Post Traumatic Stress Disorder In Horses

‘When we acknowledge the kingdom of the self, we will no longer accept slavery either for ourselves or for others, no matter how it is disguised’

GERRY L. SPENCE, From Freedom to Slavery

Although PTSD has been recognised in humans for the last thirty years or so, its occurrence in animals is only being accepted much more recently. When it does occur in animals, it seems to come about as a result of human interference, either following domestication practices or disturbance of wild animal communities. The following links provide some background information about the role of the central nervous system in humans concerning PTSD, as well as some examples of its occurrence in other animals including horses:

Babette Rothschild's website for information about trauma and PTSD in humans from a scientific perspective: www.somatictraumatherapy.com

PDST in horses: www.equine-behavior.com/PTSD_and_the_Horse1.htm
www.wiwfarm.com/Post_Traumatic_Stress.htm

Articles about PDST in other animals:

http://www.thepetwiki.com/wiki/Military_Dogs_and_PTSD (dogs)

Peter Levine's book *Waking The Tiger, Healing Trauma* presents a profound and intelligent explanation of the traumatisation process and how it can be addressed and healed in people.

Trauma and the problems caused by it are not a minor issue in our society. Many humans suffer from it in varying degrees, as do the animals we have domesticated. I believe that PTSD is in fact very common in domestic horses. The likelihood that it is common is a good enough reason in itself to learn more about it, to be able to recognise it and respond to it appropriately. Sometimes its presence in another being, whether it is another person or animal, can resonate with feelings related to our own traumatic experiences that we may be unaware we have. Much of the power we have to help others to heal comes from addressing our own limitations, and in the same way we can make remarkable progress in training horses if we acknowledge our own issues. Sometimes we feel attracted to a particular horse and we are able to empathise with them and want to protect them, whereas other horses irritate us and we see everything they do as annoying or malevolent. Negative feelings indicate something in ourselves we haven't addressed yet, and if we choose to do so we can learn a lot from those horses we don't really 'click with'.

**What Is Traumatisation?**

Traumatisation in any animal seems to occur at some indefinite time, it could be months or many years, following the lack of a healthy closure by the nervous system after a traumatic experience. The considerable energy which is produced in the body in response to a perceived threat, is not dissipated following the event, and it continues to stimulate the state of hyper-arousal which is the normal response made by the autonomic nervous system when the animal is in danger. Wild animals will dissipate any residual energy when the threat is over: they may have used some of it in responding to the threat, e.g. running or fighting, and the rest is discharged in a process where their muscles will twitch and shake until it is fully released. If they enter what is called the
'freezing' response, a last resort response that effectively anaesthetises the body as a protection from pain, they are able to recover from that and discharge any energy tied up in the nervous system without developing the symptoms of traumatisation later on. Human beings are known to have particular difficulty resolving traumatic events successfully, and as a result they often develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder later in life.

My personal experience with Trauma, working over a period of several years with an exceptional Alternative Therapist (www.keithfarvis.co.uk) to release trapped energy from a car crash, has helped me to recognise similar energy states and behavioural symptoms in the horses I have worked with. The frequency of these signs is particularly disturbing considering that horses don't even have the intellectual (neo-cortex) part of the brain that humans have evolved, and which is thought to compromise their ability to deal with traumatic events effectively.

Wild horses do not develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but in our two herds of eighteen horses we have four which are seriously traumatised, and another seven which show some symptoms to a lesser degree. It is true that many of these horses are rescue cases, but they are probably just individuals who were less capable of compensating for their problems - or maybe they chose to heal themselves. You only have to walk through the average stable yard to see symptoms of traumatisation in most of the occupants.

Each horse has their own personal boundaries which are an expression of who they are. If these boundaries are forced either particularly violently, repeatedly, or both, then traumatisation and subsequent Post Traumatic Stress Disorder seems to be inevitable. Wild horses do not typically encounter this kind of abuse, unless they are threatened by human beings of course, which is happening more often as we consider it our right to take over more and more of their natural habitat. The human capacity to traumatisise is not restricted to ourselves or even the animals we consider our own, but is extending into wild animal populations (see: nonhumancommunications.blogspot.com/2007/01/surprise-animals-suffer-ptsd-too.html). The full impact of this problem for our species and others is described
in detail in Peter Levine's book mentioned above.

It has been understood that although an event in itself might be traumatic, much of the success in assimilating and rationalising the event by the central nervous system depends on the support formed by a secure, familiar, and healthy family environment. In my opinion, this is the most fundamental element of a horse's life we are responsible for disrupting and often destroying entirely. If a foal in a wild herd were attacked by a mountain lion for example, the response from their central nervous system would be the arousal of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). This is referred to as the 'fight or flight response'. It is an involuntary reaction, and stimulates physiological changes which supply the foal with extra energy and strength to either run away or fight (the fight response being more common in predators). This gives him the highest chance of survival. If he runs and escapes, then he will return immediately to his family environment where primarily his dam, and all the other members of the band will support his recovery. Being with his family helps him to release the 'left over' energy, recover from the shock of the encounter, and rationalise and memorise the experience normally.

The third possible reaction mentioned above is called the 'freeze' response. The other branch of the ANS is the parasympathetic nervous system, and when activated it affects the body in the opposite way from the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). In essence it has calming, relaxing effects. If the foal was caught by the lion, at the point of being caught, when there was be no further possibility of escape, at the height of the SNS arousal, the PNS is triggered at the same time. This results in the freezing or immobility response, the same as when a mouse 'plays dead' when caught by a cat. When this occurs, the foal does not feel pain or fear in the same way, he enters a dissociated state of mind and body, similar to being anaesthetised. This state increases the chance of survival by discouraging the attacker, as well as making the experience less horrific for
the victim. The occurrence of freezing during a traumatic experience is thought to increase the risk of developing PTSD in people, although wild animals can recover without complications. It is of interest to horse owners because horses seem to have a particular aptitude for entering the dissociated state, and becoming almost addicted to it as an escape from any circumstances they perceive to be unbearable. The unresolved energy which is held in the system of a traumatised horse will surface in different ways such as stressed behaviour, disassociation, depression and aggression.

Some horses cope better than others: like people, they have different tolerances. In general those with a more laid back temperament genetically will suffer less. Much also depends on the correct development of the brain during the maternal care period and, to some extent, the intensity of the traumatic experience, but this is subjective, which is probably why people are slow to recognise the full extent of the problem. What we might regard as a normal event might be highly traumatising for our horse. This is why understanding our own horse on the unique, personal level, rather than trying to apply a rigid system of training, is so important.

**In essence, horses can be traumatised by anything which effectively separates them from or threatens their basic integrity as a prey species living in a herd in a particular environment.** That means that most things we do with horses are potentially traumatising for them. We have removed them from the physical environment which their health systems are best adapted to, and we often separate them from each other and prevent them from running away from threats they perceive around them. We hurt them physically, often unknowingly, but sometimes purposefully.
Wild horses are also exposed to threat and discomfort all the time though. They survive storms, predation of their young, illness, forest fires, harsh winters and lack of food and water. Sometimes they don't survive, so why do they not develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The reason that PTSD seems to be unknown in wild animals which are living their natural lifestyles may have a lot to do with the presence of secure family structures and behavioural routines which favour the normal recovery following a traumatic event. The lifestyle we often create for our horses is artificial and therefore full of threats which they are not evolved to be able to assimilate successfully. Some of these threats result in pain, both psychological (loneliness, abandonment, depression etc.) and physical (hunger, stiffness, pain etc.), and some will not materialise into suffering. Maybe the fact that our domestic horses are often not able to draw on beneficial memories as a result of growing up and surmounting these threats in a secure family environment, means that they therefore have less resources to cope with the threats when they do appear. This overwhelms their central nervous systems and makes effective discharge of the resulting arousal energy inadequate.

In a wild herd, a young horse would be learning from the moment of his birth to exercise his central nervous system in the way which best favoured his survival. He would have personal experiences of danger or observed experiences of other horses in danger - from the weather, predators, the environment etc. - and he would form a sound and healthy response. He would be adjusted to his life and its demands. In the same way as the immune system grows and adjusts to the demands of the environment of its host, the central nervous system surely requires the same development. Foals brought up by mares without the support of the herd environment, other mothers, aunts, grannies etc. as well as the stallion himself
and younger sons, will not have the opportunities to develop their neural structures and pathways as the equine species has evolved to do.

Domestic foals are often raised by a single mare. In this scenario the mare will not have the support of the other horses in a normal social group, and will not benefit from the same opportunity to rest and therefore give her baby higher quality care. The foal will not have the same multiple relationships and experiences of the community of the herd. Later on this foal is likely to be forcibly weaned at six months of age, a highly traumatic event which he or she is unlikely to have the inner resources or external support to recover successfully from. This 'layer' of trauma energy is likely to be the first of many, all of which will be associated with humans. In fact very few domestic horses will reach middle age without some level of trapped traumatic energy which persistently overloads their central nervous systems and is diverted (to avoid complete meltdown) into the trauma symptoms described above. Trauma sufferers become trapped in a vicious circle of hyper-arousal with no effective escape route for the energy. Their environment becomes more and more threatening and their central nervous system is similar to a pressure cooker approaching the point of explosion. The energy is constantly diverted into various different routes which helps to prevent a meltdown, but cannot liberate the sufferer.

We expose horses to many circumstances and experiences which are foreign to them and often provide very little compensation. Taking away their freedom to forage for themselves, and the way they structure that self-reliance naturally, is a major step towards destabilising their concept of reality. This must increase their susceptibility to all nervous disorders. We have also become accustomed to torturing them when we ride and train them, and not even noticing when they subsequently begin to display neurotic behaviour. Torturing is a strong word, but imagine being forced to hold your neck in a particular way for long enough to
cause permanent damage, or being made to carry someone out on a ride for hours and hours without a break when your spine was not in a strong shape. Imagine being exposed to jabbing metal spikes every day until your skin became chronically bruised and sore, or having a bit jammed against the sides of your mouth until the skin became hard. Most of us take all that for granted and continue to push the boundaries of acceptability: riding horses when they are younger and younger, jumping them and competing them earlier, using spurs and double bridles (which I feel is never necessary or even acceptable) sooner and sooner in the course of their training.

Although stating these facts may seem to be judgmental, I don't think blame or guilt are ever solutions. The only thing which can change how we behave towards others is feeling good about ourselves. My aim is only to try to state things a bit more clearly. When we are used to traditions, even if they have only been traditions for a short time relative to the evolution of our species, we can become surprisingly blind. Sometimes we only rethink things when they are not softened and justified. This is particularly important as concerns horses because their suffering is easy to ignore. The signs of a horse dissociating are subtle if you haven't become familiar with recognising them. Even a horse having an emotional breakdown is often seen as normal. The most traumatised horse I have ever seen was one allotted to me in a British Horse Society exam to teach a lunge lesson with. The examiners would have thought I was insane had I said anything at the time about the state of the horse, and they still would today.
There is no point in feeling bad about the mistakes we have made in the past, and every reason to feel good about bringing a horse back into the present to enjoy life with her friends and your company, or rehabilitating a horse to accept training as a result of his trust in you. *The first step is to recognise the truth and stop trying to gloss over it.* Many horses are very unhappy for no good reason.

**What Traumatises A Horse?**

- **Limiting their freedom to move.**

The most extreme limitation is keeping horses in stables in solitary confinement. Even with ad-lib food, companions within sight, and for certain periods of time only, *stabling is still highly unnatural for horses.* Often there is not always sufficient food, and the necessity to be able to search for food is integral to a horse’s nature. Not being able to do this is therefore profoundly stressful. Other horses being in sight is *not* the same as being *with* other horses, and is often perceived as threatening by horses who are kept permanently segregated. They are highly physical animals - contact is calming for them. Even a reasonable level of kicking and biting within a herd is normal and maintains normal behaviour. Bizarre behaviours seem to arise more as a result of *lack* of contact.
The main problem with stabling horses however, is that they are not sedentary animals. Imagine how it might feel to be a creature who finds their purpose in movement. Moving makes you feel healthy; it stimulates your digestion, your lymph system and your blood circulation. Feeling good in your body makes you feel calm in your mind. Moving is not only what you have evolved to be doing most of the time, it is also interesting and often exciting. Moving is partly how you communicate with your friends, how you express yourself. It is how you explore and find food. Can you imagine all that energy and vitality being confined to a tiny space? This is why some horses dissociate when they are imprisoned like this, their only way out is to mentally evacuate their body because they can't fulfill its needs, and the permanent anxiety created by this is too stressful to stay with. We cannot experience directly what they perceive when they do this, but some of the work I have done with horses makes me think of it being for them like a kind of day dreaming that they resort to, perhaps departing mentally to a ‘place’ that was safe and pleasant for that horse at some time in their lives. The book by Nicci Mackay *Spoken In Whispers: The Autobiography of a Horse Whisperer* offers a fascinating insight into the way horses see the world.

Some horses are lucky even to go out daily into a tiny square paddock because at least then they can move slightly more naturally. There are horses who *never* move of their own free will in an entire lifetime beyond the walls of a stable or indoor school. Remember also that people have voluntarily lived in restricted spaces for many thousands of years, whereas horses certainly have not. Wild horses are *never* confined unless trapped by humans. How can we take these liberties so easily then?

*Because horses accept it.*

Usually with minimal apparent fuss. We condition them to accept it by distracting them with food and then they become institutionalised and can even come to depend on it. Such dependency is only ever based on fear born out of anxiety as a result of losing the connection with their true nature however. The signs of unhappiness *are* there though, even if only in the absence of that true nature in their personalities. Watch footage of wild horses and it is evident that they are
vibrant and dynamic animals. They are intelligent and self-reliant, and proud to be so.

**Signs of institutionalisation:**

- **Switched-off, eyes glazed over look.** This is closely related to the 'freeze' state when the horse is faced with certain death or prolonged suffering. It is simply a way of escaping that horses seem to have a particular affinity with. Maybe because they are prey animals, and the freeze response is especially highly developed in them.

- **Repetitive stress behaviours such as cribbing, weaving and box-walking.** Most horses will distract themselves from the restriction of their liberty by eating, which we consider normal. If they run out of food or feel separation anxiety too strongly to eat, then they will often find comfort in a repetitive behaviour or 'vice' as it is called. It is rather ridiculous that there is an element of blame in the word vice, as if the horse was at fault for this behaviour. Like people, those horses who are more reactive, intelligent or curious will often become more twisted by confinement because they need more stimulation to absorb their energy, and when they don't find that stimulation externally, it turns inward and becomes self-destructive.

- **Lack of curiosity or wish to explore.** At HHT we noticed how radically our horse’s mind-set altered when they changed from going out in fields to the *Paddock Paradise* set-up. At first they didn't even seem to notice the possibilities of the lane network, slightly reminiscent of the zoo animals who cannot go beyond the confines of a cage they have been in for too long, even when they have been moved to a completely different enclosure. Gradually their interest started to spark and their spirit of adventure fired up. Seeing the change in their outlook and personalities was enough to give us a horror of keeping them prisoner ever again, even in the apparent freedom of an ordinary fenced area.

Most of us who have owned or looked after horses for a long time, and have been putting them in stables for a long time, are of the opinion that horses
like their stable, and it is true that they will happily enter a stable. Usually this is because there will be food there, and for an animal whose number one priority in life is finding food, this is a big incentive. Try leaving the door open behind them though, and see how long they want to hang around once they feel full enough. Even in weather we wouldn't go out in if we had the slightest choice, or in the middle of the night when we instinctively seek the security of a confined space, they will be off.

Traditions in horse care run very deep, and it will not be easy to change things. *Where there is a will there is a way* however, and the personal decision is the hardest part. After that your solutions will come to you. I wonder now why it took us so long to realise much of what now seems to be so obvious.

- **Limiting their relationships with other horses.** Sadly the idea that horses hurt each other and therefore must be kept separate often becomes a reality because of the way people manage them, creating a vicious circle which takes patience and courage to break.

It could happen like this:

*A bunch of young horses run together at the stud, perfectly healthy in wind and limb and, just as importantly, sane and well-socialised. Someone comes along and buys one of these youngsters, and has her transported to their livery yard. The new young mare is approaching her third year and her owner decides to get her shod because she wants to send her to a yard to be backed at some point soon. Whether or not this is a rational decision doesn't matter, it is the traditional course of action in this particular horse community. Equipped with her new*
shoes, the filly is put out in the field where she has been going for the last few weeks with a pony she has befriended and some other horses. A few days later another new horse arrives and is put in the same field straight away. This horse is an older gelding who has seen a bit of life and he can't be bothered with youngsters. When the filly approaches he drives her away and she turns to strike out in a normal defensive response - after all she was there first and she has to protect her pony friend too. She connects with the gelding in what would have been a hard clout leaving a bit of a bruise, but now that her shod feet are dangerous weapons, her kick results in a hairline fracture.

The repercussions from this accident result in the young mare being removed from the field and kept safely in a paddock beside the other horses. She is considered mare-ish and unpredictable and is better going out on her own. Peace of mind for her owner and the owner of the yard, but overnight this mare's world has collapsed. She has already recently lost the constant security of her family herd and replaced that with her pony friend she trusted, they grazed together and groomed together and ran and played together. Now she is not only without any of those vital stabilising and motivating activities, she is also an outcast. To a wild horse, who is not an entire male following his lone explorer instincts, being alone, (apart from the short period when a mare is foaling), is the next thing to dying. This is no different for a domesticated horse, after all the instincts which have been developed are hundreds of thousands of years old, and selective breeding may have changed certain physical attributes, but it has not been directed towards breeding out the herd animal instincts. Now there is no one to guard her when she sleeps, no one to swish off the flies, and no companionship. If most people were put into such a solitary life-style few of them would remain sound in mind and spirit for long.

She becomes fearful and depressed and when she does get close to another horse on the yard, she reacts aggressively and people agree that she is antisocial with other horses. Over time she starts to become aggressive with people and she is well started on the vicious circle of aggression and abuse before she is even four years old. When she goes to yet another new yard to be backed the staff have been warned in advance of her unpredictable nature, they know how to sort out horses like that - they don't stand for any nonsense...
This particular story is fictional, but based on similar true stories and the chain of events is not uncommon, whatever the original reason. The real solution is a shift in our philosophy.

Examples of fear-based incentives:

• Having just bought an expensive horse so he can't be put at risk.
• Unstable herd hierarchy due to horses coming and going all the time because they are treated as commodities.
• Not wanting the horse's appearance affected by bite marks which happen as a result of geldings' play-fighting or normal herd politics.
• Thinking that horses running around together will cause further damage to an injury.
• Worrying about horses escaping and being in danger, especially at night.
• Making judgments about which horse gets on with which, and segregating perceived enemies.

The list is as long as the extent of people's fearful imagination. It is not actually necessary not to worry about things (although it is a good idea to address it, according to the Law of Attraction!), only necessary not to act on our fears all the time. When we act on them, we give them power and restrict our world a bit more until eventually the fears take over our lives, and those of our horses.
Recently we integrated our smart little warm-blood fillies into the main herd. The idea of eleven strong, opinionated adult horses being liberated with what could easily seem like two vulnerable and delicate baby horses, without their mothers to protect them, was definitely a bit daunting! Even after all we have seen of horses, their altruism and wisdom, and their innate ability to revert to what is natural, healthy and sane, it still felt like a risk. As it turned out, through this integration we were given another lesson in why not to act on your fears and imagine you can improve the world by controlling it. In fact the herd became the guardians and the surrogate mothers of the foals as soon as they were given the chance. They had been disapproving of the fact that the girls had been weaned unnaturally and had no mothers, but wasted no time in filling the gap. The foals were genuinely happy, and even when the herd insisted that they must join in (without any aggressive domineering), it was obvious that they were exactly where they should be - with their own kind. They did a lot of running in weather which was warm for the season, and then a few days later they stayed with the herd in a storm and heavy rain when the temperature dropped. Instead of this being a recipe for chills and colds (they were rugged in the storm admittedly!) one of the foals who had been taking a long time to throw off a cold when they were not yet with the herd, actually recovered from it over this period. We forget that the most powerful healer is the mind. Injuries sustained by happy horses are healed much more quickly and profoundly. Human interference is famed to be more destructive than constructive, but only if we are listening to our fears. Fears have a way of seeking us out until we face them anyway, and we can't control what happens no matter how much we try.
The fact is that if we want horses to trust us and be happy to build something with us, we must be willing to accept that the company of other horses is an imperative for them. Any horse kept apart from other horses will be anxious and stressed, whether we can see it or not.

Jenny, the grey mare in the photo below, was living on a farm without any other horses when we went to see her. She was for sale because her owner was going to university. She was much loved and everyone on the farm would visit her and give her sweets, maybe because they could sense that she wasn't really getting what she needed. She became very fat but seemed to be quite happy with her routine.

We bought her for a small amount and put her in a field with another horse, the first horse she had been beside for many years. It was only at this point that it became clear how much she had been suffering on her own. She became obsessed with this other horse, a middle aged gelding, and she couldn't bear to let him out of her sight. She was never further than a few feet from him in the field. Although she changed yards and had to be separated from this horse, the next horse she met had the same effect on her. Her traumatisation surfaced in any separation situation, as well as any time she felt vulnerable. She would go out on hacks without pulling, but after the turn for home she was difficult to control.

Jenny had never been able to build enough of a trust bond with people because she did not have a sound basis from which to do so. We are not horses, and just
as they can't give us everything other people give us, we can't give horses everything they need from each other. I was not old enough to question why Jenny behaved the way she did. She was not an unusual case either. Most horses I saw displayed the same anxiety at various times and no one really thought about it. The only concern was how to get them to do what we wanted from them. Now I have learned to recognise whether a horse is happy or not, even such a situation as Jenny's previous home, where her unhappiness was less overt. One of the most effective ways to learn is by comparison. If you know what a contented horse is like, you will be able to sense when that is missing.

**We have to remember that part of the reason there are so many traumatised horses is that their suffering is easy to ignore.** It may be easier to ignore it than make sure things are working on a management level, but when the problems surface in the training we can see that the convenience wasn't worth it. And the problems *always* surface.

- **Exposure to pain and discomfort**

  **In Training Situations:**

  For much of human civilization we have been accustomed to treating horses as our slaves, or servants. Sometimes we justify that by telling ourselves it is a trade-off, we give them food and care and they work for us. Although it's probably not a trade-off many people would make themselves, considering the sacrifices horses are expected to make for us. Other people think it is our right as the more intelligent species to make use of other animals, or even that we are not animals, we are a higher race which has been chosen as guardian and master of animals. Whatever the justification, we have exploited horses to their limit for long enough to be entirely habituated to the idea.

  Now as the human consciousness begins to accelerate its evolution, many of us are questioning the basis of this dominant relationship and feeling that we want something different. Of course it is not 'different' from what has always existed. Although it cannot be proven - just as empathy and wisdom must have always
existed in human society - even from the beginning of domesticating horses, certain people must have done it out of love, forming relationships with horses based on trust and mutual affection. Any training method can be practiced out of love or out of fear. This is why no training method is right or wrong, although it is true that there are certain biomechanical truths which must be recognised. No training method in itself is anything more than the intention of the individual carrying it out. **Aspiring trainers need only think about their own motivations and the right way will open out for them, the ins and outs of methodology come later.**

It can save time to be able to recognise the common causes of trauma for horses concerning training however, simply because horses do not always let us know about their discomfort, nor refuse to work when we are hurting them. Of course they will try to escape, but just as when we keep them in stables against their will, it can be easy to ignore, especially if we are getting what we want out of them anyway.

As has been said many times, and I believe is true to a large extent, it is not the training equipment that can do the damage but the hands behind it. Just as we can't hide behind a method, we can't blame the tack either. I don't believe this theory extends as far as the use of gadgets, double bridles or spurs however. When the motivation for using the equipment is flawed, then it doesn't matter how it is used, the result will not be valuable. The idea of using a severe mechanism so that you can be more sensitive is ludicrous when you stop to think about it. If you wanted to be more sensitive with soft butter you would use a less sharp knife. Double bridles are, in fact, used to force horses to soften in their jaw and collect (falsely). Riding which is biomechanically correct will result in voluntary softening of the jaw and real collection. Spurs are used when horses are insensitive to the leg. However carefully you put a spur into a horse's side, it is still much sharper than the flat side of your leg. The only reason horses don't become sensitive to the leg, which should massage and softens their sides, is because the leg is not being used in that way and/or they are not free to go forward as the bit is blocking their progress. **Spurs do not make horses more sensitive**, they make them more tense, and they react more quickly as a response to the pain or discomfort. Neither do spurs encourage a gradual
sensitisation so they can ultimately be discarded; the opposite in fact is true. Riding a horse without spurs who is normally ridden with them is usually similar to riding a large lump of wood. Gadgets designed to improve a horse’s top-line are similarly irrational. The only thing which improves a horse's top-line is the horse's voluntary use of his own ring of engagement. External lines and straps can only cause his own body-weight to be used against him in a way which can be traumatising because it can cause pain and physical damage. To train a horse effectively is one and the same as training a horse kindly because the only work from a horse which is valuable is voluntary, and work will only be voluntary if it is asked for with respect and affection.

Horses have many ways of indicating that they are in pain or discomfort, depending on the extent of it and their tolerance to it. Some of these are:

- Ears flattened back for longer than a moment.
- Eyes rolling or showing white
- Teeth grinding and tail swishing
- Tail (dock) clamped down
- Agitation and fearfulness in general
- Heavy sweating
- Heavy breathing
- Tongue coming out (often to protect edges of mouth)
- Stopping, half rearing, rearing or spinning round
- Biting round at rider
- Constant neighing
- Continual shaking of head
- Raising up head out of 'angle of control'
- Rearing
- Running away/bolting/bucking
- Persistent spooking

It is not always possible to train entirely without discomfort, just as riding for ourselves is often hard work and requires some blood, sweat and tears, often working through physical and even emotional limitations with horses does demand some effort.
For example, one of my mares, Hope, went through a period of grinding her teeth when she became particularly straight in her work. I didn't force her to continue, and she was never held by the rein, but the grinding was not only concentration, I am sure it expressed discomfort in her spine or pelvis. If she ever found it too much she would indicate that she wanted to stop and we would stop. Over time she did grind less and some days not at all. In the course of her life training/healing or 'unwinding' process she became strong enough to let go of a major pelvic compensation and since then the tooth grinding has ceased.

I don't believe she would have built the muscular strength to let go of the compensation so she could address the underlying damage if we had stopped when she started grinding her teeth originally, but I don't believe I crossed her boundary either.

This story illustrates that signs are only indications and not rules. Tooth grinding in some horses is an indication that their boundary is being forced, the individual horse must be given the space to decide. If you can ride consistently without forcing boundaries then this will become natural.

Knowing how much is too much is finding the line between what is constructive and what is destructive. This line is only truly there when the work has a basis in gymnastic reality. In other words, if you are permanently driving the horse into a wall created by the bit, or similarly continuously sitting in a fork seat where the seat-bones are acting backwards on the horse's back, then all of the work is destructive. If you are engaging the horse fairly and it is hard work for him to use his body like that, then at a certain point the stress of
this effort will become counterproductive. Sensing this line is what I believe successful training is all about. If you can teach yourself to feel the horse's boundary and support it rather than push through it, then what you are doing will always be valuable. The more you can do this, the more sensitive your relationship will become, both you to him, and him to you.

In Management Situations: Hunger, Thirst and Boredom

Interestingly, some of the most difficult cases we have worked with in terms of regaining horses' trust were those of physical neglect. Neglect which has gone too far seems to change something in a horse's outlook, and sometimes it never comes back fully no matter how assiduous the care is after that. Of course horses are individuals, and if they choose to let the past trauma go, their original cheerfulness and curiosity will return. The reason for the profound effect on a horse's psyche is probably to do with the fundamental nature of the requirement for food and water. It is the bottom line for survival and if a horse is deprived by humans at this basic a level, they will take some convincing to change their perception back.

Sometimes a more subtle level of nutritional deprivation is used to keep horses more easily controlled. This cannot be done without consequences either; horses are sensitive to fear however it presents itself. Apart from the fact that such horses are only less excitable at the expense of their health and vitality, suppleness and strength.

Exposure to boredom and its consequences is part of restricting a horse's freedom to entertain himself. Boredom is to be avoided at all costs because it results in a horse then being incapable of entertaining themselves. Horses in a herd do spend a considerable amount of time resting; it is normal behaviour. However if they are traumatised as a result of boredom, they are rarely happy just to rest and relax without entering into a pacifying behaviour such as cribbing or weaving. Horses such as this will stand in a massive territory at a fence post and wind-suck on it. Traumatisation or PTSD are names for when the normal functioning of the nervous system has been altered (damaged), a bit like an
over-stretched elastic band. The natural elasticity (adaptability) is lost and the external environment is no longer addressed for what it is. It is as if the horse is continuously re-living the traumatic scenario in their mind and cannot see the reality around themselves anymore. It is a very sad thing to see.

In Handling Situations: Exposure to fear and discomfort

Often procedures such as shoeing, injections from the vet, equine dentistry, clipping, and even giving horses syringe administered wormers, can be a traumatic event for them. In the majority of cases it is always the same mistake we make, forcing a horse's boundaries. Instead of listening when the horse communicates her fear to us, and backing off, we push on and put the horse in a situation which is similar to being caught by a predator. They cannot run away, so they either fight or dissociate as they would in the wild state. Our demands and our presence then becomes a perpetual threat which doesn't go away as a lion would. It makes no difference that we might know whatever we want to do 'doesn't hurt' or is 'for their own good'. As far as they are concerned we have put them in a life-threatening situation.

Most of the descriptions above are routine scenarios which horses are exposed to every day. There are some common single 'events' however, which can be enough to traumatisate a horse for life. They are threshold events in most horses' lives and must be recognised for their significance. The number of horses we have worked with for most of their live to resolve issues around these events has made us realise that prevention truly is better than cure.

Weaning:

Horses which have not grown up with an affectionate and stable mother figure will be less likely to cope with stressful situations later in life because the development of certain neural structures can be inhibited. They will be more easily traumatised than other horses. It may be impossible to prevent such a scenario, but we can certainly change the way we interfere with the vital natural evolution of the relationship between mother and foal. This one event has been
at the root of more cases of traumatisation of horses in my experience than any other. Natural weaning happens as a result of the mare having another foal, so she will stop allowing her previous foal to suckle, or the youngster simply becomes more and more independent. They are not separated from each other physically. Often horses will associate stables with the trauma of this separation because they were confined in a stable at this time. We have found the horses we left to wean themselves naturally to be much calmer leaving the herd when they are older, and being on their own in general. Horses this fortunate are sadly rare, and if we rarely see horses without some degree of separation anxiety, how do we know what is normal?

**Backing:**

Riding horses has no natural counterpart of course, so we have to take the responsibility fully to find a way of preparing and introducing the horse to a rider, and teaching them to accept and obey a rider, without traumatising them. Many horse trainers in the past, and still now, did not think of the process in those terms at all. They accepted that it was by its nature a traumatic experience and that this aspect of it was necessary, 'breaking the horse's spirit' was the whole point. They wanted an animal as close to a machine as possible. One-sided communication only, not a friendship based on mutual trust. Backing young horses requires **physical preparation**, and during this process, and largely because of it, the trust bond is established. Horses understand very well if they can trust people to listen to their physical needs; and if we can help them to develop the balance and capacity to carry us in comfort, they appreciate that profoundly. There is a misapprehension that the faster a horse can be backed, the more successful the training procedure must be. The more we grab at the beginning, the higher the price will be later on. Nothing is gained from rushing this opportunity to lay the best foundations possible for our future with a horse.
Imagine a domestic horse 'traumatisation' scenario. We take a young horse towards an indoor school. The youngster has never seen a place like that and is alone without his herd, already he is worried and his anxiety is rising. He has a 'controller' head-collar on which has metal studs where it comes over the poll. His fight or flight reaction is fully aroused by the studs pressing into his neck which cause him pain, as he is forced to enter this strange place with mirrors and unfamiliar noises, so he fills up with energy and tries to take flight. The studs dig into his neck again and he is prevented from taking off. The pain forces him to go forward, further from safety. Then he is released and instantly chased away aggressively by the human he now associates with pain and fear. Fueled by adrenalin he runs for a long time, continually chased and constantly searching for a way out, away from the 'lion'. There is no way out, and exhaustion makes him turn to face his tormentor, his parasympathetic nervous system is already activating to protect him from whatever might happen, he is losing his grasp on the present moment and entering the freeze state. He accepts strange equipment being put on his back and his head because he can't feel much anyway; it feels good to be out of his body and not having to address this nightmare.

Afterwards he is put into a small, dark space with a large nest of straw. There is plenty of hay to eat, but no one to touch him and groom with, no one he trusts to communicate his distress to and let go of his shock with. He still feels overwhelmed and he is unable to release that energy. His body may be still, but he cannot truly rest and his mind is already turning back into that safe place he discovered where his solitude is no longer real and he doesn't have to feel his sore muscles or that corrosive anxiety of existence without the herd. The next time he sees a person he is a little bit less present, although another session of re-exposure to the torment of the day before will re-traumatisé him, deepening the gulf between him and human beings as well as the pathway in his nervous system to the safe dissociated state.
How Can A Traumatised Horse Be Healed?

One of our geldings, now aged seventeen, is a typical example of a PTSD sufferer although he has made such progress that his life is largely pleasurable. He would ricochet between high stress behaviour and dissociation when we bought him from a client after things were beginning to go wrong. He would jog relentlessly on a hack and if he had been given the freedom, he would simply have bolted for home. He did run away in the arena if he wasn't ridden in a very strong, forceful manner. He had no real personality in those days, and when he wasn't anxious he was tuned-out or he distracted himself by eating. An interesting trait he had, which we noticed at some point along the way, is that he seemed to always want to find himself back in the 'being forced' situation. Reading Peter Levine's book 'Waking The Tiger' in which he talks about trauma sufferers perpetual search for the same traumatic experience (what he calls 're-enactment') makes more sense of his behaviour. Re-enactment is the central nervous system’s way of attempting to learn or resolve the experience, to gain from it or rationalise it, but it tends to end up as another cycle of the same traumatic experience. In Tali's case he would appear so stubborn and recalcitrant that he made whoever was working with him want to force him into submission and repeat the vicious circle of re-traumatisation. Once we realised what was happening, we stopped entering into the pattern and stayed gentle and patient with him, even when he behaved in a seemingly utterly irrational way. One of his major 'triggers' is picking up or handling his feet on the stable yard (when this is done in the field or elsewhere he usually
remains calm). When he enters this traumatised behaviour he will behave as if he cannot lift up his foot at all without falling over, and the only way to react to this without entering the vicious circle is to give the foot back as soon as he wants it back – often as soon as he has lifted it. It is the same scenario as Odette and the mane-pulling trigger in Training a Horse without Force Part 1. With this patient approach, he eventually regains enough trust to allow his foot to be lifted for longer.

As with people and any other animal, healing is a personal choice. If we love our horses we can support their healing as far as we are able and beyond that it is up to them. Sometimes they are not ready to deal with the healing process on any level and in those cases they will not be in a position which supports their healing.

The first and foremost healer is returning your horse to a lifestyle with as many of the natural elements described above as possible. The herd is the greatest healer of all, and we should never underestimate its power.

From my own healing process, I believe that the most important first step in healing trauma is recognition. Recognition is always the key, whether the subject is training or healing and whether trauma is present or not. I believe this is the case because when we truly recognise what is there, we will access the universal intelligence. In healing, this may be the innate healing intelligence in all of us, in training it may be the wisdom or the information that is there for anyone if they choose to look.
Recognising trauma can take place on different levels. Firstly, recognising behaviour patterns and states so that the presence of traumatisation can be accepted and responded to appropriately. Although the actual procedure with a traumatised horse is usually different from a normal horse, the means by which you recognise what action to take is not, so if you can sensitise your approach, and then you will not go too far wrong because you will always become aware of the presence of trauma before you react in a way which might perpetuate the traumatisation cycle.

The recognition of trauma on an energetic level is a sense which must be developed in the same way as you develop your ability to feel a horse's needs when you are training them. Practice and self-belief are the only requirements. There are ways of supporting the healing process from trauma in horses which are very powerful, and are described in depth in my upcoming guide to energetic healing. The exercise at the end of this supplement introduces the concept of supporting the Trauma Boundary.

**Indicators Of Past Traumatisation In A Horse**

- I find that the best indicator of a horse’s state of being is the expression in their eye. If you start to look at it often, you will pick up better and better what the different expressions mean, as they can be subtle if you are not used to reading them. I find the blank expression in a horse's eye the saddest expression possible because it seems to be without hope; in fact it is without expression. It is definitely possible to bring a horse’s personality back when they have reached this stage of unhappiness with the present moment, but not without their assent.

- Agitation at any change in routine which doesn't seem to pass easily, in fact the original agitation seems to feed itself and the horse becomes more and more wound up. Horses in this state are very difficult to reach and will often elicit anger or impatience from their handlers because their trauma begins to resonate with the horse's.

- Anxiety about specific procedures which may increase over time. Anticipation
of the event may also increase. Common procedures are shoeing, clipping, dentistry, injections and mane pulling. Even catching and putting a head-collar or a bridle on can become a trigger. The sign is that no matter how the scenario is approached, the horse will go into the trauma cycle and will seem to be unaware of the fact that this time there is no pain or force.

• Apparent stubbornness when asked to go forward, for example into a trailer. Sometimes horses will 'plant' themselves completely and seem to be immovable. I don't feel the solution to this is to rile them up again, whether it is 'nicely' by swing ropes, or 'nastily' with whips or yard brushes. In order to unfreeze the helplessness reaction which is making the horse feel completely powerless, we must lower our own vibration right down, and make ourselves as unthreatening as possible – perhaps by crouching right down low to the ground, or gently grooming the horse; and most importantly we need to accept and appreciate that the horse is in the grip of a traumatic response and absolutely not being awkward or stubborn. When we do that - if we can be patient - we may witness a release of fear-based emotion such as grief or even anger by resonating with it ourselves. After that the horse can 'unfreeze' and will often yield to our demands.

In all of the above examples the common theme is that the horse is not 'in the present'. They will behave as if they are largely unaware of your presence and they can't listen to you because they are somewhere else in their minds. Just being present with a horse in this state is a very valuable connection you can make, but try to do it without expectations (which is in the very nature of being truly present). You will not necessarily see the value of what you have done straight away.
Working With Threat

If a horse has a traumatic association with a specific procedure or object, working with this carefully and exceptionally patiently can help them to re-integrate. Traumatisation can be thought of as a kind of fragmentation of the self. Some people think of it in terms of a physiological disintegration where the neural processes have lost their coordination, others see it as a leaking of energy from the core, or the spirit being separated from the body (in a near death experience the soul/spirit/mind will seem to 'leave' the body and observe from a distance, it is thought that when the body has been so badly damaged, we rise out of it to some degree as a coping mechanism). I think all of these explanations are valid and address the concept in different dimensions. Of course there will be a purely physical explanation, because trauma happens on a physical level, but that in no way excludes what happens on an energetic or spiritual level. None of these dimensions can be separated anyway because they occur as simultaneous parts of a living being.

It is important to appreciate when working with equine trauma victims that the vicious circle which is continuously activating itself in the CNS is easily aggravated further, and therapy of any kind must be a particularly gradual, gentle process. This is also true with human sufferers, but with a horse there are less straightforward means of communication and no opportunity to employ a rational thought process at any time. The advantage however is that horses are so well engaged with their innate healing wisdom, and when you can reach them on that level the intelligence is astounding and words fall far short of its power. This is a subject I want to go into in my future horse healing e-book. The therapeutic procedure described here requires only a reasonable level of sensitivity and patience on the part of the handler. To explain the concept of 'working with threat' I will describe the two sessions when I worked with Sophie, a Breton draught mare who was living and working with another mare at a small organic farm in the North of France.
Sophie's history was inconsistent. Whereas she was loved and cared for at the time I saw her, she had been treated with a mixture of trickery and brutality when she was being broken to harness. These methods were not employed specially for Sophie, but simply traditions which had not been rethought despite their ineffectiveness. Sophie was certainly traumatised as a result of this process, and during her work she was in a permanent state of hyper-arousal which was making her progressively more and more difficult to control. Not funny when she weighs around a ton and, along with her friend, is pulling a plough!

Sophie had a profound sadness about her, which didn't seem to be related to her work, and in discussing her history with her owner it came out that she had previously been stabled next to another mare with whom she had been very close. The other mare was pregnant when she was purchased with Sophie, and went into labour unexpectedly. She suffered for many hours before she died without help, and Sophie watched everything from her stable. Her present owner was surprised that this event would affect her so much, but in my experience horses are at least as emotionally complex as humans, and when it comes to their family and friends, their relationships are sacred. She will never forget the loss of her friend in that way, even if she may process the grief better over time.

The lack of human help, despite having been shut in particularly small stables, will not have improved Sophie's trust in people, which was already minimal after her training. Her innate generosity of spirit did make a big difference though, and she was surprisingly open to the present moment and new things.
In this situation the time available for me to spend with Sophie was minimal, and her healing would take many years. In an ideal situation I would have wanted to change her lifestyle and arrange for her to be out all the time in a more stimulating environment. This could have been arranged easily, and would have made a big difference to her ability to manage her traumatic stress. Staying in a stable all evening and night, hardly moving and separate from another horse does not provide favourable emotional and physical conditions for any horse, let alone a traumatised one.

Starting as close to the very first signs of tension is advisable when a horse has multiple traumatic associations. For Sophie, the beginning was seeing a person approach with a head-collar when she knew it was time to work. Because she was well treated and she received apples and affection when her owner came in the morning, this was not a stressful event. Putting the head-collar on was mildly stressful for her because this could mean work, or it could mean being groomed and put out.

The key to the process is to read what the horse is telling you and respond in the appropriate way. Horses are flight animals and when they perceive a threat they become ready to run. This is a state of high tension and also a moment of choice. Whether they run or stay depends on the choice they make about the threat. When we traumatise them through our actions they don't normally have that choice. This is because the way we usually structure our handling of horses limits their freedom i.e. tying up, cross-ties, stables, arenas and bridles. To begin to allow the possibility of a break in the negative energy cycle of trauma, our first step is to give horses back that choice (this is why relative freedom during this work is a good idea if at all possible i.e. working with the horse loose in a large fenced area).

I believe that highly traumatised horses have 'damaged' boundaries. This can be felt in an energetic context, but can also be sensed in terms of emotions and observed in their behaviour. Looking at the question of trauma in terms of boundaries can help us to understand how to relate to these horses. When a horse cannot make a realistic choice about a possible threat, he is either over-reactive or has no reaction at all, and he can be seen as lacking the normal integrity in his boundaries. Translated into 'trauma' language, this means a
horse in a state of high tension (over-reactive) or one who is dissociated (unreactive). Either way the horse is not capable of being in that moment or judging his situation calmly and effectively. Helping the horse to reestablish healthy boundaries is about respecting his choices whether they seem reasonable to us or not. In other words respecting the boundaries, as they exist for that horse. If this can be done consistently, then - a little bit in the way you would gather up dropped stitches in knitting - because you are always supporting the edge of the 'damaged' boundary, it begins to find it's normal shape again.

How does that translate into practical reality? When Sophie showed the slightest sign of apprehension at the arrival of the head-collar (because it was her very first 'anxiety symbol'), then it was necessary to back off and wait until she relaxed again. If she was a wild horse with a natural lifestyle, and she had seen something she was not sure about, then she would wait, while becoming charged with energy, and if the possible threat did not materialise, she would gradually calm down, let go of the energy, and (importantly for our purposes) remember that this particular object/event/circumstance was not dangerous at that time.

Horses learn very well from much of how we behave and what we do to them that we are dangerous unfortunately! In addition we restrict their natural capacity for letting go of their energy charge from these dangerous experiences. If we can start with a confident, normal young horse, and always present new things, situations, procedures etc. through attentive respect for their boundaries, then traumatisation associated with these things is highly unlikely - as long as we can provide enough security for our horse in their lifestyle. I think we have been so entrenched in the idea that horses must be forced and dominated in order for us vulnerable human beings to be able to control them, that we haven't given ourselves the chance to see that most horses are only ever contrary or stubborn because they are frightened. The truly bossy ones are rarer than we imagine and often have more respect for our patience and calm than for our aggression. Aggression is often part of certain natural horsemanship techniques, it may be disguised through apparent calm, but it is obvious enough to a horse and is no different to them than overt aggression.
Several times when the head-collar was presented at a distance, Sophie became agitated and turned away. She went to eat hay to distract herself, or to her friend in the next stable to talk to her about it. Each time she made a fear-based response the head-collar was taken further away from her until she relaxed again. Gradually she would move less at the sight of it, her eye would show less white, and her natural curiosity began to gain strength. It was almost as if Sophie had never actually seen a head-collar before because she had never really looked at it. Maybe when she was originally presented with it she wasn't given the time to examine it. Sometimes people think it is necessary to deceive a horse with the equipment, almost sneaking it onto them before they can react. If we do that though, they can't assimilate it and memorise it as acceptable. When she was finally ready to examine the head-collar, she smelled it for a long moment and she was visibly changing her relationship to it. Moments like that with horses always feel like being given a wonderful gift - to see the sunshine come back into her expression for that moment. Once she had made her decision that the head-collar was no longer a threat, putting it on her head was acceptable to her.

The next day we went through the same process with part of her harness. This time she perceived the threat as much greater. In her memory the harness always meant a negative experience. Her intelligence about this therapeutic process was inspiring: it was obvious she wanted to be open to what was happening, which isn't always the case(1) and her reactions were so sensitive. At first she refused even to look when the harness was there (about four metres away). Interestingly what could be called the 'behavioural' or 'response' boundary is the same in terms of distance from the horse as the 'energetic' boundary. This is logical considering that it is the same phenomenon i.e. her judgment of 'her space' was the same size as where she could allow the threat to approach to before reacting to it. If you can't yet feel the energetic boundary, watching the distance at which the horse reacts to the 'threat' will help you become sensitive to it.

Sometimes Sophie would seem to have forgotten about the harness, but in fact she was dissociating from the situation. When this happens it is imperative to remove the threat and wait until the horse 'returns' to the present moment. The
rule, if there can be one, is that when you are working with a threat, unless the horse is actively appraising it i.e. either examining, accepting or at least observing it with curiosity, then he has judged it as dangerous and is either ignoring it or indicating his distrust. He will never be able to change his opinion about it if we don't make the threat behave unthreateningly. The goal is not to be able to approach with the threat, so much as to let the horse see that it is not a threat. This is why it is so crucial to listen to the horse's most subtle signals.

In Sophie's case she spent a lot of time with her friend, discussing the situation, then she came back and spent time pawing the ground and she then went into a typical stress behaviour - flapping her lips together - which apparently she did a lot in times of stress. Remember she was expressing these trauma symptoms when the threat had already been removed. It was taken as close as she allowed before she reacted negatively, then removed if she reacted negatively. Because it was triggering her hyper-arousal response, she was not instantly able to readjust to the threat having gone away. This is the effect of traumatisation. It is like a car that over-revs; it can't react precisely because it continues to produce too much stimulus even after the foot has been raised off the pedal. This is why this kind of work must be undertaken without expectation or a time schedule because unless it is done sensitively, the tiny window of opportunity to release some of the traumatic energy will be missed and 're-traumatisation' may occur.

One time when Sophie came back to the present moment, she actually turned to look at the harness. She did it with such timidity that it was obvious how courageous she really was. After all she had been terrorised by this thing for several years. Just as you would climb up steps to get to the top, each step of the process has to be completed before continuing. Less is always more; one successful step is far more productive in the long run than sliding backwards as a result of pushing for too much progress. It is a very tiring process for the horse, and physiological changes in the nervous system are encouraged better if the horse has more energy available to make them. In Sophie's case we got as far as her smelling the harness, and this was enough, in fact it was more than enough in one session. If you have more time it is always better to take it.
The approach described here is exactly the same as is ideal with any horse, traumatised or not, the difference is that normal horses will progress much more quickly and straightforwardly, sometimes with no sign of fear at all. You do not need to threaten or dominate your horse to control him; you only need to learn his language. This language is not the language spoken by the dominant horse of the herd (as in most natural horsemanship techniques) - this horse is usually more interested in looking after himself than anyone else, often as a result of insecurity. You can bring something to your relationship with your horse which is far more sophisticated than a basic hierarchy, founded on aggression and dominance. You can bring the concept of sharing. Whether it is just sharing your company together, or moving in gymnastic harmony together, the value is always in the equality.