

Achieving Response, Gait and Confidence through Relaxation
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What is relaxation?

It is the relaxed state in which you are less tense or rigid. It is a lengthening that characterizes inactive muscle fibers or muscles. It is a way of being less severe or stringent and to make one soft throughout the body. This does not mean to the point of being sloppy and /or sagging in the saddle.

Why do we need to be relaxed?

Your body (not a bit spurs or whip) is the most important element of communication one has with a horse. Think of your body as the energy source that sends signals:

- A. Directly to the horse
- B. Through an aid (such as from the reins to the bit)

To achieve maximum communication with the horse you must understand and be aware of your own body and what you're doing with it. Riders, who maintain what I call “the unconscious state” yet still expect a horse to do everything they want, will never get the top performance from a horse. And this expectation will keep a rider from advancing in their skills.

Learning and understanding how your own body works will lead to understanding how your horse's does as well. In both our bodies and the horses, the skeletal system is the frames work. The joints are connectors, shock absorbers or linkages. The tendons and ligaments work as connectors and cords. The muscles are the source of energy. All of this is governed by the central nervous system.

Tightening and relaxing muscles throughout our bodies also does the same to the horse. When we ride tense and un-relaxed our horse becomes tense and when we relax so will the horse.

Another example of our muscle use affecting the horse's muscle use, is when a horse responds to various signals we may apply. When we tighten our legs muscles to signal a horse to go forward it causes the horse to engage its muscles to respond. When we relax body muscles to settle in the seat as when asking for a halt the horse also relaxes its muscle to achieve the signaled response.

It is also very common to see horses react in two other ways in regards to misuse of our body muscles, without us realizing why it is happening.

1. The first reaction is the numb horse. It is very common for some horses that have a rider that is keeping constant leg pressure applied with no release or the legs constantly moving in a kind of chicken wing flapping motion. These types of horse become desensitized to the constant stimulation or pressure applied with no clear meaning to the

horse. This is a rider error not a horse error.

2. The second type of response from a horse with the same type of rider muscle application is tension building in the horse. A horse can become hard to control or actually reach an uncontrollable state. The second response is rather common in riders that tend to be nervous, fearful or high strung. It is important to understand these different degrees of muscle engagement, the control we have over them when signaling correctly or incorrectly. Understanding this puts you well on the way to the best possible communication with a horse.

Getting a grip of that nervous system!

As a teacher I see the biggest blockage from achieving relaxation is a rider overcoming a mental state that keeps them from relaxing.

Most Common Possible Elements:

Fear issues

Personal insecurity

Ego issues

Controlling behavior issues

Our life and experiences can affect how we use and transfer energy to our bodies and this affects how we ride a horse. It can be these very issues that keep one from being an effective rider. I'm not saying to change who you are. But be aware of these issues, find some understanding, control or overcome them when working with our horses if it is interfering. It is possible for each and every rider to do so, if they so choose. I find that often fear is also the reason for the other elements of insecurity, ego and controlling behavior. These issues can be what affect the very nervous system that controls our body movements. Transferring this energy to our horse's, often causes them to react incorrectly to the signals one may be trying to give. It is a delight for me to witness students learning to overcome personal issues (and grow by way of learning), relax and properly communicate through their bodies to a horse. In many instances this also has helped them to better communicate in their everyday lives with other people.

What can relaxation do for your horse?

First it will help your horse to relax. A relaxed horse becomes more responsive to your signals. This makes for a lighter, softer horse to work with and one that becomes much more responsive instead of defensive. When a horse will relax under a rider it says that a horse is trusting and confident in the rider to have control and be willing to follow whatever instructions a rider communicates. Even in a horse with brio such as a Peruvian Paso, or at a gait of speed in a racking horse, there is an element in those top horses that shows confidence and yet relaxation while performing at peak speeds and energy levels. It shows in how they move, with confidence and easy in their carriage and gait. Relaxation is the key in finding the "looseness element" of a

running walk. It is also paramount for achieving collection from the back to front of any horse. Again relaxation varies in degree for the horse as well as the rider. Relaxation is also a very important tool in re-training a problem horse.

Exercises to Help a Rider Learn to Relax and/or Build Confidence

Getting Ready.

Chances are many of you have either already worked with some of these exercises or seen them elsewhere. I often find that they are being executed incorrectly. Some of the most advanced riders I know still utilize these exercises from time to time just to reconnect with their bodies while astride and relieve any tension that can come with an intense training schedule. These are also very helpful in learning to find and maintain balance astride (while not relying on the reins or saddle for balance).

Using the right horse is important, a quiet horse that is familiar with working on a lunge line quietly and controlled. It is important that you choose a time when all is calm and not distracting with dogs or children around, machinery running or distractions of any kind. One's first needs to learn to relax in a relaxing environment, so when you have mastered it within your own body you can utilize it in any situation that may arise.

Use music, it also helps a rider relax and get into flow with the exercises, many horses seem to enjoy it also.





Get your horse accustomed to having you move your arms out and away from your body. Do it slowly and softly, not fast and jerky. You may just want to raise and lower them half way out at first and increase the height of lift as the horse is comfortable. Get them used to one arm at a time moving out to each side, in front of you and behind you.

On the Lunge Line

The person handling the lunge line needs to be calm and able to maintain calm, relaxed, even voice for giving instructions. These are not to be done fast or like a military exercise. It is to help one learn to relax while astride and a good partner on the ground is a key factor in achieving this for you.

Start on the lunge with the reins in hand, incorporate using more leg signals to keep the horse out on the lunge line and bending in nice round circles with no flat sides. When you are comfortable with this then it's time to move on and tie off the reins. Do so safely, so they do not interfere with you or the horse. One may want to break this up to many sessions over time and build as you find comfort with each exercise.



Working at a walk let your hands rest on your thighs. Keep your hands soft not tense, move on when ready to just letting them hang at your sides relaxed.

Start by using one arm at a time. Have your ground person calmly give you instructions as to which arm to lift and lower.



Example instructions;

1. Right out to the side
2. And down
3. Left out to the side
4. And down
5. Right in front
6. And down
7. Left in front
8. And down
9. Right behind
10. And down
11. Left behind
12. And down

The arms and hand lifts should be done softly and relaxed with the fingers extended very much like one would in a ballet dance, let those fingers stretch. When bring the arm and hand down do it softly and slowly not just dropping them, let the finger follow through relaxed as well. You can have you ground person vary the length of time for each hold up before bring the limb back down to the relaxed hanging at the side position. Work both directions on the lunge line. Start slow and then increase the rhythm as comfortable.



Next phase is the use of lifting both arms and hands. Relaxing in the down positions at first between each lift and eventually working with the arms up and moving around your body without the down, relaxed position after every lift but only occasionally. Work both directions on the lunge line.



When you have the previous mastered and are comfortable you may want to try it without the use of stirrups.

Over time and as confidence and skill are built one can start working at doing these exercises at your intermediate gait, if you have a horse that can hold it without bit control. The most skilled of riders actually advance to doing this at a canter and it is lovely to watch but this can be many years in getting to that point and may just not be the level all desire.

As one works through these exercises you should also take notice: when you lift an arm out to the side that it tips the pelvis, the more you reach up or when one lifts the arms forward and up it shifts the whole pelvis forward. At some point also work at this pelvic shifting without lifting your arms or tipping the whole upper body. It is important to feel what your body does when to bring your arm or arms back down to the relaxed at the side position. When bring both arms down to relaxed position is using the same settling in the saddle and relaxing signal one would utilize in a halt or a half halt. The shifting of the pelvis from one side or the other is used for many exercises in an advanced horse such as flying lead changes or replacing the use of the off side leg when riding side saddle.

Relaxing for the Horse

Once you as the rider have mastered the element of relaxation, it is time to transfer that energy to your horse and ask them to relax as well.



Ask your horse to go at a relaxed dog walk to start and later this can be transferred as well to a slow flat walk. Remember stay relaxed yourself.



The next step would be to take one hand and start rubbing at the withers in a massaging motion. When the horse lowers the head just a bit release the hand and verbally praise the horse.



Once the horse is comfortable with the previous exercise and it's time to move the hand a bit more forward and massage with a bit more down pressure on the neck. When the horse drops more, release and reward verbally.



When a horse gets comfortable and understands that you are asking for them to relax and drop the head they actually will start to stretch and also reach to the bit. As in photo 3 D. The last is the total drop. I do not advise doing this in a grassy area; they would not be utilizing the exercise but taking the opportunity for a snack!

These are excellent exercises for relaxing the top line of the neck when working to relax and rebuilding muscle correctly on the horse that has been ridden in an over ventroflexed position and had built up unwanted muscle on the bottom side of the neck. This also helps to lift and strengthen weak or atrophied back muscles.

There are horse's out there that have been taught that relaxing is not allowed or asked for and some have no idea how to do that with a rider astride. Teaching a horse to do this can be a very important tool in achieving trust from a human again and reworking undesired muscle memory for re-building gait correctly.

Closing Statement

Utilizing relaxation to its many uses will take you and your horse to the best possible performance, be it on the trail or in the show ring. Relaxing will make you a better and more effective rider. It will open the horse up to you for understanding and accepting communication through signals. They will rely on your maintaining a relaxed energy when they are confronted in an uncomfortable situation for them. It is also the answer in helping so many troubled and problem horses. Relaxing is also a great tool in teaching ground work. Use it as body language from the ground when engaging and disengaging your own muscles to move a horse forward or asking them to slow down or ask for a halt in hand. Relaxing teaches us to use our whole body as an aid correctly and efficiently.