

In Practice

Help for the reluctant horse breather

Myra contacted me about her horse Rosie who suffers from sweet-itch and COPD. Following our chat Myra started doing 1N Equine Breathing with Rosie. The horse, Rosie enjoyed this but poor Myra found it extraordinarily difficult. She said she felt bored and could hardly bear to stand still for the 10 minutes needed to do the 1N.

Although most people find doing 1N relaxing, I was not surprised by Myra's difficulty. Over breathing causes release of adrenaline and which generates feelings of anxiety and restlessness (very useful if you were about to run away from the lions and tigers). It also stimulates increased breathing which further decreases carbon dioxide levels.

Low carbon dioxide levels cause spontaneous and asynchronous firing of cortical brain cells ie the brain is overloaded with stray and irrelevant thoughts which make it impossible to be calm and relaxed. (Huttunen et. al., 1999).

For many people the slight reduction in breathing that they achieve when doing the 1N is enough to reduce the adrenaline and allow relaxation to occur. Some though, are unable to reduce their breathing enough to turn off the adrenaline. The more they try the more anxious they get which keeps the adrenaline going. It seems that the body is being chemically told that it should be fleeing or fighting and the thinking brain has to battle with it to keep it immobile – a tense situation.

So if you are someone that finds it difficult to relax and enjoy Equine Breathing, please don't be hard on yourself. It is a question of physiology not character or personality, and as such is likely to be reversible with breathing re-training.

An exercise that's worth trying is Professor Buteyko's anti-hyperventilation breathing. Keep your mouth shut throughout.

Once you have your horse relaxed and enjoying the 1N, stand with your own feet parallel and hip width apart. Move your awareness to your feet and then gradually up your body to release tension. Gently pull in your lower abdomen and notice any 'let go' in your lower back (don't worry if you can't). Allow your chest to hang down and release any tension in your shoulders and neck.

Position yourself so that you can reach your horse's nostrils without bending or twisting your spine and breathe gently for a few breaths. Become aware of the diaphragm moving to pull in each breath and ask your chest to cease moving (it probably won't be able to so just ask mentally and then leave it alone).

After an out breath pause in your breathing for 1 second,

Breathe in gently, breathe out gently and pause in your breathing for 2 seconds,

Breathe in gently, breathe out gently and pause in your breathing for 3 seconds,

Continue this sequence counting the pause until you get to 10 seconds then reverse so,

Breathe in gently, breathe out gently and pause in your breathing for 9 seconds

and continue back down the sequence till you get to 1 second.

You will probably need to take bigger breaths as you pause for longer but just try and keep the breathing as gentle as possible. You may find at some point that your breathing changes and you require much smaller breaths.

When you get back to 1 second pause forget the pauses but keep the breathing gentle.

If you have difficulty holding the pause at higher counts, try staying at a count that you are comfortable for example 4 seconds, for several breaths and then try a 5 second count. Stay on 5 until you feel ready to go on to 6 and so on. Don't push it if you are still having trouble, just decrease to 1 second and try again. As with Equine Breathing, Buteyko breathing should always be relaxing and enjoyable.

This exercise may help break any vicious circle of overbreathing and adrenaline and enable you to find a more gentle breathing pattern and to relax. You may also find that you are able to focus on the 1N and your own breathing with more pleasure and attention.

In short **Breathing on the brain....**

I am delighted to say that an article covering the physiology of respiration and consequences of over breathing is now available on the Equine Breathing website. The author, Dr Peter Litchfield is a specialist in behavioural medicine, behavioural physiology, behavioural health, applied psychophysiology, and more specifically respiratory behavioural physiology (among other areas of expertise).

The article is clearly written and although the subject can be a bit complicated at times it is worth rereading tricky bits several times if you want to understand what is happening in terms of physiology.

Peter illustrates the article with this striking picture of the loss of oxygen in a brain (40% reduction) after only a minute of over breathing!

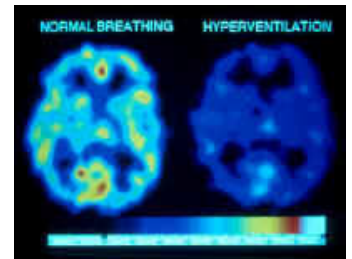
So for example (if it is similar in horses) if your horse spooks, upsets him/herself and starts snorting and puffing, they are severely reducing the ability of their brain to function (other tissues such as muscles are also compromised).

Seasonal tip

If your horse has a summer ailment such as sweet-itch or hayfever now is a good time (in the northern hemisphere!) to start Equine Breathing. By the spring the horse will have had a chance to work towards regaining normal physiology, with, we hope, a reduction in symptoms.

If you are able to ride less in the winter maybe you can spend more time on Equine Breathing instead.

[A brief overview of the Chemistry of Respiration](#)
[Peter M. Litchfield, Ph.D. in California Biofeedback. Vol. 19, No. 1 \(Spring 2003\)](#)



The information in this newsletter is for educational purposes only. Equine Breathing is not a substitute for veterinary care. Consult your vet before using Equine Breathing.