

Riding magazine Equine Balance 

Equine Balance

This cutting edge therapy helps improve the **performance** of both horse and rider by **releasing tension** held deep within the musculoskeletal system



Words
Rebecca Gibson

Equine Balance Therapy (EBT) has only been around for a few years but it

already boasts some extraordinary success stories. Your Horse writer Rebecca Gibson went to meet co-founder Julie Houghton to see if the small changes EBT aims to achieve really could make all the difference to your riding.

PARTNERSHIP
The rider is mounted while she and her horse are treated

MIND AND BODY
In EBT, the energy flow is as important as the muscular structure



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What is EBT?

An adaptation of a therapy called Zero Balancing, EBT aims to help the rider's body find its own natural balance in harmony with the horse, and help the horse work softly and responsively with the rider. EBT is specifically designed to treat horse-and-rider combinations. "Zero Balancing was started by Dr Fritz Smith, an American doctor, osteopath and master of acupuncture," explains Julie. "He devised Zero Balancing to help his clients on the couch to improve their mind/body/spirit balance by working on the skeleton to release any held trauma, stress or pain. He was a firm believer in the benefits of both Western and Eastern approaches to medicine and Zero Balancing reflects this - working on both the physical structure of the body and the energy flow," says Julie. There are many therapies used to treat riders on the couch and many that treat horses in the stable, but EBT is different because it treats the horse and rider combination as a unit. The focus is firmly on the how the horse and rider perform when working as one, so all assessment and treatment work is done while the rider is mounted.

The expert



Julie Houghton
Julie is a BHSI instructor, equine cranio sacral therapist, reiki master and the co-founder of EBT.

Four years ago Julie went on an intensive five-day Zero Balancing course where she learnt to release deep held tensions within the body using simple finger pressure and stretches. Shortly afterwards Julie realised the same principles could be applied to help horse riders improve their position and help horses learn to carry the weight of a rider properly. Julie set about adapting the Zero Balancing techniques she'd learnt, along with advanced equine sports massage therapist Heidi Barnsley. Together they've developed an effective therapy programme for horses and riders, and now plan to start training up other practitioners.



Dual purpose
Unlike most therapies, EBT deals with both the horse and rider in each session

Relaxation
The purpose of EBT is to encourage the rider to relax her body so she can work in harmony with her horse



TREATMENT
After assessing the pair, Julie works on the back half of the horse

It's the specific quality of the touch that enables the physical structure and energy to be worked on at the same time and create a harmonious relationship between them

→ What does an EBT session involve?

Before Julie begins working she watches the horse and rider in walk, trot and canter on each rein. "Most of the information I'm looking for is immediately apparent in walk," says Julie. "I look for any signs of rider imbalance and also look closely at how the horse organises himself to carry the rider. I ask myself, does he move straight with both hindlegs following in the tracks of the corresponding forelegs? Does each leg flow freely forward? Has he got a weaker hindleg, if so which one, and how does the rider deal with this? Is there any asymmetry? Is there any visible tension?" After assessing the horse and rider in action, Julie then talks through any particular problems the rider is experiencing, before she begins the EBT session in halt. Julie usually starts by treating the rider's lower body first. As the rider sits in the saddle Julie uses gentle finger pressure and held stretches to locate and release any excess tension accumulated in the deep structures of the body. The pressure is applied to particular points of the body that relate to different points of the rider's skeleton. "Different points will be used for different purposes, but the objective is to allow the rider to soften and relax through specific areas. This allows the body to reorganise and change its normal way of coping with the movement of the horse, to find the optimum way of harmonising the movement," says Julie. "The touch used in EBT engages the body's structure and energy flow simultaneously. It's the specific quality of the touch that enables the physical structure and energy to be worked on at the same time and create a harmonious relationship between them," she adds. "By holding the touch it draws attention to the area so the horse and rider can feel

what's going on and reorganise themselves to achieve a mutually optimal balance." After again assessing the horse and rider in walk, Julie usually turns her attention to the back half of the horse, from the girth backward. She then works on the upper body of the rider and front end of the horse. The average session lasts between 45 minutes and an hour. To continue the benefits of the EBT session, Julie provides her clients with a post-treatment work programme tailored to the individual horse.



HANDSON
Areas of tension are pinpointed and allowed to release

→ Why choose EBT?

The stresses of modern life can be seen, or rather felt, deep within the skeleton. Areas of tension caused by sitting at a desk nine to five each day, and blockages caused by hours of driving or mucking out, cause subtle changes to the way we move. These tight areas can take

months or even years to build up but, once there, they won't go away without help.

The tensions cause us to sit asymmetrically in the saddle and, in turn, our horses alter their way of going to compensate. EBT releases these deep-held tensions, allowing the body to move freely again.

"I frequently see horses who have a short, uneven or unlevel stride," says Julie. "Others are stiff to one side, tense through their back and neck or mentally stressed, and exhibiting this through shying or rushing. Often these problems are caused by a simple imbalance in the way the horse and rider work together."

→ How can EBT help?

Even very experienced riders can find it difficult to sit straight in the saddle and often find themselves fighting their own body as they try to force themselves into the 'perfect' position. They may feel they have to push their legs back, force one hip further forward to be level with the other, or push down into the saddle to sit to trot. "When you're forcing yourself to hold a position you're inevitably going to be tense," says Julie.

"EBT helps the rider to relax into their optimum riding position with minimum effort. Because this position isn't forced, the rider is able to concentrate on the aids they're giving, and the communication between rider and horse therefore becomes lighter and more controlled."

Julie has treated several riders who've developed a crooked position due to an injury they've been carrying. Many riders are eager to get back in the saddle following a fall and return while still carrying an injury. They then instinctively adapt their position to protect the injured area. Often this continues once the injury is fully healed and may be so subtle that even experienced coaches don't notice it - but the horse will.

"The horse will change his way of going to accommodate, eventually resulting in asymmetrical muscle development and even lameness," explains Julie. "There are many tell-tale signs that show a horse is no longer comfortable in his work. If your horse is no longer fluent in the lateral work on one rein, if he starts to show a delay in picking up a specific canter lead or if his back appears stiff or resistant - he may well benefit from a session of EBT."

EBT helps the rider to relax their body into their optimum riding position with minimum effort



SIT DEEP
EBT helps your body relax into a better riding position

Perfect your position

There are few riders who couldn't benefit from their position being worked on

MS sufferer Jane Dunham has been given a new lease of life

Jane is a primary progressive multiple sclerosis sufferer. She barely had the strength and balance to rise out of the saddle in trot and could only ride for a maximum of 15 minutes before she started having regular EBT sessions with Julie. Now Jane's fitness and stamina have improved so dramatically she can ride for up to an hour

and is able to maintain a reasonably balanced rising or sitting trot.

"While EBT doesn't delay the actual deterioration of my condition, it alleviates the symptoms of the disease. I'm less stiff, my muscle tone has improved and this has helped improve my posture, balance and coordination, both on and off the horse," says Jane.

EBT saved Sharon Dodson's youngster from becoming a field ornament

When Sharon got Flin he was a gangly five-year-old French Trotter. She spent the first six months hacking him out as they got to know each other, but when she started schooling him she noticed his movement was crooked and it wasn't long before her position followed suit.

"His left hind was landing just on the inside of where his offside fore had been," says Sharon. "I had an equine physiotherapist out and she advised me to take Flin to the vet for a full lameness work up."

After five days of tests, the vet diagnosed a bone spur and Flin underwent surgery but, two months later and having spent more than £6,000 on treatment, Flin wasn't lame, but he certainly wasn't right.

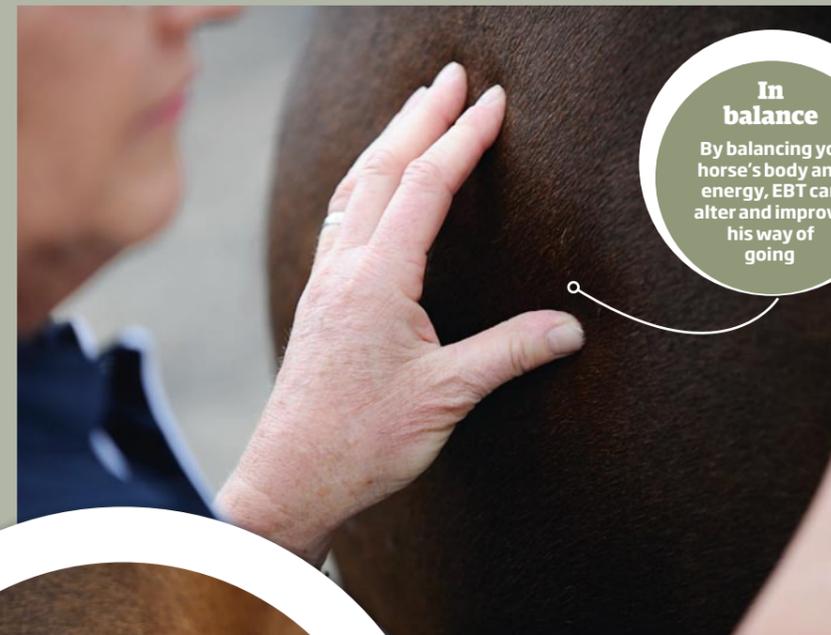
Desperate to find a solution, Sharon ordered a brand new saddle, but nothing changed. Then she enlisted the help of a new farrier - immediately Flin's way of going started to improve and soon Sharon began ridden work again, but she found Flin was still struggling to carry himself correctly under saddle and her position was out of kilter after months of riding a crooked horse.

"Flin was so used to his old, crooked ways he didn't seem to know where to put his feet. He was becoming an expensive field ornament when a friend recommended I see Julie.

"The day of Julie's visit came and I was hopeful the treatment would work but apprehensive that we would still be at square one once it was done," says Sharon. After watching Flin walk, Julie carried out equine cranio therapy on him.

"Once Julie had finished I walked Flin up and down again and the difference was amazing," says Sharon.

"His hips were level, he had the same swing through them both and he turned the corner using his left hind to step across and under. The difference was instant."



In balance

By balancing your horse's body and energy, EBT can alter and improve his way of going



VERSATILE
Wherever the problem is, EBT can help

Aimee Taylor-Bowen attributes her competition success to EBT

With a history of hip and back pain following a number of nasty falls, Aimee had been struggling to absorb the bouncy movement of her horse for many years when she discovered EBT. "For a long time I'd felt that something was holding me back. Although my feel for what my horse was doing underneath me was improving, I just couldn't get my body to do what I asked," explains Aimee.

"When riding I found that my hips were very twisted, restricting the bend on the right rein and not allowing straightness on the left. Also, my lower back was very hollow and stiff, which meant I struggled to follow my horse's movement."

Following just one session of EBT, Aimee was transformed as a rider. "I felt soft, relaxed and longer - in fact I immediately put my stirrups down two holes. The real revelation, though, was that I was able to move my hips on a circle - something that had previously been a real sticking point for me."

EBT is now an integral part of Aimee's riding. "I find it so helpful for everything from releasing the stresses and tension of everyday life to releasing tightness and pain in muscles and bones."

To continue Flin's recovery and help put Sharon's position right, Julie suggested a follow-up session of EBT.

"The difference was immediate and it lasted," says Sharon. "I kept expecting my body to fall back into old habits but it hasn't. I went to a local dressage competition recently and we were scored by the same judge who had marked us a month previously.

"The judge commented on the improvement in both my position and Flin's trot. She said he was steadier, more regular and looked stronger behind."

Info
To learn more about EBT visit www.equinetherapyservices.co.uk or email julie@equinetherapyservices.co.uk