



# Hands-on Healing

**Manual therapies for improving equine health are gaining in popularity. Here are some of those most commonly used on horses.**

by Karin Apfel

**W**ith their roots in ancient eastern medicine, many of the “hands-on” therapies have been poorly understood and, until about 20 or so years ago, poorly received by the western world. However, now, along with a growing interest in holistic approaches to improving health, there is greater acceptance of a wide variety of therapies for people and animals. While scientific study is ongoing, most of the evidence for these therapies is anecdotal.

However, in animals this is fairly convincing evidence, since the placebo affect that can occur in people is not possible. In other words, you can’t make a horse think he feels better because he had a “treatment”. He feels or performs better or heals quicker because the treatment was effective in some way.

There are many different approaches and variations in terminology, however, the hands-on techniques all have one aspect in common. Practitioners will observe the horse’s responses to treatment *during* the treatment, which will tell them what areas of the body (and which meridians and points if

applicable) need the most attention. Magdalena Smrdelj, a Toronto, Ontario-based veterinarian who uses the complementary therapies of chiropractic, massage and acupuncture in her practice, puts it this way, “It’s very relational and interactive between practitioner and patient, with the energy of positive intent included as part of the treatment, and calling the horse to engage in its own treatment, rather than a mechanical one-way exercise, where the practitioner performs a therapeutic act *on* the patient.”

In addition, bodywork practitioners take a holistic view of treatment. Smrdelj says, “The holistic approach is

simply a 'let's stand back and look at the large picture' approach to an imbalance, disease or condition in the body. This approach takes into account many of the factors the body is influenced by, such as nutrition, environmental stressors, level of activity and exercise, and more. The term 'holistic' does not imply any particular mode of therapy, but can include any modality that takes a whole-body approach. Certainly, conventional medicine can be applied holistically if the practitioner is taking into account the factors mentioned above, and is not just focused on the symptom at hand."

Many practitioners combine techniques depending on the horse's needs or recommend treatment by practitioners in other fields. Says Sidonia McIntyre of Equine Rehab.ca, who teaches massage courses around the country, "As each horse's issues vary, it is important to be able to adapt the

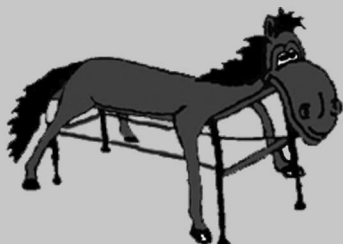
massage to the area of injury. What works for one horse may not work at all for another."

### Massage

Massage involves the use of the hands, fingers and even the elbow, to manipulate the soft tissues. Its goals include the promotion of tissue drainage, muscle relaxation, and pain relief. Massage can loosen and stretch dense connective tissue, has a sedative effect on the central nervous system and can enhance lymphatic and blood circulatory activity. Massage can be used with stretching exercises to regain or maintain normal range of motion of a joint. After an injury, massage can help align new connective tissue by providing appropriate tensile forces. This reduces muscle shortening due to scarring and adhesions (oblique collagen fibres that become binding to the connective tissue). There are a

number of different types of strokes, each with a specific application.

Sports massage is designed to specifically improve athletic performance. These therapists primarily aim to increase the efficiency of limb movement and stimulate circulation. Post-exercise it is used to remove lactic acid from the muscles and reduce pain. Scientific studies on massage have shown few measurable results, but human athletes report an increase in relaxation and an improved ability to cope with physical exertion after massage. One study did show improvement in range of motion and a thermographic study indicated increases in skin temperature after massage to areas overlying muscle spasm, so science is starting to 'validate' the benefits of massage. Ann Turner of Wits End Farm, an equine rehabilitation centre in Abbotsford, BC, finds she gets "amazing results with changes in



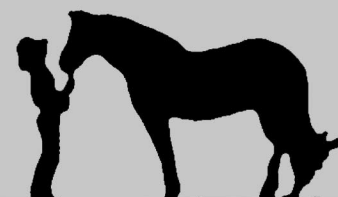
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temperament, movement and performance.”

### Acupressure and Shiatsu

Similar in some ways to massage, acupressure involves pressure on the skin. The pressure is directed at specific points to activate the body's own repair processes. Shiatsu is the Japanese form of acupressure. “Shi” is the Japanese word for finger and “atsu” means pressure.

Shiatsu is primarily about affecting the life energy, or Ki, rather than the muscles or bones. (see sidebar) Healthy, flowing Ki creates tone and elasticity. These areas do not need adjusting. The acupoints in the meridians where no tone is found are the best places for pressure. The horse will often indicate with his body language if it needs more attention to a point or a move away. The acupoints are the same as the points for acupuncture and lie along the meridians that correspond to various body organs and tissues that are regulated by Ki. Where the energy flow is “blocked” due to injury or illness, pressure (or stimulation by needles in acupuncture) on these points help unblock the channels and maintain the energy flow. Says Laurie Olstrom of Hands On Equine Massage in Surrey, BC, “A shiatsu practitioner treats all along the meridians,

giving extra attention where indicated, thereby treating the whole horse.”

Olstrom treats mostly event horses and often hears “that they get their fastest cross-country times ever after a massage – the horses have so much more energy. They are also more supple for the dressage phase. We have found that a massage three to seven days before the event provides the best results.”

A more western view of this therapy is that the meridians correspond to neural structures. The acupoints are loci with an increased number of capillaries, nerves, mast cells and lymphatics with a thinner layer of skin above so they can be easily affected by pressure. The pain relief and relaxation effects of acupressure (as well as acupuncture) are explained by Mimi Porter in her book *The New Equine Sports Therapy*: “Acupressure inhibits the transmission of pain signals to the brain through two mechanisms. When superficial stimulation such as finger pressure is perceived by the brain's recognition centers, a “gate” is closed to other sensations. Acupressure massage requires accurate location of acupuncture points. Stimulating these points releases endorphins and other chemical catalysts for pain relief. This relief is long-lasting and can relax the whole body.”

tion and ease of body movement through the repetition of non-habitual motor patterns. For animals, Tellington-Jones uses this concept in ground exercises to develop coordination and confidence. She also developed her own series of bodywork “touches” named TTouch to assist in relaxation and awareness. Although there is very little pressure involved, sensory nerves in the skin are stimulated and a cascade of physiological events (similar to those in acupressure) takes place. The touches are based on circular movements of the fingers and hands all over the body. The intent is to activate the function of the cells and awaken “cellular intelligence” according to the TTouch website. The TTouch is done on the entire body, and each circular TTouch is complete within itself. Therefore, it is not necessary to understand anatomy to be successful in speeding up the healing of injuries or ailments, or changing undesirable habits or behaviour. TTouch can be performed by anyone who has learned the techniques.

### Reiki

Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation that also promotes healing. It is based on the idea that we are more likely to get sick or feel stress if our life force energy, or Ki, is low. The person performing

The most difficult concept for westerners to comprehend is that some therapies work not just on the physical body, but also are said to affect the flow of energy in the body, variously known as Qi or Chi (in Chinese), Ki (in Japanese) or Prana (in Sanskrit). It can be defined as the body's essential life force. Meridians are channels of condensed Qi moving in a regular and known pattern throughout the body. Meridians have specific relationships to the body's anatomy. The dots you see on the diagram (next page) are acupoints, which are the best place to access the energy within a meridian. Good health requires that the Qi exist in a state of balance. The eastern manual techniques attempt to balance the Qi energy and maintain energy flow along the meridians.

### TTouch

Linda Tellington-Jones developed the technique that has come to be called TTEAM (Tellington Touch Equine Awareness Method or Tellington Touch Every Animal Method). It is aimed at developing an animal's body awareness and also fosters communication and bonding between human and animal. TTEAM is based on the neuro-muscular training pioneered by Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais to promote efficiency, coordina-



All areas of the body are addressed by TTouch including the ears, belly and mouth.

## Hands-on Therapy

### Who Needs It?

Daily wear and tear, poor saddle fit, excessive training can act cumulatively to create an environment in which the muscles tighten, lose the ability to release through inflammation and edema (swelling), and create spasms. If left untreated, these issues can affect movement, flexibility and strength. Slips and falls, overwork or accidents can cause injury, resulting in scar tissue, edema and chronic inflammation. The result is discomfort and pain causing limitations in performance and even changes in behaviour. Some of the bodywork benefits can include:

- increasing circulation which speeds healing and detoxification and reduces edema (swelling)\*
- improving joint flexibility and muscle tone
- improving disposition through relaxation and pain relief
- improving the ability to focus and learn
- improving the condition of the skin, coat, gums and teeth
- relieving pain and discomfort
- reducing recovery times from injuries
- reducing stress
- preventing injury due to improved strength and flexibility

\*McIntyre explains how bodywork can even help with situations such as laminitis or navicular. "[It] cannot have a direct effect on issues of the hoof, however, it can increase the circulation to the area to provide drainage in an area of swelling (laminitis is swelling of the laminae of the hoof), and bring nutrient-rich blood to the area."

### Who Doesn't?

- horses with elevated temperatures, low blood pressure, or who are in shock
- horses with tumours (unless there is specific owner permission) as it is unknown if bodywork can spread tumour cells
- undiagnosed lame horses (a broken bone or chip can be aggravated)
- horses with unknown/undiagnosed outbreaks or disease (to avoid spreading infection)
- horses with colic (mainly because the safety of the practitioner is at risk)
- horses in acute distress (due to thunderstorms, separated from the herd, etc.)
- dehydrated horses (dehydration compromises the fascia – the "glue" that holds the skin to the muscles)

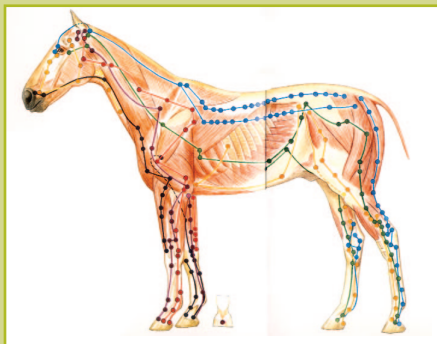
There are also local areas that *contraindicate* bodywork. These include:

- any area with an open wound, that is infected or swollen or hot without a diagnosis and approval from a veterinarian
- fracture sites during an acute stage of the injury

### A Note on Regulation and Certification

Bodywork on animals is unregulated in Canada. However, most therapies have registries or programs that "certify" practitioners and promote good standards of practice. For example, Equi-Bow Canada ([www.equi-bow.com](http://www.equi-bow.com)) registers Bowen practitioners. For a detailed explanation of how equine massage therapists are "certified" you can visit [equinerehab.ca](http://equinerehab.ca) and click on FAQs. In many provinces supervision by a veterinarian is required for professional treatment. These therapies are not meant to replace veterinary care, only complement it.

blue dot – bladder & kidney meridians  
green dot – gall bladder and liver meridians  
red dot – heart and small intestine meridians  
purple – pericardium and Triple Heater  
(controls body's heating system and  
lymphatic flow) meridians  
yellow – stomach and spleen meridians  
black – lung and large intestine meridians  
Diagram courtesy of *Shiatsu*, a Threshold Guide



Reiki channels the "universal life force energy" (which is what Reiki means in Japanese) to wherever it is needed in the body of the person or animal being treated through the laying on of hands. As practitioners become better "attuned" they are able to access greater amounts of healing energy and they are then able to treat from a dis-

tance. Reiki is not taught in the usual sense, but is "transferred" to the student during a Reiki class from a Reiki master (possessing Third Degree attunement). Hence, anyone can be taught how to apply Reiki to any living being and, it is in fact recommended that horse owners perform Reiki on their own animals to heighten their

bond and to promote physical and mental harmony.

Because Reiki is solely energy-based, it is completely non-invasive. It is said to be particularly beneficial for emotional issues such as nervousness, hyperactivity, and anxiety.

### Bowen

Bowen consists of a series of precise moves on specific points of the body. There are frequent and important pauses between each series of moves giving the body time to benefit from each as the neurological impulses created are processed by the brain. The biofeedback loop that Bowen creates allows the body to restore its own natural balance. Linda Cho, a Bowen and massage therapist practicing in Spencerville, Ontario, explains, "When the muscle is plucked, it sends an indirect message to the brain that in turn sends back a default message to the muscle to go back into its resting place."

Practitioners note that the messages from Bowen that are "reprogramming" the body can be "erased" by the application of other kinds of bodywork. Other forms of manipulative or energetic therapy performed up to seven days after a Bowen session may interfere with its effectiveness but the Bowen technique does not interfere with the effectiveness of other disciplines.

A recently completed double blind study on human volunteers given a single Bowen treatment (presented at the Fascia Research Conference in October 2007) showed "significant increases in hamstring flexibility in the Bowen group immediately post-test. These increases maintained for one week without further treatment."