

Why Do Bodywork on Animals?

by Nancy Camp

When trauma occurs, layers of compensation are established even though the animal “seems fine” ... regular bodywork sessions will help the animal regain health, well being, and overall balance.

The idea of providing bodywork for animals is catching on, but the understanding of the practice needs refinement. The bottom line is that animals need regular bodywork in order to maintain optimum physical comfort. Weak conformation, individual histories of use or injury, and consequences of lifestyle contribute to discomfort ranging from occasional tight muscles to acute or chronic pain.

Past trauma affects the body

All animals have been subjected to some kind of trauma in their life. When trauma occurs from an accident, abuse, or misguided management, the animal’s body deals with it in whatever way is necessary to survive. The capacity the body has for coping with functional disruptions is known as the law of homeostasis: “the process by which every living thing makes continual adjustments to keep itself in a stable condition and function to the best of its ability.” Simply put, they compensate and get on with their lives, but the memory of the trauma is embedded in the body. This is the underlying premise of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Left unreleased, stress patterns cause an animal to live in a state of tension and fear, which can, over time, entrain the physical body.

A related condition resulting from trauma is one known as an archaic wound, which embeds trauma in the body memory. These conditions may go unnoticed because animals compensate so well, but over time, compensatory patterns create others and imbalances build. By the time lameness or a change in the animal’s ability to perform is noticeable, the condition has likely been around for a long time and the chain of events that led to the now identifiable problem may be indecipherable. Oftentimes, treatment is directed at the symptomatic manifestation rather than the source of the problem. I believe that most “behavioral problems” and many physical issues identified in animals have their source in emotional and/or physical traumatic incidents.

When an animal presents a problem, especially a somewhat indefinable problem, like a rolling gait or stepping short with a hind leg, you are seeing the most recent manifestation of a compensatory pattern that has been building for some time, perhaps years, during which time the animal “seemed fine”. Understand that the problem most likely did not originate at the site of immediate concern. It is possible that an issue manifesting itself in the hock actually began in the neck, or a front leg, years prior to the condition you are witnessing as an acute concern. Limping for any reason creates tenseness in the upper body, which in turn contributes to compensatory patterns in, say, the low back, pelvis or neck and shoulders. Layers of compensation are established even though the animal seems fine and the structural system of the animal is forced to function from a position of imbalance. The musculature and soft tissue system of tendons and ligaments are stressed while we, as caregivers, are unaware. The ramifications are countless and hazardous to the animal’s health, his sense of wellbeing, and the ability to perform demanding tasks.

Regular bodywork sessions are beneficial

A program of regular bodywork is important for maintaining both seemingly sound competition animals and ones of the couch potato or pasture ornament variety. I find energetic healing modalities most effective because energy workers feel and identify disruptions, or dis-ease, in the flow of energy in the body and can facilitate an unwinding of both the tissue and the body memory. Energetic modalities address the physical body, but also target mental, emotional and spiritual essences. Allopathic medicine simply does not address this level of healing or physical maintenance.

Here’s a hypothetical example of how injuries result in compensatory patterns that create problems later in the life of a horse. A colt tweeks his neck during halter breaking and sustains mild or severe damage to soft tissues in his neck, but he is young and he compensates and is not likely to be asked to do much, so he seems fine.

A year or more passes before the stress of being broke to ride enters his world. The archaic injury in his upper neck has created functional restrictions. He may hold one shoulder blade more tightly than the other. This didn't really matter to him out in the field; he could get around it, but it makes accepting a girth or carrying a rider difficult.

Our young horse is not visibly lame. He seems fine, but he sulls up or bucks when the girth is tightened to express his discomfort. His actions are read as resistance or bad behavior and he is disciplined and forced to submit. The young horse is left with no choice but to make do and further compensate in order to function within this new set of requirements. He figures out a way to accept a saddle and a rider. Perhaps he tightens his rib cage and stiffens the long muscles of his back to help support the rider's weight. His young body is flexible, but he struggles in order to achieve homeostasis, and his training begins.

The young horse's body is now carrying multiple compensatory patterns. Over time, as he grows and moves and meets the challenges of his job, his efforts become more labored. His back muscles atrophy and stiffen. His ribs lock up. Eventually, his low back weakens under this stress and his pelvis and sacrum are restricted in movement. The horse forces himself to perform required physical tasks because he has no choice.

Years later, this horse will travel uneven behind or more short strided than his conformation dictates. Still he is not technically lame, so no concerns are expressed about his wellbeing. He has likely joined the ranks of the vast number of horses who cope with life by simply shutting down emotionally. Unfortunately, people are so used to seeing this shut-down emotional state in horses that they accept it as normal. Some horses are labeled ADD (Attention Deficient Disorder), because they don't seem to focus on their job. Eventually, it becomes difficult to trim our once-young-and-agile colt's hind feet because he "doesn't want to" hold up a leg for the farrier. The solution to this situation is frequently a sharp blow to the underbelly of the horse with a farrier's rasp to give him an attitude adjustment, when an adjustment to his sacroiliac joint would be more appropriate. Furthermore, by this time in our horse's life, his trainer can't figure out why the horse has so much difficulty taking a particular lead in his canter or turning in one direction.

Sooner or later - sooner if the horse has nutritional or conformational deficiencies contributing to his lifestyle challenges, and later if he is indeed built to last and has been "well cared for" - this horse will break down. At this point, the people in this horse's life start to notice that he no longer seems fine. The horse is 11 or 12 years old and he will end up at a vet's office being examined and treated for whatever problem has manifested itself at the end of this chain of events, but not for the source of the problem.

I see a lot of horses and other animals who are in desperate need of relief for their physical bodies, but their caregivers resist providing bodywork. I believe the reasons come from a cultural, subconscious mindset, which has been molded by the Western thinking of allopathic medicine: "Don't fix it if it ain't broke." Commonly, people only seek medical assistance when something has obviously gone wrong. The belief that the body is fixed by a pill or a procedure is deeply entrenched in the subconscious mind of our culture. When the body of a living being is compromised and its ability to function hindered, the consequences are far reaching. The physical being is forced into compensatory patterns of movement. The emotional being becomes downtrodden and depressed. And often, especially in an animal like the horse where the ability to flee is a matter of life or death, the spirit may be broken. So, whether you are addressing an injured body or trying to prevent one from becoming so, regular bodywork sessions are an important part of your program to maintain optimal health and well-being in your animal companions.

About the author:

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