

Equine-imity

Stress Reduction and
Emotional Self-Regulation
in the Company of Horses



Beverley Kane, MD

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EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION
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QIGONG FOR SOMATIC HORSEMANSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

When the grass looked greener at a Fortune 500 company, Allison left her comfort zone at the top of her game as editor of a small food magazine. But at the first meeting in her new corporate boardroom, she felt the threat of being laid low (or perhaps too high) by the Peter Principle of rising ever upward until you fail. Her performance anxiety was so severe that it was *somaticized*—expressed through her body—as a rapid heartbeat that sent her to the emergency room. The cardiologist found nothing abnormal with Allison’s physiological heart. He diagnosed her as having a stress response, a condition of the emotional “heart.” Weeks later, still experiencing “heart” symptoms, Allison came to the Wisdom of the Mare, an equine experiential learning program for women in transition. This somatic horsemanship workshop used interactions with gentle horses as a way to counteract the stress that comes from life’s major changes.

What Is Somatic Horsemanship?

Somatic horsemanship is the practice of exploring the physical relationship between humans and horses, on the ground and on the horse, in order to promote physical, emotional, mental,

and spiritual health in both species. While all these aspects of the horse-human relationship are interrelated, for most horses the most tangible means of interacting is through the five senses and the body as a whole.

Somatic means of the body. Somatics as a mind-body conditioning and healing practice began with the work of the late Thomas Hanna, a student of Ukrainian-Israeli engineer and physicist Moshe Feldenkrais. The story goes that Feldenkrais used his understanding of electrical currents in mapping out the circuitry of the nervous system to rehabilitate a sister who had suffered brain damage. He then pioneered his eponymous movement therapy to reprogram the brain following strokes and for other neurological disorders. As with the Feldenkrais Method, Hanna Somatics emphasizes small, slow, isolated movements to heal injuries, correct anatomical abnormalities, and promote healthy aging in nerves, muscles, and joints. Somatic horsemanship uses these principles in teaching deep breathing; slow, simple muscle movements; and mindful activities with horses to tap into mind-body states of health, peace, and strength.

My relationship with my body became redefined in middle age. At fifty, I realized I was no longer twenty-five. Although I remained healthy, my body was noticeably, well ... older. Long work hours, business travel, and expense account dinners conspired to thwart my attempts to stay fit. I had also lost the spiritual connection to my body that came from the discipline of sports and adherence to a healthy diet. Once a marathon runner, mile-a-day swimmer, and solo wilderness backpacker, I began to notice a decline in speed, strength, flexibility, and stamina. I was always an animal lover, and I found myself attracted to horses as magnificent beings who could become extensions of my body.

Who Moved My Cheese?

When the dot-com bust hit Silicon Valley at the turn of the millennium, I was working as a doctor-patient communication expert at WebMD. As the company began pulling its Sunnyvale operations, about fifty of us chose to take a hefty severance package rather than move to New York or Atlanta. Our managers solemnly paraded us into private rooms one by one to confirm the rumors and give us our walking papers. I thought, *No big deal, I'm A-OK*. Twenty minutes later, my true state of mind became evident when I drove a few blocks from the office to put gas in my car. Subconsciously more shaken up than I wanted to admit, I drove off with the gas nozzle still attached to my car, pulling the hose out of the pump.

I immediately began some frenzied mental machinations to plan how to find my next job. With an epidemic of closures and layoffs hitting the Valley, the book *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Dr. Spencer Johnson made the rounds. It was a kiddie-style allegory about two mice and two humans—and two types of reactions to having the rug pulled out from under them. One type remains stuck looking for the same old cheese; the other type moves on creatively.

My close friend Sheri, also a physician, sat in the garden with me while I poured out my feelings of stress and woe. After patiently listening to my lamentations, she asked, “So, what do you really want to do?”

The first thing that came to mind was, “Well, I’ve been wanting to take riding lessons.”

I decided to do this one small thing for a while instead of obsessing on my lost cheese.

Dreams and Dream

Guided by what Swiss psychiatrist and mystic Carl Jung called a Big Dream, a nighttime dream of cosmic proportions, my riding extended into the practice of equine-assisted learning and psychotherapy, and finally into somatic horsemanship.¹ My first horse was aptly and synchronistically named Dream. In intimate, whole-body contact with this big, beautiful animal, I regained my sense of the physical. I felt Dream's flesh and bone as part of me, felt us as eachother's² centaur-like appendages, joined at the body and at the heart.

One year after the dot-com bust, I established my private practice, Horsensei Equine-Assisted Learning & THerapy (HEALTH). My services were dedicated to teaching career and social skills to corporate employees, university staff, and medical professionals. These programs emphasized the psychological and pragmatic aspects of the horse-human relationship in modeling communication, teamwork, and leadership. The somatic aspects played a lesser role.

Then, in the spring of 2011, I got bucked off a step stool in my kitchen. I sustained a fractured foot, a dislocated right elbow, and a sprained left wrist. If I were a horse, I'd have been called three-legged lame!

My orthopedic surgeon told me not to ride for three months. Not ride?! Now, most physicians know little about horseback riding. When a doctor tells you not to pursue a sport, you must consider where the advice is coming from.

1 *Red Mustang Stallions Dancing in the Desert*. In Carey, Michiko Akahori. *Women's Meaningful Dreams: The Treasure Within the Feminine Psyche*. Doctoral dissertation. Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Palo Alto, CA. 24 May 2010. <https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/597937273.html?FMT=ABS>

2 I use the single word *eachother* to denote Oneness among beings.

Is she just expressing generic caution about potential risks? Or has she identified specific biomechanical limitations in your body that preclude that particular activity? In my case, it was the former. I was physically able to ride but would not have tolerated another accident. So I decided to compromise: I enrolled as a client at the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy, a premier hippotherapy (physical therapy on horseback) and therapeutic riding facility. Riding, which I had always done holding the reins and usually in a saddle, was now done bareback and out of my control. Someone led the horse, another person was a side walker, and Corie Thompson, my inspirational therapeutic riding instructor, directed my movements. (Corie would later help create Equine-imity and become my first co-facilitator.) My entire focus was on how my body felt on top of the horse. Instead of the nervous, gotta-do-it-right attitude I carried into my riding lessons, here I was just another kid. We played the airplane game with my arms straight out. We played 'round the moon where I turned in my seat 360 degrees. These tearfully joyous sessions brought home the message that for me, the entry point to mind-body-spirit wholeness has always been the physical body. And the physical and metaphysical embodiment of wellness is the horse.

I continue to experience body and mind revitalization best when sitting atop a horse, but also when I am grooming, massaging, and breathing with horses, or just watching them in pasture. All these activities evoke feelings of strength, grace, balance, and peace. To make these benefits accessible to others through contact with horses, I offer the Equine-imity somatic horsemanship program to reduce stress, dispel negative emotions, support graceful aging, and renew a spiritual connection with nature and one's happy place within it.

A proliferation of yoga and horsemanship programs, mainly for equestrians, has grown out of the popularity of yoga in corporate, college, and community wellness centers. Other somatic horsemanship programs use *tai ji*, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, and the equine-assisted implementations of body-oriented psychotherapies such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and Somatic Experiencing.

Why Horses?

Horses are consummate teachers of healthy embodiment and emotional resiliency. Unlike our family dogs and cats, horses are not housebroken. They are not conditioned to feel shame and guilt for their biological functions. Cats and dogs are predators who create stress for other animals. Horses are prey animals who run to safety, then let go of fear when the danger has passed. They have survived for 60 million years by becoming more adept than their attackers at sensory awareness and emotional self-regulation. After being acutely stressed into a flight response, horses quickly recover and go back to grazing—their baseline *equanimity*. We learn from horses how to go from a state of hyperarousal, due to uncontrolled emotions such as anger, grief, and fear, to a state of peace.

Weighing up to 2,200 pounds, horses are the great equalizers of all people fat and thin, weak and strong, young and old. Anyone can feel light, powerful, youthful, and athletic beside or astride a horse.

Somatic horsemanship is one of many equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT), which include equine-assisted learning and psychotherapy, hippotherapy, and therapeutic

riding. Scientific evidence is mounting for the benefits of these programs.

Why Qigong?

Equine-imity teaches the art of just *being* and the art of *doing* slowly and mindfully. The core of Equine-imity's doing aspect is the practice of *qigong* (chee goong). Qigong is an ancient Chinese healing exercise with slow, graceful movements suitable for people of all ages and physical abilities. It is the most gentle, most traditionally health-oriented form of East-meets-West moving meditation.

Unlike sitting meditation, qigong doesn't ask us to stay rigidly immobilized with blank minds. Unlike yoga, qigong doesn't entail pretzel poses or head-down contortions. Unlike kung fu, aikido, and karate, qigong is non-combative, requires minimal strength and fitness, and results in almost no injuries. Qigong is the ideal technique for teaching humans to go back to grazing.

Equine-imity uses one of the best known and simplest forms of medical qigong, the *Ba Duan Jin* (literal translation, "eight sections of brocade"; poetic translation, "eight silken movements"). Medical studies of the *Ba Duan Jin* show its unique healing benefits. In the modified Shaolin *Ba Duan Jin* set that we practice, five of the eight classical forms can be done on horseback. We call these the *Wu* (five) *Duan Jin* and learn them initially on the ground, then on the horse.

The qigong movements prepare you for blending your *ch'i* (qi) life force energy with that of your horse. This mindful contact between your two bodies allows the human heart, with its rate of up to 120 beats per minute during times of stress, to slow to a normal 60 to 80 beats per minute by *entraining*

it with the horse's heart, with its resting rate of 40 beats per minute.

When Allison shared a dan tien ch'i hug with the mare Bella, the racing feeling in her chest subsided for the first time in weeks. The moment Allison exhaled into her dan tien lower abdominal energy center, Bella let out a huge, whuffling sigh of release. You will learn the dan tien press and the dan tien hug in chapter 13, *Con Su Permiso*, and you will learn to treasure the whuffle.

Why Somatics?

Equine-imity has at its foundation the practice of balancing the four functions described by Carl Jung: intellect, emotion, sensation (somatics), and intuition. In Western culture, stress is caused mainly by an overwrought intellect manifesting as worry and self-criticism and by runaway negative emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, envy, and sadness. The key to creating equanimity lies in cultivating positive behaviors based on healthy somatic and intuitive—including spiritual—attitudes and practices. We use the term *somato-spiritual* to mean the combination of body and soul that creates health and happiness in a deeply meaningful, even sacred, way.

What Can Equine-imity Somatic Horsemanship Do for You?

- Do you suffer from stress that manifests as bodily symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, or insomnia?

- Do you feel a disconnect between your work, family, or social life and who you are, or wish to be, most deeply and idealistically as a person?
- Are you seeking a harmonious integration of your intellectual, emotional, physical, and religious or spiritual activities?
- Are you in transition or at a crossroads where merely thinking, talking, and worrying about problems and options has failed to create clear solutions?
- Do you suspect that there are subtle energies, coincidences, and hidden meanings in life that are not fully described in or predicted by the scientific, academic, or business world?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, you can benefit from an approach that uses the wisdom of the body and the intuition, as taught by horses, to create health, wholeness, and balance in your life. For while horses are not highly developed verbally and intellectually, they are geniuses of somatic, instinctual, and emotional functioning.

What You Will Learn in This Book

Written for the not-necessarily-equestrian, not-necessarily-qigong-y reader, *Equine-imity* offers:

- A reappraisal of the human body as beautiful no matter what its size or shape
- Horses as models of embodiment and teachers of physical, emotional, and spiritual health
- Stories of horses healing humans

- Seven simple, easy-to-follow medical qigong exercises
- Applied principles from exercise physiology and sports medicine, natural horsemanship, and equine-assisted psychotherapy
- The Stanford Equine-imity four phase somatic horsemanship program, proven to reduce stress
- Resources for how to locate horses within half an hour of your home or work
- Resources for how to pursue equine-assisted activities and therapies as a career
- A heartfelt appeal to keep horses appreciated, valued, and employed

Equine-imity is for those who have, or have had, horses and for those who have never even touched a horse. It is for anyone in middle age or older who wishes to become reinvigorated by the power, grace, and majesty of the horse. *Equine-imity* is also for younger generations, who, studies show, cope more poorly with stress than older generations. Teens and young adults can use *Equine-imity's* principles of sports medicine, martial arts, natural horsemanship, and meditation for sports and school challenges.

Equine-imity does not attempt to make you into an equestrian or a qigong master, although if either of those happens as a result of its activities, your life will be much richer for it. But you can use the teachings far beyond any experience with horses and qigong.

This book teaches you how to return to, or find for the first time, a place of invigorated peace and health. It helps you keep finding it, and keep returning to it, even without horses or structured exercises.

Equine-imity is divided into four parts.

Part I introduces you to the nature of horses—why they are so well suited to teach us how to reduce stress and let go of damaging emotions. Horses live in their bodies differently from the way we, our cats, and our dogs do. You will learn important ways in which horses are different from our household pets.

Part I also examines the evidence for a sixth sense in horses and humans. When doing somatic horsemanship activities, it is important to be aware of all influences coming into play. We present evidence that, according to landmark work by parapsychologist Dean Radin, PhD, bodies can, independent of the mind, precognitively sense a variety of stimuli.

Part II gives you a look at some historical and cultural views of the human body. Many religious and esthetic traditions make it difficult for us to appreciate our bodies as a source of pride and pleasure and as the key to stress reduction. Part II also looks at the science of stress physiology and psychology as it relates to the qigong forms in Part III. Westerners accustomed to partaking of their philosophy and their science in separate bowls will see how these ingredients can be combined into one recipe for living.

Part III teaches you how to orchestrate the body's subtle energy systems in coordination with your breathing and muscle movement. You will learn the Wu Duan Jin qigong forms, plus some techniques from yoga, mindfulness meditation, and Reiki, preparatory to practicing them with, and sometimes on, a horse.

Part IV shares the entirety of our Stanford Equine-imity program, allowing you to experience some or all of the activities under the supervision of an experienced, trustworthy horse person.

It is fine to skip the background material and go right to

the techniques and activities in Parts III and IV. Later you can go back and read the rest of the book while sitting in a lawn chair beside your new horse friend.

Don't know how to meet a horse? In the back of the book, appendix C gives you resources and suggestions for finding equine-assisted activity programs or private individuals with horses in your area.

A not-at-all-hidden agenda of *Equine-imity* is to teach appreciation of horses, the land they live on, and the trails they walk. In writing this book, I visualized all of you and all of the horses who will be enriched, and perhaps saved, by your engagement with each other.

Our bodies are our temples and horses lead us to the altar.