

Gentle Bodywork: the Best, Hands Down!

*a group interview with
Wendy Wolf, Kendra Laughery,
Barb Riffle, Colette Bolster,
Stefanie Reinhold,
Candy Beauchamp, and
Sherry LaMarche*

Why horses need bodywork

Photo by Nancy McCurdy, www.nancymccurdyphotography.com

Horses can be anything but calm and gentle, yet hands-on bodywork that is gentle seems to have the best results with these beasts. Why do horses need bodywork, and what kinds are helpful? We were able to connect with seven of the many bodyworkers who will be speaking at the Holistic Horse Fair, and here is some of what they had to say.

The consensus seems to be: *Gentle is best.*

Gentle bodywork techniques they use:

Colette Bolster - The Equine Touch

Wendy Wolfe - CranioSacral Therapy

Stefanie Reinhold - Integrated Equine Performance Bodywork™, the "Masterson Method™"

Kendra Laughery - a variety of techniques to best suit each horse's needs: Acupressure, Myofascial Release, Joint Yoga, and/or Energy Work

Barbara Riffle - Massage, Myofascial Release, Reiki, Hands on Healing, Acupressure

Candy Beauchamp - Equine Muscle Release Therapy, CranioSacral

Sherry LaMarche - Massage, Acupressure, Reiki, Microcurrent (Alpha-Stim), Raindrop, and Quantum Biofeedback

Which do you think is the most gentle on the horse?

Colette: Equine Touch, when done correctly, is so gentle on the body - it's so gentle that it does not tire me out to work on many horses in one afternoon. I actually feel that I get something back for myself when I work on horses with it.

Wendy: Both are very gentle but I believe CranioSacral is a bit gentler than the myofascial release.

Kendra: Acupressure and JointYoga are the gentlest techniques I have found yet. They are highly effective and the horses get quiet and 'soak it all up'.

Stefanie:

Gentle to me means actively paying attention to the horse's limits, reactions and responses and being guided by the horse. Therefore gentle could on occasion be a rather high pressure touch, if that is what the horse is asking for. The Masterson Method™ is built around the principle of circumventing the horse's flight instinct and giving him nothing to brace against by creating trust almost instantly. The foremost advantages of 'gentleness' - being in tune with the horse - is that it creates trust and enables the horse to relax. Only a relaxed horse can actively release tension. It is to help the horse actively release the tension, rather than "do massage to" the horse. In addition to being extremely effective, it's also the most rewarding experience, due to the high degree of constant horse/practitioner dialogue and subsequent trust building and bonding.

Candy: The horse is my guide and will dictate which modality I choose. It is my responsibility as a facilitator to trust my intuition and follow its guidance as to what it is the horse is needing at that particular time.

What are the advantages of a gentle technique?

Colette: Anytime that you can address pain and discomfort on a horse without causing worry, you get less defensive behavior by the animal with the ability to address even sensitive areas.

Wendy Wolfe: The horse's body has its own inner wisdom and wants to return to a state of balance. When we approach our work with gentleness and intention for balance, the body does the work. This way we are not forcing our own agenda on the healing process but allowing the best possible course of healing for the horse to occur.

Barb Riffle: For horses with neurological conditions such as EPM, or with history of strokes, seizures, or narcolepsy, or even just sensitive horses, it is an effective way to facilitate healing.

Kendra: A gentle technique is extremely effective at working with the body's natural abilities to heal itself. I am able to 'feel' more of the body's responses. There is a shift that comes when doing gentle techniques and you just seem to melt with the horse. Horses are very intuitive and sensitive animals and I feel that it doesn't always take rough massages to get an impact. I find that horses can have great changes occur with the most gentle of techniques. Though most horses relax with bodywork, it seems that there is more of a sense of relaxation and peace with a more gentle approach.

Candy: With gentle programs there is no deep tissue disruption; therefore the muscles will be less likely to tense and the body to repel the touch. When you go in gently, and softly ask permission, take your time, the body welcomes you and you experience melding. Melding is where your hands become one with the horse.

Sherry: One of the best advantages is that the horse's natural resistance will soften quicker once they trust that what you are doing won't hurt them. Their body can easily brace and tighten if your approach is too aggressive.

How important is regular gentle bodywork?

Colette: I think regular bodywork is always great - but the term "regular" won't always mean the same frequency. It is great for just regular maintenance for a horse in an average work schedule just to help with relaxation and suppleness. The frequency would not be near as important for that type of horse, compared to a horse who is dealing with some type of pain or long term problem and is trying to get back to a more balanced state within its body. I have also found that a horse who has developed trust issues with people and emotional baggage from bad experiences can really turn their hearts and minds around with regular sessions.

Wendy Wolfe: We are constantly asking our horses to use their bodies in ways that are less than natural, carrying us with metal in their mouth and trying to keep their balance with our weight. Because of this, gentle bodywork becomes very important to help them stay flexible and most importantly, comfortable.

Kendra: I feel that regular work is vital to any athlete or individual under stress. Every horse is an individual and 'regular' will vary from one horse to the next. One horse may need work once every four weeks and the next can go for six weeks before needing work again. I try to let the horse and rider gauge how often he needs work.

Stefanie: Horses are nature's perfect athletes. However, they were not by nature designed what we ask them to do. Carrying riders or pulling loads can put a strain even on a healthy and well con-

ditioned horse. Once tensions manifest in key areas of the horse's anatomy, performance declines and is often addressed as a training issue. Keeping the horse supple and comfortable, means keeping the horse able to perform at his best while feeling 'happy' and content. I always say "only well horses perform well". The first and foremost precondition for wellness is relaxation.

How do you gauge progress and improvement?

Answers included: obvious signs that the horse is releasing restrictions, the performance improves, increased range of motion; assessments before and after (visual observation, checklist/chart, palpation, behavior, emotion) reveal progress; owner feedback, favorable responses from the horse, "feel" of muscle tone/ absence of spasms, symmetry, change in reactivity to touch, behavior improvement

What hinders progress?

Almost anything and everything can hinder progress. If the issue that caused the problem in the first place has not been resolved, progress is definitely inhibited, such as unbalanced hooves, a poor fitting saddle/ tack, poor nutrition, an unbalanced rider/ bad hands, dental issues, the horse's living environment, spending 12-18 hours in a stall. also hinders progress. Pharmaceuticals can get in the way of the body's natural ability to heal itself. Sometimes the owners do not give the horse the time it takes for the modalities to work in the body. Owners/ trainers push too far too fast. Every part of the horse must work in sync.

What responses and reactions from the horse do you commonly see when performing gentle bodywork on them?

Colette: I see relaxation of the body and mind, exhibited by head and neck dropping down, eyes softening and/or closing; the typical licking and chewing response seen during training; frequently horses begin itching their legs with their noses; some horses begin to stretch themselves; some horses go off to a corner and stand quietly by themselves and "zone"; some even lie down and take a nap.

Wendy: Typically, licking and chewing, large open-mouth yawning and stretching of the jaw, a change in breathing, stretching and a very relaxed demeanor. At times I have seen very odd behavior as the horse actually recreates the trauma that created the restriction as part of the releasing process.

Barb: I look for the horse to start relaxing with the head lowering, yawning, eyes softening, dropping a hip as well as the stifle relaxing. The horse stretching, along with range of motion in the limbs as they reposition their legs under their body as I release different muscle groups. Horses who have not had bodywork may at first be apprehensive but almost immediately relax and enjoy the session.

Kendra: Horses will yawn, lick and chew, sigh, and take deep breaths as they are worked on. Sometimes they blink multiple times in a row, roll their eyes back into their head a bit, stretch body parts, or even help you work on them. They will 'scratch' acupressure points.

Stefanie: I categorize 2 types of responses: Reactivity and Release. Reactivity is a response that happens due to my touch and tells me that 'there is something going on'. This could be a guarded look, change of breathing, tensing up, excessive blinking of the eyes, crinkling the nostrils etc. When I encounter this type of reaction, I stay in the area and see if I can elicit the second type of reaction - a release - through bodywork. Release is a response that happens due to the release of tension in the horse's body. These releases are

often expressed as licking and chewing, softening of the eye, sighing, head shaking, yawning etc. I see both types of reactions from horses during every bodywork session.

What do you think these responses indicate?

Colette: I feel that horses can feel the changes happening inside of them - it feels good, it feels different. It seems that they're "thinking" about it. It seems to bring awareness to the horse, either all over or to a particular part of a body.

Wendy: That they are releasing the restrictions and their body is returning to a place of homeostasis.

Barb: A resetting of the nervous system, improved circulation clearing toxins, as well as endorphins being released to help facilitate the muscles to regain proper elasticity and lengthening.

Kendra: I feel that these responses indicate that they are relaxing, releasing restrictions, and letting go of past traumas. I think they are feeling a positive change throughout their bodies.

Candy: horses will yawn, and get droopy eyes, but the biggest response I've had is when the horses lay down and take a brief nap to promote the healing. It is almost always where the horse will follow me with his eyes or turn his head to see what I am doing, and when I am finished most horses will touch my face with a very gently touch as if to say "thank you". Horses that move away, or get a bit nervous are telling the practitioner that the touch needs to be lighter, or that it's the wrong modality and changes need to be made.

What feedback have you gotten from their caregivers, handlers, and riders?

Colette: Depending on the reason I was called to see the horse, it can really vary. I've worked on multiple horses who were having problems taking a particular lead during the canter - most report an ability to pick up that lead the very next ride. Many horses being ridden show increased suppleness with the very next ride. I've had horses who were previously just crabby all the time just have a general better attitude and nature. Horses who had been tossing and twisting their neck during riding stop doing it. Horses who had started bucking quit bucking. Horses who previously just had an unwillingness to go forward, both on the ground and in the saddle, just seem lighter and more forward. I've worked on a horse during the actual dental visit and he could not relax his mouth with the speculum and the dentist could not achieve the work he wanted to do. By doing ET moves on and around his TMJ, the horse relaxed instantly and quit chewing and the job could finally be done. The list just goes on and on!

Barb: The movement of the horse has improved, a lessening in pain along with a better quality of living. Performance horses again being ridden and shown, sometimes at a level they had not been able to do before.

Kendra: Horses are more relaxed, have more fluidity, more willingness. Horses are recovering quicker from high stress situations like shows or injury that kept them stall bound.

Stefanie: Most people are surprised how cooperative their horse is.

What can caregivers do to help the horse in between GBW sessions?

Colette: Depends... Some horses will just need to have time off from performing and riding. I think one of the most important things an

owner can do is to make sure any of the previously mentioned hindrances to progress are taken care of. I actually encourage owners to just learn the bodywork for themselves and use it on their horses regularly and just call me if they get stuck on an issue.

Barb: Part of my bodywork session is spent teaching owners how to do their own bodywork, specifically geared to their own horses' needs. A few key areas done on a regular basis will help facilitate the healing that is started during the initial session.

Sherry: Learn some basic massage and bodywork techniques and practice them on their horse between sessions, or weekly.

Candy: Follow the instructions the practitioners have given them. If there are restrictions to riding or trimming, for example, then do your best as an advocate to follow the advice of the practitioner. The instructions are for the good of the horse, and to give them the time they need to absorb the work. Owners need to understand that in the four days the horses are off from work, they are healing, and will not lose their condition in those days.

Are there bodywork techniques that can cause harm to the horse?

Colette: I believe that any bodywork can be done too harshly, too deep, too rough, too forceful for the body to accept. Yes, it is easy to overstretch a horse if you are not trained in body movement. Anything that is forceful has the potential for harm.

Barb: Any bodywork can cause harm if it is done in an area that has trauma, swelling, fractures, cancer, or infection among other things. Having basic bodywork knowledge is key to enabling an owner to be effective in a healing session.

Kendra: There are certain acupressure points that should not be used during pregnancy, as they can stimulate birth. As a general rule, I will avoid acupressure when horses are very ill and/or have cancer. I want to support the body but veterinary care must come first and owners and veterinarians must have a complete understanding of acupressure prior to session. I try not to do acupressure near meal time, breeding time, or exercise time; the body needs time to adjust to the shifts that occur with acupressure and it puts a strain on their system to try to adjust to bodywork followed by rigorous work. I will not do acupressure near any fractures, for obvious reasons.

Stefanie: Any technique that is not guided by the horse's responses can be harmful to the horse. The most commonly misunderstood bodywork technique, in my opinion, is simple stretching. You can probably not do much wrong with active carrot stretches, where the horse dictates the amount of stretch. However, a passive stretch - where the handler dictates the amount of stretch - can, especially on a 'cold' horse, result in soft tissue damage.

Sherry: Deep muscle work on an injured area can do further damage. Also in acupressure there are forbidden points to use in pregnancy.

Are there times and situations when bodywork should not be performed? If so, why?

Colette: I would not want to work directly over a fresh wound area, swollen, cut, etc. But many times, being able to address the rest of the body can help release tension due to an injury and speed the healing process along. There are also a couple moves that I would not do on a pregnant mare or an acute neurological issue. And always, if the horse's veterinarian feels it is not OK.

Stefanie: Equine massage/ bodywork is mainly a wellness modality. It is meant to be performed on the healthy horse. If there is any doubt regarding the physical health of a horse, the responsible practitioner needs to obtain the owner's confirmation, that the vet approves of the bodywork and – ideally – obtain guidance from the vet as to the extent of the bodywork. Bodywork should never be misunderstood as a 'healing' method or used to 'treat' any illnesses. This is the realm of the vet. In addition, one should obtain vet OK to perform bodywork on pregnant mares and never work with an overheated, exhausted, dehydrated or otherwise overstressed animal.

Candy: Keep the vet in the loop - remember that none of these modalities are to replace veterinarian care, but to work in conjunction with their care for best results.

Sherry: I would not do a full body massage on a horse who is fighting an issue like strangles, or influenza, as the liver and the immune system are already working hard to clear the body and don't need more toxins to deal with. Since massage can loosen toxins in tissues you want the eliminative organs in a position to be able to clear anything loosened by the massage. That's why you are always told to drink a lot of water after a massage.

Do you think one needs a special talent for being a bodyworker?

Colette: If loving horses and wanting them to feel the best that they can be is a talent, then yes. If it's not a natural thing at first, with desire, a good heart, good instruction, and experience, I know it can be learned by anyone.

Wendy: I think the most important aspect of being an effective bodyworker is to understand that you are assisting the body to heal itself. You are not "fixing" something but gently guiding the wisdom of the body back to its natural state of balance.

Barb: Anyone with the desire to heal can be a bodyworker. Some people may have a natural talent towards healing but all of us are born with the aptitude to share healing with others. It is more about your focus and intention to heal than having a special talent. Special talent may make it easier for a person to learn and to work successfully, but dedication, knowledge, and desire to learn are just some of the tools that anyone can use to learn to help their own equine.

Kendra: Yes and no. Anyone can provide body work for horses if they are doing it with positive intention. Education is very important, but so is following your intuition. I do feel that acupressure can be applied from caregivers to their own horses under guidance from someone more experienced in the field. Though technique may be easy, understanding what you are influencing, how it works, and possible contraindications is very important to a safe and successful session.

Stefanie: No. One needs to develop sensitivity, respect for the horse and a true intention of aiding the horse's wellness. Everything else is technique that can be learned.

Candy: No, but a practitioner should be open in mind and spirit and allow the work to come from the heart, not from an ego.

Sherry: Not a special talent, but a special mindset that is focused on helping the horse relax. The more grounded a person is, the easier it seems for the horse to trust and accept.

Do you think horse caregivers and handlers should learn to do some kind of bodywork, and why?

Colette: Most definitely, yes! They are with the horse day in and day out. They already have their hands on the horse for other purposes. They can help maintain a horse through everyday situations. And more importantly, it's a gift they can give back to the horse for all that horse does for them!

Wendy: It creates a tremendous connection between the horse and human while allowing the human to give back for all the horse has given them. It also creates a greater awareness of the condition of the horse's body which is important to know before you ride or ask other tasks of your horse.

Barb: The person who knows the horse the best is the owner. He is the one who knows how that horse has been used, what kind of injuries have occurred in the past or recently, and when the horse is not acting or feeling as it normally does and may be in pain. With routine bodywork, you can maintain your horse's health, vitality, and longevity by staying on top of his physical needs.

Kendra: Yes - very helpful to know; can be very beneficial to do while you are waiting for your veterinarian to arrive or when a professional may not be reachable. One must always keep their safety and the safety of the horse in mind.

Stefanie: Absolutely. Not only can caregivers and handlers immediately help a horse overcome tension and contribute to the horse's wellbeing, but it also is such an effective trust-building process that yields immediate fruit by improving the relationship with the horse instantly.

Candy: Yes, but only a few moves that will offer relief in emergency situations. Having some basic knowledge of any bodywork will help the horse until the vet arrives.

Sherry: It's a great way to create a trusting relationship with your horse, and can also be great injury prevention since your hands will notice any change in musculature which could be a problem; and while helping your horse's circulatory and elimination systems as well. ♡♡

Natural Horse Magazine thanks you all for participating in this group interview. See you at the Holistic Horse Fair!

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For more information on each of these speakers, see pages [53-54] in this issue.