

the quarterly journal of wholistic equine care

# Natural HORSE

M A G A Z I N E

*dedicated to your horse*

**FARRIER TRIM vs. NATURAL TRIM**

**DETERMINING  
AGE by TEETH:  
What Counts,  
What Doesn't**

**ACUPRESSURE  
for Kids!!  
Fun, Safe, Powerful**

**WILD HORSES  
LOCKED OUT:  
Will the Fence  
Be Removed?**

**SPECIAL:  
NATURAL  
PETS  
MARKETPLACE  
Inside!**



# Equine Hanna Somatics + Yoga = A Gift to the Horse

by Gloria Hester

*Gloria Hester working somatically, in partnership with an equine retreat participant.*

*Photo courtesy of Kathy Edds*

What if there was a natural way to help your horse to overcome chronic injuries, pain or misalignments? Suppose there was a gentle set of principles that you could utilize to help your horse regain his natural freedom of movement. Imagine that you could create a better, more trusting relationship with your horse through non-verbal communication.

These possibilities exist, all within the sensory-motor relearning program known as Equine Hanna Somatics. Hanna Somatics was originally developed in the late 1980's for humans by Thomas Hanna, the founder of the field of Somatics, and later adapted for horses by his wife, Eleanor Criswell Hanna. Somatics works by connecting the horse's mind and body to re-awaken his natural ability to self-correct. The work is beneficial for all horses, regardless of age and conditioning.

*Soma* is the Latin word for body. When Somatic Educators use the term, it implies more than that: we believe that the body is intelligent and capable of self-regulating.

Indeed, both horses and humans are born with an innate ability to self-correct through movement. Yet we lose this ability due to

injury or to movements that are made repeatedly and habitually. Often, the result is a body or "soma" that is contracted into what appears to be an aged posture – even if the person or horse isn't that old. Posture is not from aging per se, but is from unconscious reflexive responses to life's experiences, hence the need for somatic re-education.

**Adaptive Tension Patterns are Common to All Vertebrate Animals. The Results are Pain, Misalignments and Loss of Functional Movement.** Every vertebrate animal - that is, every animal with a spine - demonstrates the same patterns of holding in response to stress or trauma. Human, horse, dog, cat - anytime we feel apprehension for any reason, we unconsciously contract the abdominal and other muscles. This pattern will remain held in the unconscious and is cumulative with each additional experience. (Weblink to Audio Interview: <http://www.gloriahasteryoga.com/gloria-hester.wav>)

Over time this becomes a pattern of dysfunction, creating a vicious cycle: the body's response reinforces the feelings of fear and apprehension, feeding back to the brain which then responds by shortening the muscles even more. Shortened abdominal muscles result

in an inability to breathe deeply, which in turn leads to additional carbon dioxide being stored in the bloodstream, irritating the nervous system.

In horses, shortened abdominal muscles leave the animal with a limited, altered movement pattern where he is unable to stride properly and may drag his feet rather than lift them. He will tend to stand short, close-in together and camped under. This holding pattern is just one of many that horses demonstrate in response to stress. So we see that emotional responses are held in the soft tissue. In addition, any movement that we make repetitively will leave us contracted and “on the ready” to make that movement at all times.

Performance horses, for example, are asked to repeat certain movement patterns habitually. Over time, these movements may become more difficult for the horse, even totally inaccessible. An example would be a horse who has lost his ability to disengage the hind-quarters and cross over on the hind.

Falls or previous injuries are another common cause of misalignments. This can leave a horse holding chronic tension patterns from the fall or from adaptation to the original injury. This often results in pain. If your horse habitually holds his head or tail to one side, or has a short stride on one side, then you can be sure that the muscles on that side of his body are held tight by the unconscious as he tries to protect the injury.

Fortunately, all of these habitual responses can be addressed through somatics. Through visual assessment, gentle movement



Gloria Hester, (left) working with a pair of retreat participants.

Photo courtesy of Kathy Edds

and touch, and by utilizing the horse’s sensory-motor feedback, well-organized patterns of movement are re-established. The result: a calm, relaxed and confident horse. And no wonder: a healthy animal who is able to move well has nothing to fear.

**An Equine Somatic Educator works *with* the horse, rather than doing something *to* the horse.** In somatic work, we invite the horse to use his brain to make his own self-corrections rather than forcing changes externally. When we ask a horse to contract

a muscle and to use good control to slowly release and lengthen that muscle, the control is taken from the brain stem and cerebellum and is given back to the sensory-motor cortex. In this way we address and reverse the chronic cause of the problem rather than temporarily alleviating the symptoms.

We do not stretch the horse. Instead, we ask the horse to voluntarily contract first and then sense the new elongation and relief that comes from releasing the dysfunctional holding pattern. This allows the horse to re-set the resting tonus of his muscles. If we, or a horse, anticipate pain for any reason, then we will be guarded in our movements. So we want to let the horse know that he will not have to guard. In this way the horse is given the ability to re-learn.

### **Rapport and collaboration between human and horse are key to the success of somatics.**

To help humans prepare themselves to work with horses somatically, I utilize a combination of Therapeutic Yoga principles and Somatic principles. I find that this combination of modalities develops an openness and curiosity that translates from one soma to another without an agenda being present in either species. This is paramount to successful somatic rapport. We don’t exert our will over horses; instead we help them find their own way through their sensory experience.

A somatic educator’s role, for both species, is to re-educate the nervous system to enable the individual to self-correct and to release chronic holding patterns in the musculature. Since this work has been adapted from the tradition of Thomas Hanna’s Somatic work, the brain and the body begin to have a different kind of communication with one another. This work involves alpha gamma motor-neuron co-activation in the central nervous system to allow the voluntary portions of the brain to reset what the involuntary portions of the brain have been controlling up to this point.

Somatic principles are the only principles I know of at this time that will interrupt the messages being sent from the brain and back to the brain to interrupt the patterns. Energy work and massage are great, and very relaxing, but they do not necessarily make a permanent change for the horse’s nervous system the way somatic work does.

Once control of movement is restored to the sensory motor cortex, then movement will be graceful and fluid again, and your horse’s natural ability, agility and expressiveness will be fully realized. ♡

#### *About the author:*

Gloria Hester, ERYT, CEHSE, is the founder and director of the Yogic Wisdom for Horse and Human Training Institute. She is a Certified Equine Hanna Somatic Educator and Yoga Teacher Trainer. She is a member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists and specializes in Yoga and Somatics as Therapy. She is dedicated to sharing the benefits of both and currently travels to hold retreats, clinics and teacher trainings internationally.

[www.gloriahasteryoga.com](http://www.gloriahasteryoga.com)

Weblink to Audio Interview: <http://www.gloriahasteryoga.com/gloriahester.wav>

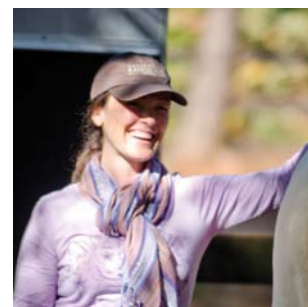


Photo courtesy of Stephen Pyle