

Human Body Language

By Marie Hoffman

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We had just purchased three broodmares and were loading them to take them home. The first two my husband, Gary, and I led up to our stock trailer and they walked right in. The last mare was at a different pasture, so we drive over there to get her. The man we purchased her from, caught her and led her up to the trailer, but was unable to get her to load. Even though I was encouraging her from behind, she stood with her head up pulling against him. After a few minutes, he realized he wasn't going to be successful and backed her up. At this time my husband took the lead and she walked into the trailer without hesitation. The only difference was the body language of the two men. The first stood facing her with the attitude that she had better load or else. His body language was telling her she might be in danger if she came closer. By pulling with a steady force on the lead, trying to pull her in, he was giving her the pressure of his pull to resist against. The second man, Gary, had a softer attitude, used a light tug and release on her lead and expected her to follow him in. He kept his back to her so she would be less intimidated and would likely follow him. Gary also used her herd instinct to follow by keeping his back to her. He gave her no reason to think she wouldn't be safe. By using the tug and release signal on the lead, he gave her nothing to resist against. The mare having no reason to resist, loaded easily.

Most of us have heard of magical horsemen and horsewomen that can do anything with a horse and the horse cooperates. There are two key reasons, first is the person's understanding of how human body language affects the horse and second is their excellent understanding of the horse's body language. The magic you see is really total communication. Anyone can learn to use their own body language more effectively. Learning how to breathe, center, use soft muscles, use soft eyes, and make mind pictures will help you achieve this goal.

Breathing is something we don't normally think about since it's so automatic. But when we are concentrating on something very intently or are very nervous (like at a scary movie), who hasn't found themselves holding their breath? When you hold your breath, your body becomes tense and inflexible, which are two conditions that directly affect your ability to communicate with your body to your horse. You should make a conscious effort to breathe regularly and deeply. To breathe properly, you should feel your stomach move out below your navel when you inhale. Take a deep sigh and you will feel this movement.

Centering is when you find your center of balance. To find your balance, stand with your feet about shoulder width apart with your legs straight, but your knees should not be locked. Close your eyes while in this position and focus on finding your center of balance. At first you may feel like you're swaying as you stand, but with practice you will find the place where you feel centered and balanced. In time you will be able to find this place instantly. Centering is important because when you are centered you are like a punching bag that is weighted on the bottom. No matter what happens your balance is secure and you will return to your center, like the punching bag. This will give you confidence that will help you relax and, in turn, will help the horse be more relaxed.

While centering you need to make sure your back is flat so your spine is straight. If you placed one hand on your back where your belt would be and slide it up and down, that area of your back should feel flat. If your back is concave, you will not be able to center properly. To flatten your back, tilt your pelvis so your tail bone is pointing down.

Soft Eyes are important because how you use your eyes effects how you hold the rest of your body. If you use hard eyes, where you stare at something with little or no peripheral vision, you will notice a tension in your back and neck. When you use soft eyes, you look at something but use as much peripheral vision as possible. It is a more relaxed and all encompassing gaze. You will notice how much more relaxed your back, neck, and body feel. Your horse will sense the difference too. Horses are the body language experts because most of their communication is done with body language.

Soft Muscles are important because hard muscles cause you to lose your center and are present when your body is rigid and inflexible. Soft muscles allow you to maintain control yet keep you flexible to handle changes in the horse. Your touch on the horse is also more effective when you use soft muscles.

Use this exercise to discover soft muscles and how effective they are. Stand on the ground and using the muscles in your arm, hold your hand out so your arm is parallel to the ground. Have a friend try and push your forearm and hand toward your shoulder. Note how hard it is to maintain your balance and how much effort you had to use to resist your friend's strength. You will find hard muscles keep you from being able to adjust. Now try the same exercise by using soft muscles, mostly your arms tendons, to hold your arm in the same position. Your muscles will feel soft to the touch. Once again, have a friend try to

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move your forearm and hand toward your shoulder. This time you will find that you are able to resist a stronger effort by your friend, maintain control, and keep your balance. Soft muscles will allow you to control your horse better and be flexible to the changes the horse may require of you.

Mind Pictures is an easy yet effective technique to use. To use it all you need to do is think about and make a picture in your mind on how you want your horse to behave or what you want him to do. By having this picture in your mind it will automatically make your body language say what is in your mind to the horse. For example, if you think that your horse will not go into the trailer, you will put out subtle signals that the trailer is an upsetting place to be. But on the other hand if you picture your horse walking right in to get a bite of grain, like in his stall, you will send a relaxed signal to your horse and he will think he is just going into a different kind of stall. Another example is if you have ever had a horse rub your knee on a fence as you are riding and had a very difficult time getting him to quit. You may have found that when you were thinking about your knee being rubbed off by the fence that the horse kept rubbing it every time around. Once you were able to think about something else like riding on the inside of the track, the horse quit rubbing your knee on the fence. Your body language told your horse to go where you were thinking, and this can often be a stronger signal than your direct aids.

In addition to how you hold your body and think, the horse will also read your position in relation to his body. There are a few basic positions that are often used to communicate what you want your horse to do. One is to stand off to the side and in front of the shoulder facing the horse, this means to stay back or hold. You will find standing erect with your head up and shoulders back has a more aggressive effect than when your eyes are down and your shoulders are slightly slumped.

While the horse is loose or lunging, moving toward the rear quarters from the mid-barrel back will move the horse away from you. If you circle around and approach the horse from the shoulder forward, this movement has a blocking effect to stop or turn the horse.

You will find that horses will also mimic some, if you want him to duck under something, the act of you lowering your head and shoulders will help him to lower his head and neck. You will find that if you step big over poles while leading your horse he will be a little more careful stepping over the poles himself and if you walk around them he will want to too. These techniques will help you work with your horse in a way that is easier for your horse to be calm and you will be able to effectively use your body language to communicate what you want him to do.

You can learn the magic of total communication with your horse! Watch for an up coming article in the late winter of 98 giving more detail on the human - horse body language relationship.