



# OH THIS ACHING BODY:

A Beginner's Introduction  
to Equine Bodywork

*by Gwen Santagate*

Most people have heard the old song "Dem Dry Bones" – your toe bone connected to your foot bone, your foot bone connected to your ankle bone, etc.

Nothing could be closer to the truth when talking about horses. Horses are absolute marvels of engineering and connectivity. Being herbivores, they are animals of prey who rely on flight for survival. Just as the song



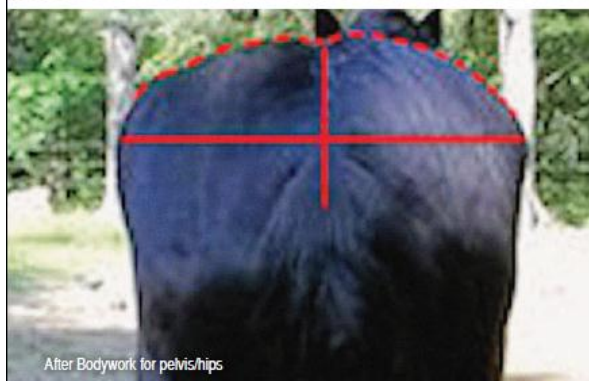
Before Bodywork (Notice swayed topline)



After Bodywork (notice natural lifting of the back)



Before Bodywork for pelvis/hips



After Bodywork for pelvis/hips

lyrics go, the bones are all connected to each other and to the inner organs of the horse, and they're all connected for flight, for survival. All of this, then, is connected to and entwined in the mind and spirit.

### Bodywork is for Body, Mind, and Spirit

What goes on in one part of the horse's body affects the rest of the body in some manner. As a Natural Hoofcare Practitioner, I tell my clients – if something is stressing the horse, whether it be in the body, the mind, or emotions, it all presents in the hooves, and, vice versa. If there's something affecting the hooves it affects the rest of the horse, as well.

Because of this, I also chose to learn natural nutrition and bodywork for horses to complement my hoof care. PENZANCE Bodyworks® is a combination of acupressure, Quantum Touch, TTOUCH, laser acupuncture, electric acupuncture, non-invasive massage, stretching, ROM, neuromuscular releases, and intuitive hands-on energy work. Having a variety of modalities allows the practitioner to customize treatment to the individual horse and body part to find, assess, and relieve pain, spasms, and pressure points. Combine this with healthy, balanced hooves and we have a solid foundation for homeostasis and well-being that positively increases the quality of the horse's performance as well as overall behavior and functioning. In other words, balance in his entire being.

### Effects of Pain and Discomfort

Discomfort or pain can affect your horse's performance immensely. Bucking, crow-hopping, refusal to take a lead, rearing, bolting, shying, jiggling, prancing, resistance, balking, hollowing the back, throwing the head up, constant tension – not able to 'round up' – all of these can very commonly be attributed to muscular stiffness, painful muscle spasms, soft tissue adhesions, or soreness.

### Benefits of Bodywork

Bodywork can increase circulation to the muscles, release tension in the soft tissues supporting the joints and vertebrae, and break up congested areas and spasms, all of which encourage muscle development, relax connective tissue, improve performance with greater range of motion and gaits, and relax the mind for increased learning and willingness.

Bodywork done prior to chiropractic work helps the adjustment hold longer as the muscles are not in spasm and won't pull the adjustment out again as readily as they could if the spasms are unreleased.

### Assess and Address

There are simple ways to detect pain and muscle spasms in horses. They can then be easily and safely addressed by the caregiver.

### Ground yourself first

To start, it's important that the human be grounded and centered so as to be able to be in the present moment and able to receive the energy the horse is putting forth. To do this, simply stand relaxed, or sit, and breathe. That's it! Pay attention to your breathing. Inhale slowly through your nose to the slow count of 4 allowing the first air to fill up all the way down to your abdomen then rise to expand your chest. Then hold for the count of



2 or 3 and exhale slowly to the count of 8. Empty your lungs starting from the top and reaching down to your 'center'/ abdomen so your lungs are completely emptied. As you inhale, picture filling your 'self' up with a beautiful, soft white light. When you exhale, breathe that beautiful white light into your horse. By nature, you and your horse will begin to resonate in a calm, relaxed, state of being.

Once you feel relaxed you can begin to softly assess your horse's body. Work front to back, top to bottom.

### Meridian sweep

Starting at the poll, very lightly and slowly sweep the palm of your hand over the horse's poll, down the neck, back, croup, rump, and all the way down to the backs of the heels. This helps to open the main "chi" or energy meridian that branches out and affects all other parts of the body, including organs. I do this 3 times on each side of the body. Mentally take note of where the horse reacts in discomfort or where you feel a 'hot' or 'cold' spot.

I usually start on the near side as most horses are primarily handled on this side and are therefore more accepting of being touched there. Then I will do the same sweep on the off side of the horse.

If at any time the horse begins to tense and become resistant, take note of your own relaxation. Stop the sweep and repeat your own breathing awareness to recoup the resonance with the horse. Then simply start again.

After the main meridian sweep, which addresses the energy flow throughout the body, start with a simple assessment of the placement of your horse's eyes.

### Eye level and the atlas

Are they level? Do they both sit on the same 'horizontal plane?' An eye located lower than the other tells you that the atlas of the horse is out of alignment for some reason. I find most horses who have not had body work done prior to my work will have issues with the atlas. One exercise to help this is a simple tail-pull.

Try this: Working with a partner, gently pull the horse's tail while your partner stands at the head of the horse to hold him and encourage him to bring his head down to the ground. Food treats may be used to encourage the lowering of the head. You'll notice the horse will begin to pull against your pull a bit. This is what you want. Slowly and gently stop your pulling when the horse stops his own counter pull against you. This simple exercise is usually enough to release the spasms that were holding the atlas off balance.

### Feel for heat, cold, hard or soft tissue combined with an intuitive feel

After releasing the atlas, a gentle assessment is done lightly stroking our way down your horse's neck, shoulders, chest, and inside and outside the front legs to see if any other spasms are present. From the neck down to shoulder and chest, I then work to the withers, the back, the croup, the gluts and the hind legs, inside and outside. A mere "blink" of the eye as the horse is focused on your touch at a certain point can indicate the need for bodywork. More obvious signs can be a raising of the head or even a more pointed swing of the head towards the bodyworker.



Releasing a shoulder and deltoid spasm

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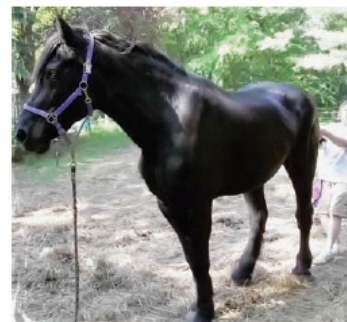
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### Address with bodywork

When a specific spot is noted, simply press a thumb or forefinger lightly on the spot. Your energy will be transferred to the spot encouraging resonance and release. The horse may become very drowsy, lower his head, chew a bit, quiver at the lips and muzzle...

all indicators that the energy is getting to his place of discomfort. A 'release', when your work is complete on that spot, will be indicated by a lick and chew, yawn, deep sigh, snort, or other tension-releasing behavior. Allow the horse to complete his release, and then gently move on to the 'next' area needing attention.



Axis adjustment and topline stretch

### Helpful exercises

Leg stretches, neck stretches, belly lifts, pelvic tucks – these simple exercises can easily and safely be executed by any horse caregiver. They all complement acupuncture, massage, and other therapies that are used in the complete bodywork session.

Bodywork positively affects not only work-related stress, but also compensation spasms due to laminitis, other foot soreness, Lyme disease, injuries to muscles, tendons, ligaments, and more. Consult with your local Bodyworks practitioner for more information and guidance if you feel your horse could benefit from this service. ☺

#### About the author:

Gwenyth Browning Jones Santagate has become world renowned in the world of good horsemanship. Gwen teaches and shares, speaks and trains daily. Her studies with and of such Masters as Mark Rashid, John Lyons, Tom Dorrance, Pat Parelli, Linda Tellington Jones and others who became 'natural horse-world names' with the internet explosion have sprinkled her own methods of horsemanship with spice and flavor that bring life and harmony to the horse and human relationship. Her pioneering teachings of Clicker Training and Natural Hoofcare have helped to set a precedence in the world of horses today. She can be reached via <http://www.thepenancehorse.com> or [caballus@charter.net](mailto:caballus@charter.net)