



Coping with Stress

Anders Lönedal

We breathe all day, every day and most of us take breathing for granted. The way we breathe is affected by stress! But conversely the way we breathe can reduce stress.

How does stress affect us?

Stress affects the body and our mind in many ways, and a change of breathing behaviour is one of them. It is actually our ancient survival mechanisms that kick in when we find ourself in a stressful situation.

Imagine a caveman meeting a great bear, in a split second his body turns into the fight or flight mode! His muscles stretch, his hands gets cold as the bloodstream is diverted to the big muscles, digestion almost stops as that energy is better used elsewhere, his cerebral blood flow is reduced by almost 50% and the remaining 50% streams into the mammal brain, or the limbic system, thus making it difficult to think in an abstract way, which now is important to his survival because he must focus on ONE thing only, and that is, how to survive. In all this, the breathing is extremely important. It is changed in that first split second in order to remove the excess of lactic acid streaming from the fighting muscles.

We have not changed a bit since the stone age, we have the same reactions and same change in breathing behaviour. But, as our caveman killed the bear, skinned it and went home to tell the tale, many of us today stay in the fight or flight mode for months or years.

Why is that? We can trigger this function with our emotions or with a thought, or with a cell phone, an e-mail or a deadline.

That keep us on edge all the time, and that is why breathing is of a fundamental importance when it comes to dealing with stress related dysfunctions. Many of my clients come to me with a lot of different problems eg headaches, exhaustion, insomnia, lack of energy, and not being able to focus, to name but a few. In most of the cases they suffer from hypocapnia ie hyperventilation, which is low carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in the body.



Can breathing reverse the negative effects of stress?

I work a lot with athletes. One example is a Swedish goal keeper in one of our top soccer teams. He came to me and simply said "I've lost it". He had no strength in his muscles, found it hard to focus and his reflexes were just not there. Bad news for a goalie!

We immediately checked his breathing, and some other parameters using special equipment, and started his transformation. Six weeks later he was back to his old self.

What was the magic trick...? Breathing! He had to retrain how to breathe and set the body straight again.

You might still think "Well, breathing, I do it all the time", but it is HOW you breath that makes the difference. I have found, during my 10 years in working with stressed out people, that breathing is the key that unlocks almost all your bodily functions. When you get it right, your body will sound and work like a well tuned race engine.

Breathing is the most important factor to cope with stress! No doubt about it!

How does our own stress affect our horses?

When I met my wife some years ago I entered into the world of horses. I had done some riding so I thought that it's no big deal to handle them. That was a mistake, but I soon discovered how my emotions affected the horses. The horse is a "flight" animal ie their best defence is their legs and their ability to outrun most predators.

One very cold winter morning I had promised to let the horses out before I took the train to work somewhere, I was late and I was stressed. The horses knew me, but as I entered the stable there was not the normal "good morning" sound that met me. I opened the first box and the horse just retreated and looked very nervous.

It made me think so I went out, took some controlled breaths and re-entered the stable, breathing through my nose in a calm way. Totally different story when I opened the box, the horse came to me in a curious way, as normal. No problems what so ever with the rest.

I learned something that day; my breathing behaviour was copied by the horses thus triggering their flight mode.

This fact inspired me to do a study and work with riders, including some of Sweden's best performing western riders. Reining was their game and it requires full attention from both horse and rider. It was fantastic to see the transformation in riders trying to control a 500 kilo animal at full speed, into a team consisting of 4 legs and 2 brains, all in perfect harmony.

All riders will benefit from this knowledge!

How can we reverse the negative effect of stress?

Your breathing behaviour is, as I've said, fundamental to how you and your horse perform. It is all about coping with stress and manage every situation in a controlled conscious way. Once you master it, you master it for life. You become aware of how you breathe in every situation and then you can switch the stress off - just like that!

One important thing is to breathe through your nose, and then check your horse again. Horses and all other mammals are primarily nose breathers. The Mongols and the first nations of America trained their young riders to breathe through the nose by pouring water in their mouths and then practise riding! It is very efficient and breathing through the nose has a calming effect on the horse! So use it!

When I work with my clients we always start with some very simple breathing exercises. First they must be aware of how they breathe and then we start to retrain and change the dysfunctions.

If you want you can test it, just do this.

Stand up and put your attention to your shoulders, a lot of people have problems in the neck/ shoulder area. Are your shoulders tense?

Try to lower them a little (yes the muscles will protest, but do it anyway)

Inhale through the nose and notice how low in the lungs you are able to breath.

Your diaphragm is the most important breathing muscle and it should move down and outwards when you inhale.

Test it this way. It is very important not to overdo it, it should feel good.

Lying on your back with one hand on the chest and the other on your belly, inhale (NOSE) and feel your belly moving a little, and effortlessly.

Do not breathe too deeply, as doing so might cause the loss of too much CO2 when you exhale.

Do calm and relaxed breathing and as soon as your hand start to move on the belly during inhalation, start a slow exhale. Inhaling activates the sympathetic nervous system, exhaling activates the parasympathetic nervous system and the latter triggers a relax response.

Try to inhale while counting to three and exhale while counting to six. But again, do not over-do it.

Three breaths like this, pause briefly and repeat three times.

Do this morning and evening for a good start.

When you have done this for a few days, go out and breathe with your horse, enjoy the moment and do this as a daily routine. I have myself noticed a much better relation with our horses.

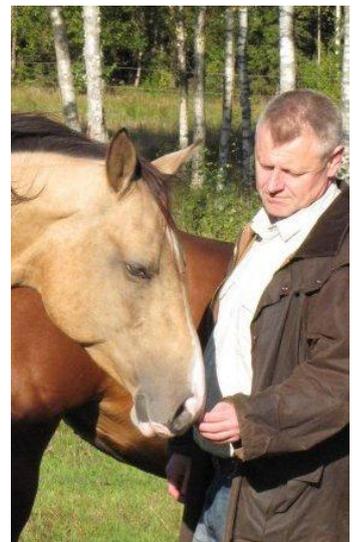
If you want to know more about the science of breathing I recommend a test in a capnograph, especially if you have stress related problems. Skills before pills!

About Anders

Anders Lönedal is a Swedish expert in breathing and applied psychophysiology. He worked as a mechanical engineer at Volvo Truck Corporation in Sweden for 26 years. Among other things he was responsible for the British and Irish market during the 1990's. He changed track in 2000 and after training at Sweden's Karolinska Institute started to work with the science of psychophysiology. He has helped a vast number of individuals, companies, professional athletes and now also horses, to better life and performance. He is a passionate rugby player (prop forward) and lives with his wife Anna on their farm in Töreboda Sweden where they breed American Quarter Horses. Their horses live a good unshod life in 32 acres in the Swedish countryside. The horses only enter the stable during cold winters nights or when the snow reaches up to their bellies!

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