or fowl (yes, terrible pun, please forgive me). If our 'Mutual Trust Account' is well in the black a sharp kick and a firm tug on the reins will not send us into debt.

But these circumstances are the exception. In general we can resolve conflict in a win-win way by being fair, clear and consistent regarding our boundaries and expectations and by taking responsibility for what we bring to the relationship moment to moment.

Having clear and consistent boundaries avoids entrapment i.e. you don't show your horse how to treat you and then get annoyed when they treat you in a way you don't like. Harmony is not possible without boundaries.

Without boundaries we are setting ourselves up to become reactively fearful, frustrated, angry or resentful.

It's very difficult to embody the generosity of spirit that is necessary for harmony, when we are experiencing these unpleasant feelings.

Why do we feel like this around our horses when we love them? Welcome to your human-ness...self-identity driven aspirations, beliefs, judgements, comparisons, competitiveness, insecurities...and now conflict resolution falls into the 'intellectually simple but not easy to embody' category of life challenges...

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#### **Warning: Ego gone rogue**

We all have self-identities. This is our own personal PR department managing how we wish to be seen by others. But – and it's a big BUT – our self-identities can go all 'Kardashian' on us and drown out the guidance of our true-self. I fondly think of this as an 'ego gone rogue' (like a defecting secret agent) and it can show up in a combination of two ways – acting from a place of superiority or inferiority. Neither of which our horse can connect with harmoniously because it's not the real us. The real kicker is it happens at an unconscious level so we can get 'puppeted' by our ego and make some pretty cringe-worthy decisions when it's driving our priorities.

Poor old ego gets a bad rap. We need it help us realise we have free will choice. But, when it takes free will to the extreme of feeling disconnected from all other living beings, things go astray.

When our ego is doing a superiority dance we are likely to seek admiration and act with entitlement, judgement, aggression, resentment, defensiveness, contempt, disdain, insensitivity and condescension (not exactly what you are looking for in a friend). We tend to be critical and bullying towards others. An ego on an inferiority trip is less commonly seen towards horses – humans usually think they are superior to other species. It is more likely to show up as pity seeking, shame, guilt, boundarylessness and being apologetic. In this case we tend to be critical and bullying towards ourselves.

Either way they are all flavours of fear as our unbalanced ego is trying to hustle for self-worth by getting it from other people rather than feeling inherently worth of love and belonging. As far as our horse-human relationship is concerned we are not in harmony with ourselves so relationship harmony just doesn't add up: *Human energy with any flavour of fear + Horse energy ≠ Harmony*. So what are we to do? Would we want to connect with someone when their ego is running the show? No, and neither do our horses.

### **Save me from myself – I am getting in my own way to harmonious connection**

The first step is to know what skills we are trying to master. Being our True-Selves roughly translates into being in the 'now' moment and embodying love. This is not the dreamy Disney, soft focus kind of love – this the equally fierce and tender kind that self-aware, self-loving mature adults embody. A much more resilient and powerful kind of love. Love that protects the vulnerable, respects all life and feels the unity of existence. This is the love that fuels wholehearted horse-human connection.

"A horse will only bond voluntarily & devotedly with a truly adult human being who is conscious & internally controlled, authentic & fully responsible for all his or her actions." Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling

As an Animal Communicator I get to hear the horse's side of how it feels to try and connect with a human who is not embodying love. For some sensitive horses it is so frightening that they will bolt, buck and kick out to distance themselves from 'cardboard cut-out' people i.e. people whose nurturing heart energy is absent. Some horses can tolerate their humans living in their heads and rocking out their ego projections, some simply can't.

### **Steps to developing a harmony habit**

Seeking harmony is a choice that we get to make each and every moment we are with our horses – a way of thinking, feeling and acting – a habitual way of being. Like any habit, the skills need to be understood, then embodied and then practiced, until the new habit become second nature.

#### **Step 1: Embodying harmony begins with self-awareness**

We often don't even realise we are defending our self-identity and we can't change what we don't know about. From the list above you can see fear has many faces. For example we might think we are being compassionate when we come to our horses apologising for the way the people have treated them. But by doing this we are living in the past and pity won't inspire a horse to trust you in the present moment, luckily 'being love' will.

Another common scenario is having hard and fast goals. As a result we are not taking their state into account –

maybe today is not the day to master something new. In a harmonious relationship the needs of both are taken into account.

#### **Step 2: Embrace reality warts and all**

When we want the present moment reality to be any different from what it is right here, right now we are in denial and harmony is not possible. Using 'wishful thinking' to create change is not effective. We need to get real with what's right in front of us or underneath us, otherwise you are trying to find a solution for a fantasy problem not the real one.

#### **Step 3: Be self-supportive**

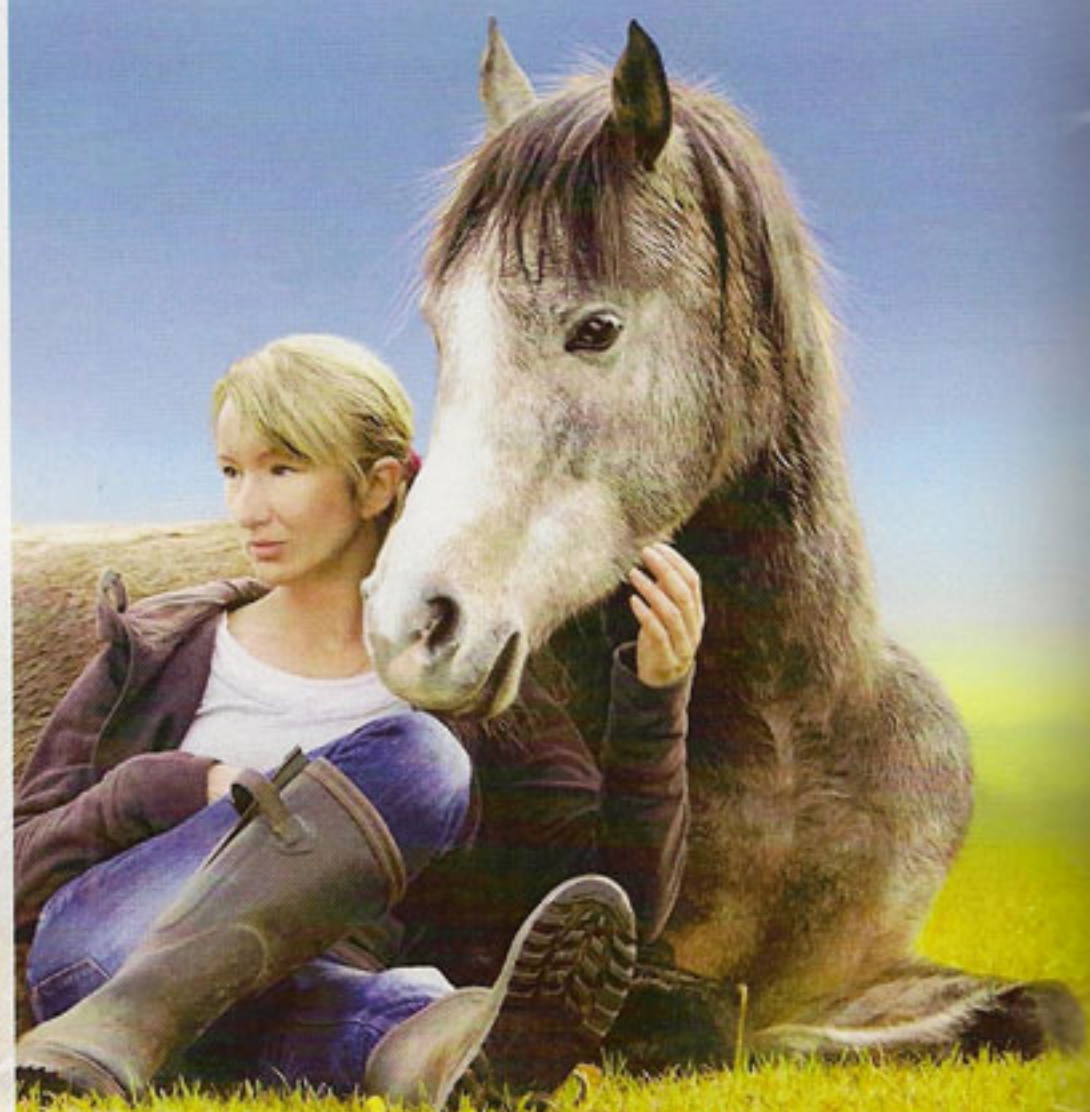
So once we have become self-aware and embraced reality we can then self-support. Self-supporting means we are compassionate towards ourselves when we are vulnerable, yet we are always seeking a solution rather than obsessing over a problem. Our subconscious mind can work with "what can I do to help my horse find calm" but it can't resolve "why is my horse so uptight".

Our subconscious mind is the ultimate solution seeking mechanism if we direct its creativity appropriately.

Be warned though - if we give it a juicy problem to contemplate it will find all sorts of reasons for the problem but no solutions...not very useful!

#### **Top tip**

Becoming self-aware, embracing reality and self-supportive



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is easy when we are calm but what about when we are mentally and emotionally 'bucking and bolting'? The most effective practical step we can take is to take slow, deep belly breathes – focusing on our breathing calms our nervous system so mental, emotional and physical balance can be restored.

When we are mainlining adrenaline we are 5 times stronger but 5 time more stupid! Adrenaline gives us access to the physical strength to fight or flight at the expense of creative solution seeking. If you can't find calm breath in the current situation then you need to change circumstances as quickly as practical so you can. That may mean putting your horse in a yard and sitting on a hay bale for 5 minutes or getting a supportive friend to be there with you – their

presence alone may help you maintain your calm breath.

Being self-supportive may also mean that, after a fall, you give yourself permission to rebuild trust slowly – sometimes even the thought of riding can send our nervous system into a spin. You may need to just be together on the ground first. For example, sitting quietly in a chair in the paddock with your horse can do wonders for your connection (don't worry about what the neighbours think – your harmonious connection is more important).

If you feel safe, then move on to riding whilst being led. Being self-supportive is the only way to restore real confidence rather than the 'fake it until you make it' kind. Your horse knows if you are faking confidence anyway and will often respond by being nervous as a result. We take responsibility for guiding our horse safely within, what must seem to them a crazy human world, so us finding our calm confidence is essential for the horse to find theirs. ■

**Disclaimer:** If your horse is exhibiting dangerous behaviour that is beyond your experience to resolve please consult a kind and knowledgeable equine professional for assistance. Feeling fearful due to a physical threat to your well being is valuable – it keeps us safe. Feeling vulnerability due to a psychological threat to our self-identity and belief systems is normal, but if we don't challenge this it keeps us small, disconnected and unfulfilled – this is the type of fear I can help you grow through. Confidence is a learnable skill. Harmonious Connection is a choice.

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