Understanding the use of Massage & Acupressure with Equine Performance Horses

“The Whole is different than the sum of its parts,” Aristotle

There are many perspectives when addressing “what is healthy,” and “what is illness.” Most often, when something is not functioning correctly, we look only at the presenting systems, and not at the whole. Good health, in general, is thought of as the absence of any symptom. By defining health in this manner, we are limiting our scope which leaves our treatments woefully inadequate. “Holistic,” by definition, means “relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Embracing a holisitic approach means changing our viewpoint from symptoms to defining health as a being in balance, encompassing physical, emotional, mental and energetic aspects of the being into an integrated, cohesive whole. When the system is unstable, symptoms begin to present themselves. The body, as a group of closely dependent systems, work as one to function most efficiently; when one is out of balance, the whole organism is then affected. When viewed in this manner, a symptom is merely a part of the whole picture, or put another way, one malfunction that will affect each system throughout the body.

The focus of the holisitic approach is to rebalance the body, by helping the systems find dynamic balance. A balanced state creates space for the body to heal itself. When looking to heal your horse holistically, massage and acupressure are tools that can assist in putting the horse back into dynamic balance in a non-invasive, gentle manner.

STRESS & INJURY

Repetitive exercises put stress on our horses’ bodies and minds. This stress, in turn, creates the first noticeable symptom appearing as a physiologic injury. Once injured, the body begins to compensate instantly, even for the smallest micro-lesion in a muscle fiber. The longer the injury or stressed muscle goes unnoticed, the greater the compensation. In injury, the body spends much of its time and energy protecting its “self;” pulling away from its balanced state to focus on the stressor. As we interfere, the horses’ body has to compensate with movement over stability. As stability decreases while the body attempts to heal itself, muscles start firing in abnormal patterns to protect the injury site, disrupting proprioceptor organs throughout the body.

The proprioceptor organs are a specialized group of nerve fibers that communicate between the central nervous system and the musculoskeletal system. As the body starts to function incorrectly, stride lengths decrease, shorter jump heights become more challenging, spins are slower, or leads are missed. This is normally when we get frustrated and misunderstand these signals as a refusal or as an inability to do the requested job. In addition, bodily fluids (blood or synovial fluid, for example) start to pool causing edema putting greater stress on surrounding tissues. From a holistic approach, the animal is no longer in balance both physically (from the initial injury), mentally (increased stress), or emotionally (increased anxiety) as it strives to reach the demands placed by us but cannot. From here, the imbalances begin to snowball.

MASSAGE & ACUPRESSURE MECHANICS

To assist an equine athlete in caring for itself and its ability to do its job, equine sports massage therapy maintenance is becoming increasingly more prevalent in competitive barns. Gaining legitimacy as part of pre- and post- event conditioning, sports massage can help muscles heal faster, increase range of motion[[2]](#footnote-2), and encourage movement of metabolic wastes. By reducing stress on the muscle fibers through manual manipulation, massage therapy can speed muscle recovery interrupting involuntary constrictions and restoring blood flow. As these systems regain balance, the disposition, or willingness, of the animal will improve, and anxiety or stress will decrease[[3]](#footnote-3).

Added to the benefits of equine sports massage therapy, equine acupressure can assist in what appears to be a more subtle manner. Using texts from thousands of years ago, acupressure works as a proven tool in the recovery of animals out of balance. Acupressure helps “restore, replenish and maintain”[[4]](#footnote-4) the animals’ systems in a natural, non-invasive manner creating health, as defined above. Eastern and Western medicines’ studies, as well as clinical observations, conclude that acupressure can facilitate in almost every system within the organism: circulatory, respiratory, immune, muscular, skeletal, endocrine, as well as emotional well-being. Acupressure is the invisible component that solidifies the physical component of massage therapy.

REHABILITATION

Introducing massage and acupressure into a rehabilitation situation is as equally beneficial as a maintenance regime. For instance, performance horses are prone to tendon and ligament injuries. In these instances, massage can relax the muscles attached to the tendons releasing additional strain on the tendon, acupressure can assist in strengthening the tendon and ligament health. The masseuse palpates the muscle tissue searching the structures for imbalances. Unlocking the corresponding muscle groups that facilitate a specific movement, releases not only the affected tendons, but also the surrounding structures allowing greater fluid flow.

The acupressure practitioner uses the concepts of the meridian system to encourage the body to heal itself. Selecting acu-points along the distressed meridian will encourage holistic balance and ease stagnation by moving bodily fluids within the horses’ systems. Circulation will release pressure caused by edema on the tendon sheaths and limit the potential for adhesions. Acupressure stimulates the immune system creating a stronger organism, uniting the core systems to strengthen the whole.

Merging massage therapy with acupressure for the management of the equine athlete can establish a new basis for what was previously considered healthy. The sooner the imbalances are noticed and addressed, the easier it is for you and your horse to regain previous performance levels. Combining these two therapies gives your performance horse a competitive edge over those using a single symptomatic approach. These tools are most effective when used pro-actively to find imbalances before symptoms occur. Maintaining a holisitic perspective, in combination with a good working relationship with the veterinarians is pertinent to supporting these horses. Your professionals: trainer, farrier, veterinarian, chiropractor, massage therapist and acupressure practitioner are all part of the team to help you and your horse reach your goals.

HOW, EXACTLY, CAN BODYWORK HELP?

Stretching: Passive and active stretching to avoid or repair probable injury sites

Post-surgical: to increase circulation and blood flow through and around incision sites reducing or removing edema

Stall rest: to assist in keeping the horse relaxed and quiet through long-term stall rest

Back to Work: when you get the green light to return to work, Massage & Acupressure can assist the body in ensuring correct muscle usage creating increased strength and flexibility for balanced recovery.

Reduction of recovery time: reducing edema, increasing fluid flows (blood, metabolic wastes, water), decreasing stress on muscles used for stabilization, creating symmetrically balanced musculature, and locating soreness or tightness to decrease potential for re-injury or additional injury.

1. www.Merriam-Webster.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Effects of Sports Massage on Athletic Performance and General Function*, Massage Ther. J., Summer 2002, p92. Results demonstrate an increase in stride length and corresponding decrease in stride frequency, concomitant with an increase in muscle diameter, following the use of sports massage techniques. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *A Preliminary Study on the Effect of Massage to Reduce Stress in the Horse*, J. Eq. Vet. Sci., Feb. 2004, p76.
Results demonstrate a statistically significant decrease in heart rate and significantly more positive behavioral response scores following massage [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To learn more about acupressure, visit Tallgrass Animal Acupressure Institute at www.animalacupressure.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)