

Emotional Fitness and Coregulation Skills for Equestrians, Pet Owners and Animal Advocates

By Linda Kohanov

Traditionally, riders have been told to never, ever, show fear to a horse. Life at the barn would be so much simpler if only we could comply with this age-old request. However, studies into the neurophysiology of emotion suggest that it's actually impossible to hide what you're feeling from your horse, or any other animal for that matter. This factor has implications for those who work in animal rescue organizations, and most certainly with the dogs, cats, birds, and other non-human companions who share your home.

For centuries, people have struggled to suppress negative emotions, to emphasize logic over feeling---as if emotions were by-products of an undisciplined mind or imagination run amok. Then scientists in the late-twentieth century discovered---much to their chagrin---that the human brain wasn't actually in charge of this process, not by a long shot. Work by Candace Pert, Ph.D. and other researchers active in the field of psychoneuroimmunology proved that the molecules carrying emotional information (called neuropeptides) are not only generated by the brain, but by sites throughout the body, most dramatically in the heart and the gut. Physiologists now know that the heart has its own mini-brain comprising tens of thousands of neural cells, and there are more neural cells in the gut than in the entire spinal column. As a result, both areas can act independently of the brain in gathering information and adapting to the environment. In this way, the body serves as a magnificent tuner, receiver and amplifier for all kinds of information. It feels, learns and has definite opinions that sometimes contradict the brain.

Think of your body as the horse that your mind rides around on. Like any horse, you can form a mutually respectful partnership with it, or you can rein it in and spur it on, refusing to listen to it, only to have it throw you during stressful situations and head for the hills when you need its cooperation most. What's more, when you're taught to focus exclusively on what an authority figure is saying, suppressing gut feelings and wildly fluttering heartbeats, your body's intuitive wisdom and natural warning systems are muzzled, allowing others to corral you for any number of purposes against your better judgment.

At the barn, your horse is paying attention to your body as if it *were* another horse. What you *think* you're communicating is much less important than what you're unconsciously conveying through heart rate, muscle tension, breathing, and the various emotions that cause or arise from those physiological responses to environmental and relationship challenges.

Four-Legged Empaths

As animals possessing extremely large and sensitive guts---and hearts for that matter---horses exhibit a prodigious talent for receiving and responding to emotional information. In order to survive, animals preyed upon in nature are especially sensitive to changes in the stance, heart rate and blood pressure of herd mates and predators *at a distance*. In the wild, for instance, horses,

zebras and deer will often graze relatively unconcerned as a lion who has recently eaten a big meal walks right through their pasture. Yet when an agile carnivore is on the prowl, the herd will scatter long before the cat can get so close.

The experience of living with human beings has given horses and other domesticated animals even more sophisticated skills. I've seen even the gentlest gelding become noticeably agitated when his handler wears a mask of confidence and well being to hide anxiety. It's as if this person appears out of focus to the equine awareness system. The body language of someone "putting on a happy face" is incongruent with the rise in blood pressure, muscle tension and emotional intensity transmitted unconsciously by an individual who's actually afraid, frustrated or angry. This person may be more of a danger to herself than others, but a skittish horse isn't likely to wait around and find out. Mainstream trainers explain this phenomenon by saying "the horse can smell your fear," but it's more subtle and complicated than that. A secure, well-cared-for animal will often relax the moment his owner simply acknowledges a hidden feeling---*even if it's still there*. Let me say it again: The emotion doesn't have to change in order for the horse to show at least some improvement. The handler just has to acknowledge what he or she is really feeling.

How is this possible?

Studies on the neurophysiology of emotion show that even human beings exhibit stress responses in the presence of incongruent people. In *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, emotional intelligence pioneer Daniel Goleman cites research proving that not only does a person's blood pressure escalate when he tries to suppress feeling, *the blood pressure of those interacting with him also rises*. Basically, unless you're a sociopath, your blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing intensify when you're frightened or angry, even when you're wearing your best poker face. It takes extra energy to hide these feelings, which adds to the anxiety radiating from your body, through whatever complex process scientists are only now beginning to uncover. Lie detector tests measure arousal fluctuations. Yet, you don't have to be hooked up to a machine to reveal a hidden state of mind. Living beings are hard-wired to transmit and receive this information at a distance. Our culturally-induced emphasis on verbal communication lessens awareness of this valuable information over time, but anyone who retains or reclaims use of this natural ability appears downright psychic compared to the rest of the population.

As animals who can be preyed upon in nature, the volume of this recently discovered "sixth" sense is turned way up in horses, who become noticeably agitated in the presence of people who are incongruent, who try to cover anger, fear, or sadness with an appearance of well being. This is not an equine judgment of our tendency to lie about what we're really feeling; it's a reflection of emotion's physiology---and its contagious nature. Horses show signs of stress when their human handlers try to suppress emotion, then calm down the moment the handler openly acknowledges that feeling. By making the fear or anger conscious, by becoming congruent, the handler effectively lowers his own blood pressure, even if only slightly. But it's enough to drop the horse's blood pressure in response, which the animal demonstrates by sighing, licking and chewing, and/or lowering his head.

The easiest way to become congruent in the presence of your horse, dog, cat or other animal is to admit (even at a whisper that no one else can hear) that you're afraid, angry, frustrated, or confused. Your companion won't understand the words, of course, but your body will register

positive physiological changes that all animals can read nonverbally, and he will be less likely to spook as a result.

The good news is that *authentic* positive feelings are contagious too. A person who truly feels peaceful in situations that unnerve others can have a calming effect on everyone around her. This is a key skill in becoming a great rider, animal rehab specialist, pet owner ---or effective leader of human beings for that matter.

A Surprising Study

Research into the human-equine relationship confirms that horses and riders don't have to *see* any evidence of movement or gesture to affect each other physiologically. While this may seem obvious when you're riding a horse---you can feel what's going on in his body and vice versa---emotions and sensations are contagious even when you appear to be walking calmly beside each other.

In my online course *Connections 101: Life Wisdom from the Herd*, my staff re-enacted a 2009 study published in *The Veterinary Journal*. Researchers from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences performed a simple yet elegant experiment designed to study the effect a nervous handler has on the heart rate of his or her horse. Twenty-seven horses of various breeds and ages were led or ridden at a walk by 37 amateur equestrians. Wearing heart-rate monitors, each team traveled a 30-meter distance between two cones a total of four times. Just before the final pass, however, the person was told that an assistant, who had been standing next to the path the whole time, would open an umbrella as the horse went by.

As it turns out, those scientific pranksters didn't even open the umbrella (as any equine liability insurance company would be relieved to know). Even so, the heart rates of both human and horse rose significantly as they passed the now suspect, inclement-weather savvy lab assistant. Even more remarkable, no behavioral differences were observed in either horse or handler when the animal was being led, though there was a tendency for riders to shorten their reins after the dreaded news was conveyed. So, especially in the case of people leading their equine companions, the mere human *thought* of the umbrella's spooking power was enough to raise the arousal of the handler and consequently, almost simultaneously, the *horse*, who I'm pretty sure would not have understood the experimenter's warning in Swedish, or any other spoken language for that matter.

Let's not mince words here. What we're talking about is a mild form of telepathy, which, I might add, comes from the same root as *empathy* and *sympathy*. Telepathy literally means *feeling at a distance*, pointing to what science now acknowledges as the contagious nature of emotion. Because we're methodically and quite relentlessly taught to dissociate from the environment and our own bodies, modern humans downplay rather than develop this ability, but the information still manages to leak through now and then in the form of "gut feelings" and other forms of intuition.

A Simple Method for Emotional Agility

So what in the world are we supposed to do with troublesome feelings if we can't actually hide them? As it turns out, we can look to horses for the answer. These highly sensitive animals use emotion as *information*. Rather than suppressing uncomfortable feelings or outlandishly expressing them, horses follow a simple four-point method that any human is smart enough to learn. They:

- 1.) Feel the emotion in its purest form.
- 2.) Get the message behind the emotion.
- 3.) Change something in response to that message.
- 4.) *Go back to grazing.* (Get back on task or back to enjoying life. Horses, in other words, don't hang onto the story, endlessly ruminating over the details of uncomfortable situations.)

By collaborating with the nonverbal wisdom of feeling (which includes not only emotions, but sensations, including shifts in blood pressure, heart rate and body posture), horses conserve energy for true emergencies. Let's look at the emotion of fear, nature's warning system. At a distance, horses can sense whether a lion is on the prowl or simply passing through. In the former case, the herd races to safety without hesitation. In the latter, alert yet relatively relaxed horses will often continue grazing as the cat saunters through the field on his way to an afternoon nap. These animals don't waste time fretting that they had to run from a predator, and they don't stay up all night questioning why God invented lions in the first place.

Same with anger: Horses use this momentarily uncomfortable rise in energy to help them set boundaries. A stallion may get a little feisty and try to push his mares around. If they're not in the mood for his shenanigans, they'll pin their ears and warn him to back off. If he doesn't listen, they'll become more emphatic, kicking out and squealing if necessary. Yet when he finally gives them space, they'll relax, joining him later for a nap under a favorite tree. These horses don't need hours of counseling to work out their resentment and disappointment. Both offender and offended get the message behind the anger, change something in response, let the emotion go, and resume their enjoyment of life.

As it turns out, letting the emotion go is easier than you might expect. Contrary to popular belief, fear, frustration, and anger are actually quite reasonable if you know how to work *with* them. When you get the message behind these "negative" feelings, and change something in response, they dissipate on their own. Psychotherapy and sainthood are not prerequisites for emotional mastery. The average person can learn the necessary skills in a weekend, and life itself provides plenty of practice. So-called "negative" emotions are actually course correcting signals: They have an uncomfortable charge to them because they are asking us to *change* something that we would neglect to alter if we felt peaceful, happy, or simply comfortable.

The problem is that most adults have been suppressing emotion for so long that these simple warnings have fused into monstrous complexes that truly are disturbing when they rear their ugly heads. We've grown up fearing feeling itself, and *that* is the root of our discontent. In *Connections 101*, I put this strange human habit into perspective by using the example of the oil light appearing under the speedometer of a teenage girl's first car. Rather than encouraging her to check the manual to see what it means, her parents strongly advise her to ignore it. A week later, she covers this deviant signal with duct tape and continues to drive around, hoping none of her friends will notice. She begins to smell smoke, but she's afraid to check under the hood and too embarrassed to bring the issue up at dinner. When the engine starts to blow, her father tells the

confused and frightened young woman that she'd better get control of that unruly vehicle, or else. In their purest forms, feelings are no more sinister or irrational than dashboard warning lights, and our attempts to reject them no less ridiculous.

Two Kinds of Fear

Expanding upon the natural emotional intelligence of horses, for instance, I realized that there are actually two kinds of fear. It's important, and ultimately empowering, to discern between an external threat in the environment, which is fear as nature's warning system, and the kind of fear I now distinguish as "vulnerability," which is an internal threat, a challenge to your self image, belief system, or comfortable habits. Performance anxiety belongs to the latter category.

Fear and vulnerability feel similar, and most people treat them the same, but each of these two emotions calls for a different response. With an external threat, you need to move to safety. With performance anxiety and other forms of vulnerability, you realize you're not in actual danger, but that circumstances are asking you to change your perspective, expand out of your comfort zone, and, quite possibly, experiment and/or make mistakes as you learn a new skill. Problems occur when people overreact as if their life is being threatened in response to the latter, and fail to realize their life *is* being threatened in the former. Take the 2009 financial crisis. Some of us were facing the very real threat of having our homes taken away from us. Others were dealing with the vulnerability of having to change the ways we do business, of having to step into the unknown and try something new. Similarly, with COVID-19, we must distinguish between threats to our safety (fear), and innovations we must make to our schools and workplaces during this challenging time (vulnerability).

Humans sometimes don't protect themselves when they should, and they often go into flight or fight mode when there's no real danger. It's as if some of us are more reactive and fearful of change or experimentation than of an actual physical threat. Horses, on the other hand, are highly adaptable to challenging conditions. If something threatens them, they run, or if cornered, fight. And then they go back to grazing. When change is on the horizon, they relax into it and adapt. If water and grass become scarce, they search for greener pastures with their family groups. There's a real sense of adventure in the herd when they move on, not resentment. Wild horses show incredible endurance migrating over vast distances precisely because they know how to enjoy, and be nourished by, the journey. Domesticated horses show similar levels of emotional agility--- unless they're habitually ridden by abusive, incongruent humans, confined, restrained, and kept from socializing with other horses---conditions that create extreme dissociation (the animal acts like a soulless machine) or hyper-vigilance (hair-trigger flight or fight responses associated in humans with abuse survivors and soldiers exhibiting post-traumatic stress disorder).

Regulating Stress in the Saddle

Secure, well-cared-for horses---like confident, well-adjusted humans---can actually calm others during stressful situations. They can "coregulate" the "dysregulated" nervous systems of others. These animals are worth their weight in gold on the trail and in the show arena where the line between fear and vulnerability can sometimes blur. Performance anxiety provokes a rise in the rider's own blood pressure that, in turn, increases the horse's blood pressure, making an insecure mount more likely to spook. To make matters worse, the stress levels of other horses and riders in

the arena can affect a hyper-vigilant horse most dramatically. At the very least, this rising tension makes it more difficult for human-equine teams to perform complex moves and transitions gracefully enough to win.

The key to turning this irritating, sometimes dangerous, feedback loop around lies in *consciously* capitalizing on the contagious nature of emotion and body sensation through the following steps.

1. **Stay congruent throughout the ride.** Over-emphasizing the body language associated with confidence and control---when you're actually feeling nervous---causes your blood pressure to rise even more dramatically and involuntarily, which is contagious to your horse. Consciously acknowledging fear or performance anxiety lowers your blood pressure slightly, even if the emotion is still there. (Remember studies show that suppressing emotion raises blood pressure in those interacting with a person trying to hide his or her emotions.)
2. **Get the message behind the emotion.** Distinguish between actual threats in the environment (fear as nature's warning system---the message: move to a position of safety) and internal threats (threats to your self image, belief system or comfortable habits---the message: your ego may feel threatened, but you're much more likely to win if you relax and enjoy the ride!) When you get the message behind the emotion, and change something in response to that message, your body will release the tension automatically. Your horse will mirror the release.
3. Because emotions and sensations are contagious, (in other words, the tension may not be originating in you), it's helpful to **"breathe into" any tension that arises in your body while becoming curious about the information it may hold.** Bracing against tension increases it, activating the sympathetic nervous system that increases heart rate, leading to flight or fight behavior. Breathing into the tension, followed by an even longer outbreath, activates the parasympathetic nervous system which decreases heart rate, supporting fluidity, focus, and a problem-solving mindset.
4. **Activate a coherent breathing signal through long, even in-breaths and out-breaths.** This helps your nervous system achieve a state of "relaxed alertness" that helps your mind to think more clearly and your body to respond more productively. In all of my workshops and in the *Connections 101* online course, I teach how to engage this highly productive form of breathing. I illustrate the physiological effects of this state, and show researched-based video of the most amazing benefit of all: *horses and other animals are attracted to humans who are in a state of coherence.* This state not only encourages horses to seek out your leadership and companionship, it coregulates their nervous systems into a more productive rather than reactive state.

Physiologically, breathing into troublesome sensations like tension, increased heart rate, or sudden increases in anxiety can result in the ability to loosen your spine, soften your clenched gut, release your jaw, etc.---without suppressing the concerns behind these sensations. Rather than bracing against the horse, sit deeper in the saddle, maintaining an agile, balanced position while becoming curious about what emotion or concern has emerged. This is counter-instinctual, and difficult to do at first, but the more you practice in less-stressful situations, the more likely you will be to make these physiological adjustments in more urgent situations.

Since strong, survival-based emotions are especially contagious, it's sometimes difficult to tell whether a sudden rise in blood pressure or tension originated in you or your horse. Don't worry

about “who started it,” especially in an emergency. Think in terms of “there’s fear present in this horse-human system,” and move to a position of safety.

It’s particularly dangerous to dissociate during a potential spook because if you go blank and numb, you leave the choice of what to do and where to go up to a frazzled horse. You avoid the haze of indecision, not by trying to disconnect from sensation overload, but by maintaining focus while *feeling* what’s happening and *using those feelings as information*. This obviously takes courage and practice, but it does become easier over time.

Working with Aggressive or Fearful Animals

A similar sequence can be used when interacting with fearful or aggressive pets and rescue animals.

1. **Stay congruent throughout the interaction.** Again, it’s important to understand that over-emphasizing the body language associated with confidence and control---when you’re actually feeling nervous---causes your blood pressure to rise, which is contagious to those around you. Consciously acknowledging fear, concern or performance anxiety lowers your blood pressure slightly, even if the emotion is still there. (Remember the study showing that suppressing emotion raises blood pressure in those interacting with a person trying to hide his emotions.)
2. **Get the message behind the emotion.** In some cases, you may have to do this on behalf of the animals you are interacting with. Two growling dogs, for instance, can escalate quickly, and cause your body to tense up as well. Is one dog, or both, asking for space, or trying to protect a toy or treat? Or are they concerned about a stranger dog walking through your yard, or the UPS man delivering a package? A number of training techniques teach dogs to more productively read and respond to shifts in the environment (fear as nature’s warning system, anger as a protection response---the messages: move to a position of safety, and/or protect), often by looking to their owners for reassurance and direction. The first step, however, can be as easy as speaking aloud the dog’s concern---with a tone of voice and body language that helps regulate the animal’s nervous system. You might say, “Oh yes, that’s the UPS man bringing us a package,” or “Sparky, that is your treat. Gimble needs to move away.” And then of course, you direct Gimble to move away. But, keep in mind, there’s a significant nonverbal element that keeps the situation from escalating.
3. **Because emotions and sensations are contagious, it’s tempting to tense up and begin shouting at the animal (the human version of catching a dog’s “growl”). It’s helpful instead to “breathe into” any tension that arises in your body, then direct a long outbreath and reassuring body language toward the dog.** Bracing against tension increases it, activating the sympathetic nervous system that increases heart rate, leading to flight or fight behavior in you and the dog. Breathing into the tension, followed by a longer outbreath, activates the parasympathetic nervous system in you both, which decreases heart rate, supporting fluidity, focus, and a problem-solving mindset.
4. **Activate the coherent breathing signal through long, even in-breaths and out-breaths.** This helps your nervous system achieve a state of “relaxed alertness” that helps your mind to think more clearly and your body to respond more productively. But you can coregulate the animal to do something similar by imagining that you are sending this coherent signal to your dog. As we’ll learn more specifically in **Connections 102** (coming

soon, still in production), it helps to imagine that as you breathe out, you are sending calm, supportive energy into your dog's heart and nervous system, and as you breathe in, you are drawing your dog's nervous energy into your strong, regulated heart, thus regulating you both. I actually learned this technique from a horse with an astonishing ability to regulate nervous humans and horses. For more information on this "heart-breathing technique," see an article I wrote at the following link: <https://eponaquest.com/beyond-words-art-science-sentient-communication/>

The Messages Behind Emotion

Through observing horses and doing plenty of follow-up research, I realized that there were predictable, quite rational messages behind "troublesome" emotions like fear, anger, frustration, sadness, grief, and even depression, information I shared for the first time in the 2003 book *Riding between the Worlds* and expanded upon it in my 2013 book *The Power of the Herd*. In researching the messages behind emotion, I drew on a number of emotional intelligence sources, including Daniel Goleman and Brene Brown. I found the work of Karla McLaren especially helpful. Some of the definitions of emotions were taken from her audiobook *How to Become an Empath*. (Whenever you see quotes around emotional definitions in the following section, I am quoting McLaren directly.)

Recognizing the wisdom that feeling holds allows us to use emotions as allies, efficiently accessing the information they communicate, then quickly letting them go, ultimately spending more and more time enjoying life with our horses and other companion animals as we learn to go "back to grazing" as fluidly and naturally as our equine friends have been doing all along.

For more extensive information about how to work with emotions and sensations, see chapters 13 and 14 in *The Power of the Herd*. There's an in-depth discussion of the same with engaging video examples in my online course *Connections 101*. I also explore innovative techniques for using these and other principles in my workshop *Deepening the Bond: Sentient Communication for Equestrians, Pet Owners and Animal Advocates*. (The next offering of this workshop will take place April 14 through 17. For more info: <https://eponaquest.com/workshop/deepening-the-bond-sentient-communication-for-equestrians-pet-owners-and-animal-advocates/>) See the end of this article for discounts on these online and in person workshops.

In the meantime, here's a quick look at the important messages behind the emotions that cause equestrians, animal rescue workers and pet owners the most trouble, as well as the questions to ask of these potentially instructive feelings.

FEAR

"An intuitive focused awareness" of an external threat in the environment. Nature's warning system.

"What is the threat?" What must I do to move to a position of safety?

VULNERABILITY

An internal threat to your self-image, belief system, or comfortable habits. Fear of change, of experimenting, of trying something new. Performance anxiety unrelated to physical danger.

What belief, behavior or perception is being challenged? How might my life change if I accept this new information? Who can I go to for support in integrating this new information?

ANGER

Someone has overstepped a boundary with the conscious or unconscious intention of pushing you around, intimidating you, or bending you to his/her will.

What physical or emotional line has been crossed? “What must be protected?” What boundary must be established or “restored”?

FRUSTRATION

(Feels like anger to most people, but holds a completely different message.) The action you’re taking is not effective.

What is the block? What can I do differently? Who can I go to for ideas or assistance?

DISAPPOINTMENT

The outcome did not live up to your expectations.

What was I hoping or expecting to happen? Did I actually communicate my expectations or did I want someone to intuitively guess what I needed? Was my expectation realistic? If so, how can I better communicate my goal/vision to those *capable* of carrying it out? If my expectation was not realistic, how can I modify my vision and/or better train/prepare/support the people/horses/animals involved?

SADNESS

The loss of a valued (or simply comfortable) relationship, job, home, or lifestyle is “immanent and in your best interest.” You have a choice of when and how to release what is no longer working for you. Tears help you release your attachment to the status quo and “rejuvenate” you for the next stage of growth.

“What must be released? What must be rejuvenated?”

Example: You must find a good home for a horse that has served you well in competition in order to purchase a new horse capable of taking you to the next level. Or you must find good homes for

a litter of puppies you've grown to love. You will feel sadness in letting your companions go. Tears will help you release your attachment, while opening the space in your heart for a relationship with a new horse, or a new state of your relationship with the mother of these puppies.

GRIEF

“No choice in releasing something. The loss or death has already occurred.” (Grief often includes feelings of anger, in addition to intense sadness, because it is the ultimate boundary violation to have something or someone you care about taken away from you, even if by fate, such as an accident, illness or injury.)

“What must be mourned?” What must be memorialized or celebrated?

Example: A beloved animal companion has died. Tears help you release attachment to what was so rudely snatched away from you, eventually opening the space in your heart to remember and memorialize the many good times you shared.

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To receive 10 percent off the workshop *Deepening the Bond*, contact Sue Smades at info@eponaquest.com

To receive 20 percent off the 7 hour, self-paced online course *Connections 101*, enter the coupon code **emotionalfitness20** when you enroll in the course at the following informational link: <https://nelda.tv/connections-with-linda-kohanov/>