

Getting the balance right

Lorna Maybery discovers how equestrian balancing therapy is improving the lives of both people and horses

Lorna Maybery

Lorna is our deputy editor who loves being in the great outdoors



Horses have always played an important role in Julie Houghton's life. The *Countryside* member began working with them at the age of seven and hasn't looked back since.

But simply working as an instructor wasn't quite enough for her. Through years of experience and training, Julie has developed a therapy to tackle health problems in both the horse and its rider that is seeing genuine results. The therapy, called equestrian balancing therapy, is based on zero balancing, which is a non-intrusive therapy that aims to clear the body of bone-deep tension and re-establish a flow of energy and vitality. Clearing blockages in the body can help get to the underlying cause of a wide range of conditions, such as stress-related illness, pain, anxiety and fatigue.

So what motivated Julie to develop this unique therapy that involves working on a client and the horse together?

Julie explained: 'Having achieved my AI [British Horse Society Assistant Instructor], I worked at the Royal (Dick) Veterinary College in Edinburgh for a couple of years teaching students. I then went to Austria, Germany, and France before returning to London and working at Northwood, where I got my I [instructor] and was in charge of 120 horses and 24 staff and students, which was a fabulous experience. From there I ran a couple of local riding schools in this area around Worcestershire, before deciding I wasn't

particularly good at the business management side. So I went to Warwick College and got my horse business management certificate before then going freelance.'

It was then that a member of her family became ill with a series of health problems and despite receiving excellent care, conventional medicine did not seem to help. So Julie looked at alternatives, including reiki.

'I went into reiki to start off with, which made a massive difference but it didn't cure the problem,' she says. 'So that led me to zero

balancing, which isn't particularly well known but it is wonderful therapy. When I started zero balancing I realised I could use it with horses, so from there I have adapted it so it is a therapy I can use on a person seated on a horse.'

'As I've worked with the person on the horse and watched the horses change underneath I realised

A GREAT THERAPY: Lorna looks relaxed and at ease on Bon Bon, following her equestrian balancing therapy treatment by therapist Julie Houghton



Case study: William, aged 4

'William is very disabled with cerebral palsy, and he can't stand unaided. He is four now. When he first started he couldn't actually get his knee lower than the front of the saddle, but now his legs have dropped right down and he looks like a normal little boy and he loves it.'

'The treatment has made a massive difference to him. When I started with him he took a laxative every day because he was too uncomfortable in his tummy to straighten his back. I did a zero balancing session on a couch to start off with him and after that session he never needed a laxative again.'

'But because he had had so much physio, every time I touched him, he moved thinking I needed him in a certain position, so I asked his mum if I could put him on a horse because I felt I would get better results. We started with a saddle, because initially his core stability was poor so he couldn't hold himself up straight at all. Soon we were able to work without a saddle. Then recently, for the first time, we were actually able to let him go briefly and he was starting to balance himself and right himself.'

'He just rides between 10 minutes and half an hour most weeks. He can't stand unaided but he can ride. Recently, we let him go on his own and he was so pleased. The next day at school, he told everyone he had ridden on his own. He is a delightful little boy, so determined and it is wonderful that EBT is making such a difference to his life.'



I could actually work on and change the horse as well, so it has developed from there.'

Equestrian balancing therapy (EBT), is done through finger pressure, addressing foundation joints in the body that don't actually move much, such as the spine and pelvis.

Julie explains: 'There's quite a few joints that don't move much at all, so if impact or trauma gets locked in that joint, you can't remove it like you can a freely moving one.'

'So EBT offers the body a chance to rebalance around that trauma and actually it's a mind, body, spirit treatment so it is not just physical, although it does change you physically, and fundamentally. We are dealing with the skeleton and although you are not pushing hard right to the bone, it's directing the energy to the bones - it's balancing.'

'When using EBT, I would normally start with the person on the horse, then I would treat the horse. When a rider sits in the saddle, their body changes, so once I work on the rider the horse's stride also changes, as the rider feels different to him.'

'And we have what we call working signs which show the

horse is feeling the treatment through the rider. Often there is a deep intake of breath, or a fluttering which you can feel through the horse, even though I am working on the rider and not touching the horse. The horse reacts as though it is receiving the treatment as well.

They will open up their stride afterwards and if they are little bit tense, it relaxes them and gets them flowing forwards.

'A lot of my able-bodied clients are perhaps struggling to get their horses working properly on the bit or the horse isn't stepping underneath level where the back leg isn't following the track of the front leg properly, or there is some unevenness and the horse is stepping short, and EBT can really help,' Julie added.

'I also work with disabled people and I have two such clients at the moment, including a four-year-old boy,' says Julie. (See case study panel above).

As well as EBT, Julie is also an equine craniosacral therapist.

'With equine craniosacral therapy, to watch me work is like watching paint dry.'

'You put your hands on the horse and if you know horses you can see changes; they are very



ILL AT EASE: Lorna looks awkward on horseback



AT WORK: Julie works the lower body, and right, the legs



TENSION: Julie detects stiffness in Lorna's upper body and works to release it



DELICATE TOUCH: Julie works on the front and the back of the body

‘I had never felt so relaxed and confident on a horse’

subtle but the results can be fantastic. There was one horse that was a head shaker and hadn't been able to be ridden for five years and he got so distressed last year that the owner decided if she could do nothing with him this year, she would have him put down because she couldn't see him go through that distress again.

‘She is still riding him and has had three treatments so far. And she has ridden him throughout the summer. There has been a little bit of head shaking – just a bit of nodding – but it has been a transformation.’

Hands-on

I'm not a rider, as such, but I have ridden horses, although not many, and I certainly don't look at home perched up on a horse's back. So, I thought it would be interesting to see what Julie could do, if anything, to improve my posture using equestrian balancing therapy.

I was introduced to my horse for the session, Bon Bon, and slightly nervously patted her neck and stroked her side before walking with her outside to the manege.

With the help of a step I pulled myself onto the saddle then held

onto the reins for dear life as the horse's owner, Jayne Bradley, led Bon Bon around the manege to enable Julie to watch me in action.

By the looks of the photographs even I can see I am stiff and hunched up and holding tension pretty much everywhere, but particularly in my legs – I am gripping hard with my thighs – and my arms, as I am clenching the reins rather too tightly.

Bon Bon gently walked me back to Julie who then began to work on my lower body. She started with my legs, holding and gently pulling them, then using her fingers to put pressure in certain areas.

The sensation was relaxing and positive as she worked her way up one leg and then the other and then onto my lower back, just pressing gently and holding.

She commented that my hips were very stiff and worked gently to release and balance them.

A couple of times Bon Bon twitched beneath me and adjusted her feet, a sign that she was also responding to the treatment.

Having completed my lower half, Julie then watched as we walked around the manege again. And amazingly, I felt much more comfortable in the saddle, my hips were looser and I wasn't gripping as tightly. I was surprised at the difference after such a short time.

We returned to Julie and she used the stool to begin working on my upper half.

She sensed immediately the tension in my shoulders and upper back, a legacy of sitting at a

Case study: Kate and Aramis

‘A lot of people are a bit nervous with their horse, especially if it bucks and messes around. The horse is tense because the rider is tense, so by receiving equine balancing therapy, I can take the tension away and relax the pair of them.’

‘Kate has had her horse, Aramis, for a while but he has had no end of health problems and every time she got him going a bit better, something else would come along. Before the EBT session you could see the horse was quite tense and straight in his back end and his back end looked higher than his front end, and after treatment he looks a lot softer.’

‘She has been out competing with him a lot now and the horse looks like a different horse to the one I started with, as the picture below shows. Kate is a qualified riding instructor, which shows that EBT works for people at all levels of riding.’



computer all day, and gently pressed her fingers to release the tension. It was a strange, but comforting sensation, and when Bon Bon sighed beneath me I knew she was again feeling the benefits. Julie worked around my head, neck and shoulders, holding and pressing and balancing and then at the end of the session, Bon Bon and I again walked around the manege.

This time, there was a palpable difference in my posture and technique. I realised I wasn't even holding onto the reins, my back was more upright, my legs were loose and relaxed and I felt as though I was sitting into the saddle rather than perching on top of it.

I had never before felt so relaxed and confident on a horse and was genuinely impressed with the results, particularly as it was only a 20-minute session. Imagine how much better I could be after an hour or two!

CONFIDENT: Jayne Bradley leads Bon Bon around the manege and Lorna is delighted to find she is able to ride without holding on, thanks to Julie's treatment



Further Information

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