A Somatic Approach to Well-Being: Part II
The art of the quick reset: Getting started

By Trudi Howley

These following simple exercises are designed to regulate the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). They may help to interrupt an accumulative path of professional burnout when practice is combined with motivation and commitment.

A good place to start is choosing to invite curiosity rather than criticism about your ability to have feel for your internal states. Self-awareness is something that can be developed as a skill. Check in with yourself, and your immediate environment whenever possible, to remind yourself to practice being more present. This is a basic, achievable goal for anyone and can be a valuable place to start.

Dan Siegel, renowned author and neuropsychiatrist, delivered the keynote at the 2015 AAEP Annual Convention on the importance of mindfulness. This is where the art and practice of body awareness can begin: taking time to slow down, pause and be fully present in the moment. A basic mindfulness practice can be to focus on the breath. One way of doing this can be to breath in deeply, pushing the abdomen out for four counts, holding the breath for four counts, and breathing out for four counts. Another breath exercise from public figure and Buddhist monk Thich Nat Hahn, can be to say to yourself as you breathe in and out, “breathing in I calm myself, breathing out I smile.”

Exercises to engage your sensory awareness

The following exercises are designed as introductory ways to connect with the senses.

1) Prior to entering the farm and getting out of a vehicle, take a few purposeful minutes to stop and look around. If you have lower limb issues or physical pain, make a point to take a few moments to really notice a place where you feel good in your body. Then notice your seat bones. How do they feel connected to the seat of the vehicle in which you arrived? Intentionally notice the physical sensations of the weight of your body and back supported by the car seat. The stables and farm may be a familiar place to you. If so, you may habitually do the same thing each time you arrive at the barn. If you are attached to checking your text messages, email or social media (visit the AAEP’s well-run Instagram account) before you get out of your vehicle, you might want to use these actions as a cue to just pause after you’ve put your smartphone away and chose to engage your sensory perceptions.

2) As you move towards the barn or pasture, simply look all around and notice what your eyes might be drawn to today, such as particular colors in the landscape, similarities or differences in textures, the shapes of any horses outside, different types of manufactured objects or even patterns of light. Name these things silently to yourself. Practice keeping your instincts sharp.

3) Next, pay attention to the familiar smell of the horses. Is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral to you today? What other smells do you notice in the air? Humans used to travel for the purpose of finding food, and smell is a primary tool of awareness.

4) Consciously make note of what sounds are audible to you today—horses, vehicles, birds, planes, etc.
5) And last, purposely take time to notice the temperature on your skin, hands or face. Does it feel good, bad or neutral?

**Breathe and getting embodied exercises**

1) In this present moment of practicing self-awareness, it is also good practice to bring attention to a soft easy breath, staying aware of the breath for the entirety of three full breathing cycles. Whether breathing in for three, four, or more counts, simply exhale one beat longer than you inhale.
2) Next, take a short time to feel the weight of your feet and body on the ground as you stand next to your vet truck.
3) Shift your weight slightly from side to side, or gently rock from your toes to your heels if you are able. Really take time to notice what you are feeling.

Already, relational self-awareness can be developed by this act of becoming attuned to yourself. Through these initial practices, you can become connected to your bodily sensations.

**Repeat and practice**

Another way to practice bodily awareness is by doing a quick body scan. From the ground up, bringing awareness into the toes up through the legs and torso to the neck, head, shoulders and jaw can highlight any tightness or tension that might be unconsciously felt. This can be done repeatedly and as needed. A somatically trained therapist or health professional can facilitate the deeper processing of chronic or habitual pain patterns in the body that may otherwise interfere with the regulation of the nervous system. The goal is to go beyond just trying. Practice is essential. Practice feeling into each day, before and after each call, procedure or surgery.

If unexpected distressing thoughts or images come up from your day or from the past when doing these somatic exercises, they can be acknowledged with acceptance and non-judgement. If you need, go a step further and place them in an imaginary container where they can be privately held in an imaginary safe spot. Let the thoughts or images remain there until such time as you have the resources to work with a therapist, coach or trusted friend who can attend to them with you. Becoming purposeful about understanding how your body holds big or small traumatic events allows more space in the nervous system for successful awareness of positive states of joy, laughter, awe and gratitude.

As humans, our own emotional worlds are conveyed by the way we walk, talk, stand and move. It makes sense that if the veterinarian can develop a quick awareness of both the mind and body before and during a call, then a more regulated transition to connecting with the horse as patient, the owner, the trainer or a colleague can occur.

**One step**

If you are not ready to practice these techniques, start with this one step. Soften the chest as you slowly and deeply breathe in and out for one full cycle. Relax the fingers, and relax the tongue to communicate to your nervous system that you are ready to meet another sentient being with an open heart.
Another quick reset for a stressed-out nervous system on-the-go comes from an energy medicine technique by Elizabeth Tapas-Fleming. The Tapas Acupressure Technique is as follows:

1. Gently place your hand horizontally at the base of the skull with the thumb touching just above the hairline.
2. With your other hand, place your thumb and ring finger on either side of the bridge of the nose.
3. Now place your middle finger in the middle of your forehead (third eye area). Hold this position until you take a natural deep breath.

Tracking your body is the first step in noticing that thoughts and behaviors are separate from sensations. Allow yourself to develop a deeper capacity for relaxation, non-judgment and gratitude for the privilege and success of utilizing your professional skills on any given day.

These grounding and orienting techniques used in somatic therapies can help you begin getting out of the thinking brain and start being curious about experiencing more connectedness to bodily sensations. If you are curious enough to give these suggestions a try, you will develop a capacity to give your nervous system quick resets throughout the day and inhibit chronic stress. Initiating a purposeful routine to quickly recognize and acknowledge the state of your nervous system will help facilitate harmony between the self, your equine patients and others, ultimately improving the effectiveness of all your wellness initiatives.

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