

Connected Riding

With
Trisha Wren



The aims of Connected Riding® are to release blockages and tightness in the body of both horse and rider, and re-educate it to bend and be supple. This is done through subtle exercises using feel, sensitivity and observation to address and eliminate bad postural habits.

Tension and position can interrupt the communication flow between horse and rider.

Many horse riders have experienced it, or at least seen it – a horse and rider combination that looks anything but relaxed, harmonious and moving as one unit. It is particularly common at competitions, when increased tensions more obviously indicate that horse or rider are in some way at odds. Signs of tension are easy to spot; in the horse they include stiff, uneven, shortened, or rapid paces, a hollowed neck and back, tail swishing, teeth-grinding, behaviours such as bucking, kicking out, rearing, and more subtle evasions such as coming behind the bit. In the rider the symptoms might be tight fisted, grabbing or moving hands, tense, raised or hunched shoulders, raised or jammed heels, and a face that's red and distressed.

Physical signs such as these indicate negative emotions, and, too often, such signals lead to explosive and possibly dangerous consequences for both horse and rider.

It has long been recognised that there is a direct link between the emotions, posture and behaviour. Many riders will have experienced that when a horse is upset or worried its posture and behaviour are adversely affected. The same applies if it is physically out of balance (manifested as being stiff, hollow, one-sided etc), as the horse's emotions and behaviour can be adversely affected.

Connected Riding teaches horses better body awareness, and how to rebalance themselves and self-carry, by removing the compression and tensions that reduce harmony between horse and rider, and consequently, communication. It can also be applied to riders; with better body awareness a rider can improve their balance and effectiveness and, as a result, improve their horse's performance.

Connected Riding was developed by Peggy Cummings, an early student of ground breaking riding teacher, Sally Swift (Centred Riding). A highly experienced rider, trainer, and educator, and also a Feldenkrais and TTeam practitioner, Peggy created exercises for riders that promote freedom of movement and a more elastic, in-sync connection with the horse.

Trisha Wren, a student of Peggy Cummings, is Australasia's only certified Connected Riding Instructor. Scottish-born Trisha now lives in New Zealand, and regularly visits Australia. As well as training riders, she specialises in teaching body awareness to horses.

"Body work is an important aspect of training the horse to develop good posture, better carriage, greater confidence, and a better connection with the rider," Trisha says. "Groundwork is a good place to start, as the horse is feeling relaxed, supple and 'with' the rider before they get on.

Problems relating to balance and security as a rider can be addressed through Connected Riding®. Common questions asked of riders new to this technique include: if the horse spooks, does their seat stay glued to the saddle, or do they fall off at the drop of a hat? What about the horse - does it stumble going down hills, hollow its back and carry its head in the air, 'motorbike' going round corners, or pull on the reins? Is the horse inattentive, or reactive?

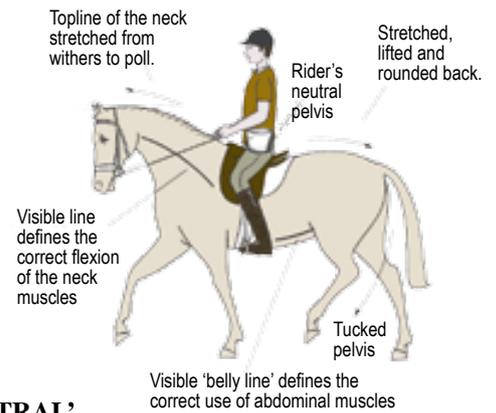
Whilst there is a variety of causes for these behaviours (remember to rule out saddle fit, teeth needing attention, unbalanced feet, nutrition etc, first), the bottom line is that if a horse is 'misbehaving' in some way, it is out of balance. Connected Groundwork® and Riding teach both horse and rider how to rebalance themselves - to self-carry and 'come through' for each other. It helps build a reciprocal partnership of trust, ease, and clear communication. A holistic approach to classical riding principles, it gives the rider an awareness of body and movement that empowers them to move in harmony with their horse. It provides the basis for all higher level movements and can be applied to all riding disciplines.

NEUTRAL PELVIS

An important part of Connected Riding® is learning to ride with a 'neutral pelvis' - the only posture that will give the rider balance and security in the saddle and also enable freedom and independence of movement, while riding without pain or discomfort. With a neutral pelvis, riders have more tools available to help the sluggish horse move forwards, to be more 'plugged-in' if the horse should spook, and to have more clarity of communication with which to assist and enhance the horse's performance.

Employing these same techniques whilst working with the horse on the ground with 'connection' - i.e. a consistent feel on the line rather than slack - enables handlers to teach the same skills and habits to their horse.

When riders find the 'neutral' posture it removes tension from their body, engages core muscles, and stabilises their body. When they brace by tightening their backs they cause the horse to brace also.



FINDING 'NEUTRAL'

Neutral posture removes tension from the rider's body, and enables them to achieve more with less effort. Lengthening between the sternum and sacrum releases compression, engages core muscles, and stabilizes the body. Riders become more easily able to rebalance in motion, with their joints moving freely. Conversely, when riders brace, by tightening their backs, hands or legs, they become 'dead weight', causing the horse to counterbalance and compensate by bracing in its own body.

GROUNDWORK

Connected Groundwork® is a little more like rehab or physical therapy, than the usual types of groundwork that are out there. The various exercises are done at a standstill first, and there is no emphasis on 'making' the horse 'do' anything. Rather, the handler is planting a seed, making a suggestion, giving the horse some new input then observing how it interprets it. It's important to give the horse as long as it needs to process the new things it will be feeling. The exercises are designed to release tension, give the horse more body awareness, and teach it how to shift its weight and rebalance itself. Once the horse is showing some release at a standstill, movement is introduced. It's a bit like learning to walk all over again as habits are identified and slowly changed. Since it feels easier and more comfortable, permanent improvements can be made quite quickly.

TRAINING TIP -

How balanced is the horse? It is know that when standing, the horse should have its weight equally distributed between all

Continued

EXERCISES TO TRY

EXERCISE 1

With arms hanging softly at your sides, allow one arm to lift and notice the ease and range of movement. Arms hanging again, tighten just one finger. Notice how far up the arm - and beyond - you can feel the tension in your body. Now lift the arm as you did before, keeping the finger tight - notice how the range of movement is restricted. How would that feel to a horse?

In neutral - and with consistent body awareness and rebalancing - riders will find that tension and the resulting discomfort becomes a thing of the past, and they will be better able to transmit soft clear communications to their horse.

EXERCISE 2

Sit on the edge of a hard (dining room type) chair, so that you can feel your seatbones. Sit up straight! Isn't that what many of us have been taught? Feel your sternum / chest lift and notice that at the same time your back arches and your pelvis tips forwards. Notice how your seatbones feel. Your hips will tighten, and if you try to 'march' your legs alternately there will be effort and a limited range of movement. Now slump - the opposite extreme. Your back will round, and your pelvis tip back. What direction are your seatbones pointing now? How do your hips feel? How does marching your legs feel? Lastly, find the place in the middle, leveling your pelvis. Your lower back will be flatter, your sternum soft, and your hips soft - marching your legs will be easiest in this position (independent legs). Remind yourself to 'think forward' ie not get sent back behind the vertical, keep your sternum soft, and your lower back released.

Try this same exercise straddling the chair (facing the back of the chair). Hook your fingers around the side of the chair back. In an arched, then a slumped posture, notice if you feel pulled forward, braced, or pushed backwards. Find neutral; the contact should feel stable and supportive.

EXERCISE 3

Standing, experiment with arching (lifting your sternum) and slumping, and finding the place in the middle (neutral). Remember to unlock your knees and hips; with your eyes closed, practice locking and unlocking them and notice the effect on your upper body and back.



Checking Balance: Go from halt to walk, by turning (rotating) your body towards the horse and starting to step into it without pushing.



The turning movement is fluid and not stuck as this horse bends, looks in the direction it is going and steps underneath itself with the inside hind leg.

The correctly balanced horse should be able to move easily in all four directions, bending in all of its 'hinges' - behind the cheek, base of neck/shoulder, front of ribs.



four feet. Many horses, however, consistently stand with more weight on their left fore, perhaps also resting their right hind. Stand directly in front of the horse at a distance of a few feet and observe how squarely it is standing and where the weight is. The habit of weighting the left fore often comes from a handler's habit of doing most things only on the left-hand side. Connected Groundwork® exercises* can reteach the horse how to shift and reapportion its weight, release that one-sidedness, and rebalance itself. One simple exercise to do anytime one is standing with a horse is to not stand on its left side...! Position yourself in front, or to its right, and observe how just doing that can help the horse rebalance it weight and straighten its body."

EVALUATION EXERCISE - DO ALL FOUR CORNERS WORK?

Clip the lead rope onto the left ring of the halter, rather than underneath. (Use an 'ordinary' halter for this, rather than a rope one.) Hold the clip, so that you are snugged right up to the halter. Go from halt to walk, by turning (rotating) your body towards the horse and starting to step into it without pushing. Walk a small circle to the right. How easy did the horse find it to step off to the right? What did you notice? Was it heavy? Could it bend to the right on the circle, or did the horse keep its self straight? Halt, and this time step to your left to initiate a circle to the left, without pulling. How comfortable is the horse walking a small circle to the left? Again, is it bending, or straight? Does it feel like the horse might step on you?

Unclip the leadrope and clip it to the ring on the right side of the halter. Standing on the right of the horse, repeat the exercise; this time on the right, first circling to the left; halt and evaluate; then moving and circling to the right.

Think about what has been observed. Was one of these four directions more difficult for the horse? Was there one leg that seemed more stuck, less able to do what was needed of it? Was the horse able to bend in one direction, but not the other?

The correctly balanced horse should be able to move easily in all four directions, bending in all of its 'hinges' - behind the cheek,

at the base of the neck/shoulder groove, behind the shoulder/front of the ribs, and in front of the hip. It should be able to look around the curve of the circle, release its head and neck forward and down, and its inside hind leg should be stepping up underneath itself.

If the horse had trouble in one or more of its 'corners', the Connected Groundwork® exercise* that can help the most is S-walking* - in neutral posture (soft knees and hips, full lower back, relaxed arms and shoulders), in connection with the horse, walk in an 'S' configuration, using your rotations (turn your torso or point your belly button in the direction of travel) to suck the horse along in one direction, then the other (not pushing or pulling). Simply walking S's, or serpentines, seems fairly innocuous, but it can very easily teach a horse how to shift its weight, change its bend and focus, reach and push more with its hind legs, lowering its head and stretching its topline. It's also a great exercise for spooky horses, as it gives them a controlled look all around their surroundings without them being able to get fixated on anything.

*Think about what has been observed.
Was there one leg that seemed more stuck,
less able to do what was needed of it?
Was the horse able to bend in one
direction, but not the other?*

Adjustments to balance can alleviate horse discomfort and improve behaviour, and adjusting the rider's balance makes them easier for the horse to carry.

These and many other exercises developed in the Connected Riding® concept are simple and easy to learn and apply, but the benefits can be profound, from developing better communication with one's horse, to increased competitive performance, and positive influence on overall health and soundness.

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