

MASSACHUSETTS HORSE

A bimonthly magazine covering all horses, horse people, and horse-related events in the Bay State.

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FEATURES

[disciplines](#)

[farms](#)

[people](#)

[horses](#)

[breeds](#)

[horse sense](#)

[lend a hoof](#)

[trail guide](#)

[guests](#)

DEPARTMENTS

[partners](#)

[events calendar](#)

[bay state business](#)

[junior awards](#)

[the neighborhood](#)

[editor's letter](#)

[your letters](#)

Enhancing Your Horse's Well-being: Holistic Treatments



Karen Morang Photography

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by Susan Graham Winslow and Stephanie Sanders

Most horse owners make veterinary care an integral part of basic equine management, but there are many other ways to improve the lives of our horses.

The more we hear about a holistic approach, the more intriguing it becomes; the more people are open to learning about it, the more understanding they have of the traditions, the reasoning, the science — and the positive results. Along with regular veterinarian visits, the following are ways to pay preventive and palliative attention to our treasured horses.

Acupuncture

“The first time I met Dr. Amy Plavin was the result of a referral by Dr. Robert Schmitt, of South Deerfield,” says Chris Johnston, of Shelburne. “Our twenty-four-year-old Morgan gelding, Country S Troubadour, diagnosed with Cushing’s disease several years earlier, suddenly developed laminitis in his hind hooves. Dr. Schmitt did all he could do; another vet checked Troubie carefully and suggested we put him down. Dr. Schmitt called us with one last suggestion: Contact Amy to see if acupuncture might help.”

Amy Plavin, DVM, CVA, CVSMT, a graduate of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota, owns Hemlock Ridge Integrative Veterinary Care, in Bellows Falls, Vermont, where she practices (and travels to Massachusetts) with a holistic approach.

“With that advice and our last hope for saving our beloved Morgan, we contacted Amy, who came immediately, examined Troubie carefully, and then performed acupuncture on him,” says Chris. “She identified issues in his aging body, but her focus was on the laminitis.

“After three sessions, Troubie was sound and pain-free. I was able to ride him and enjoy him for four more years. Amy came several times during that period to administer acupuncture treatments to keep the energy flowing as it should, and we felt blessed by her knowledge and help.”

Amy became certified in veterinary acupuncture in 1995. “I’ve used acupuncture to treat horses with conditions such as laminitis, muscle injury, arthritis, kidney disease, and diarrhea,” she says. “I use it in combination with herbal medicine, nutritional therapy, and spinal manipulation. I ask for a commitment of four weekly treatments for chronic conditions. Acute problems are usually helped more quickly and with longer-lasting effects, but chronic conditions often require monthly maintenance therapy.”

Amy has taken a number of advanced acupuncture courses given by the Chi Institute. She expanded her studies of traditional Chinese medicine by completing a Chinese-herbal course in the late 1990s and continued her training in integrative medicine with certification in veterinary spinal manipulative therapy in 2006.

“Our second need for Amy and her acupuncture occurred more recently,” says Chris. “Our current Morgan, CBMF Strictly Personal, is rather skittish. When he was frightened by some unknown boogiemán, he slipped and his left hind leg went right under him, causing pulled muscles and a lot of pain. Amy came, examined JT, did some chiropractic to realign his spine, and then administered acupuncture. She visited three or four more times to continue to align the spine, administer acupuncture, and give me advice regarding his work/ exercise. Within six weeks, JT was perfectly sound — and continues to be sound today.

“I can’t say enough about Amy’s expertise and sensitivity to a horse’s pain and blocked energy,” says Chris. “She ‘rescued’ two of our horses, and for that I’ll be forever grateful.”

Animal Communication

Recently Susan Deren, an animal communicator, psychic, and medium, helped a horse that had become a chronic head shaker, much to the concern of its owner and trainer. “The trainer told me the horse would start to shake its head the minute the bridle went on,” Susan says. “They tried a different bridle, different bits; they called in a veterinarian. They had even taken X-rays of the horse’s head, but there was nothing definitive and the behavior continued. When I read the horse, I immediately felt a pain that told me the horse had an abscessed tooth. They called in a specialist, who found the abscess and removed the tooth. This horse is no longer shaking its head. It’s very rewarding when I can help an animal like that.”

Susan, who lives in Haverhill, says she noticed her gift when she was a small child. “My desire to help animals and people has always been there,” she says, “and my ability to communicate with animals has grown stronger in the past twenty years.”

She makes it clear that she has great respect for vets, and that she's not a substitute for one. "Horse owners should always seek the advice of their veterinarian," she says. "I often work with them to augment what they do, but I don't overstep my bounds as a medical intuitive. Animals don't have a voice to tell us where it hurts, but when I read an animal, whether it's a cat, a dog, or a horse, I can feel the area in my body that relates to that animal's condition or pain. I often describe it as stepping into that animal's body for a while."

Many horse owners call Susan for physical concerns, and she tackles behavioral issues as well. Her psychic abilities helped a rider whose horse would jump for other riders but refused every time with her. "I asked her to show me what was happening," Susan says. "As they approached the jump, I knew immediately what the problem was. I asked the rider if she had had a crash at a jump when she was twelve years old, and if she broke her leg at that time. She said it had happened more than twenty-five years earlier, and she was just starting to jump again. I told her that it wasn't a behavioral issue with the horse. I could feel the deep-seated panic in her, and the picture of the crash in her mind that she was inadvertently sending to the horse every time they approached a fence."

Because she now understood the problem, says Susan, "the woman could work on a positive resolution instead of perhaps punishing the horse for behavior she herself was creating."

Equine Physical Therapy

"One horse I've worked on is very special," says Katja Bredlau-Morich, equine physical therapist. "I went to see the horse, in Amesbury, because it had back problems and couldn't canter. The owner bought him like that six years ago, had vets out to look at him, and was told that she had to live with the horse's situation."

Katja's practice is in Waltham. She studied at the German Gymnasium with the Abitur and worked as an X-ray technician for 15 years. She attended the Institut für Tierheilkunde, in Viernheim, Germany, and in 2012 became both a certified physical therapist for animals and a certified acupuncturist for animals. Katja is also a certified leech therapist and is licensed in flexible taping for horses. She works with owners for general maintenance of their horses and supports veterinary care through her rehab work. Although equine physical therapy is relatively new in the United States, it's been a staple of care in Europe for more than 20 years.

Katja first does a thorough assessment. "I palpate the whole horse and test the range of motion of all joints," she says, "because a lot of times the problem is not at the part of the body where it shows. This might just be the weakest part. It's very important, then, to look at the whole horse to find the source of the problem. After my assessment, I discuss the findings with the responsible person and adjust my treatment according to the specific needs of that horse."

To return to the special horse: "When I looked at him, the horse had barely any back muscles on the left side from the withers to the sacrum; it looked like a hole. The right side was developed normally. First I couldn't figure out why he had no muscles on that side but when I did my assessment and palpated the whole horse, I found that he had a huge circular scar around the pastern of his left front leg. It wasn't easily visible because of the hair. Because I also do acupuncture, it was clear that the scar tissue was blocking all six meridians that run through that leg and therefore blocking the energy flow on that side of the body. With no energy flow, the horse couldn't build up muscle"

As a physical therapist, says Katja, "I can choose from among many treatments, such as massage, manual therapy, stretching, lymphatic drainage, scar treatment, leech therapy, acupuncture, and kinesiology taping." In this situation, she decided on laser acupuncture.

"I stimulated those meridians on that leg," she says, "then treated the scar with massage and infrared therapy. I just focused on getting the energy flow going again. At my next visit, a few

weeks later, the horse already looked better and had built some muscles. Next I focused more on the back with a stimulating massage, stretching exercises, and kinesiology taping.”

Just what is kinesiology taping? “It lifts the outer layer of the skin and therefore creates space in the tissue underneath, so blood and lymphatic fluid can flow more easily,” Katja explains. “This effect then continues through layer after layer of tissue all the way down to the bone. Depending on the type of application, you can assist muscle work for horses in training, you can relax a muscle, you can use it to support lymphatic drainage and start healing, and you can use it for joint and ligament support.”

And it worked. “A few days after my second visit,” says Katja, “the horse owner called me and was extremely excited because for the first time in six years she had been able to canter the horse. In order to canter, the horse has to be able to lift its back. To do that, the back muscles must be healthy.

“I treated the horse a few more times. Each time he looked better and had built more muscles, and now he’s able to use his body better.”



Victoria Laskoski

Massage and Reiki

Mary Gordon, a certified equine massage practitioner and Reiki master teacher, does bodywork. “Bodywork encompasses traditional equine-massage techniques, as well as Reiki and other energy work,” she says. “When a horse that’s been moving and behaving well suddenly stops and becomes angry, aggressive, or uncooperative, there’s a reason. The first step is having the horse checked out by the veterinarian. If the vet gives the horse a clean bill of health, then often a bodyworker is brought in to assess what’s going on.”

Mary, of Westford, has practiced Reiki for 14 years and has also utilized tai chi, qi gong, and other energy-based disciplines. She brings all this experience to her work with horses.

Reiki, which is at the heart of her practice, “is a method of conveying universal life-force energy to boost and balance a horse’s natural healing systems,” Mary says. “It helps to move energy and generally calms the horse. If it’s in pain, Reiki can help by stimulating endorphins. I can’t force Reiki on a horse: the animal chooses to draw it in from my hands only if it wants or

needs it. Typically, you see the horse start to lick and chew and generally relax when it accepts the energy.” Some horses Mary works with regularly, she says, “will relax into sessions of more than an hour.

Mary explains part of why she thinks it works: “I’ve often felt that Reiki gives horses a safe place to relax and just let go of their fears and discomforts and reset. For a prey animal, especially if it has pain or has experienced trauma, I think that’s a great benefit. It’s also a wonderful way to relax the muscles and prepare a horse for massage. Some horses I’ve met were in such distress that they couldn’t tolerate massage. For them, Reiki was the first order of healing; it was only in later sessions that we added massage.”

Massage provides several benefits. “It can make a radical difference in how a horse feels and moves,” says Mary. “If a muscle, or more than one, isn’t functioning correctly, the horse begins to use other muscles to compensate. What may start out as a small knot of unreleased muscle fibers can, if untreated, proliferate through many muscles until the horse has significant pain that interferes with its mood and work. What looks like the horse just shutting down may in fact be stuck muscle fibers that could be released by a professional. Regular equine massage can prevent this problem and keep a horse moving well. Catching muscle issues early is key.”

Also key — and all our practitioners mentioned this — is trust. “In both massage and Reiki, it’s one of the most critical elements to establish,” says Mary. “Horses need to trust that I’m paying attention to the body and energy cues they’re sending about how they feel and how what I’m doing feels to them. Horses will often point me to an area they want worked on or give me other information that helps me assess their condition and how best to help them. Keeping constant focus on the horse produces the best outcomes. When we listen, they work with us in amazing ways to solve their problem.”



Karen Morang Photography

Paddock Paradise

Joyce Wiernasz, of Cumington, has always loved horses. Although she's no longer a rider, she spent years learning about equine body language, herd mentality, horse handling, and stable management in various barns, workshops, and clinics. When she decided to take a big step and get a horse of her own, Joyce knew she wanted the horse to live as naturally as possible, and turned to the equine-lifestyle paradigm set forth by Jaime Jackson in *Paddock Paradise: A Guide to Natural Horse Boarding*.

The goal is to give horses freedom of movement through a grazing and living environment as close to their natural habitat as possible. Joyce opened her home to an older pony with a variety of problems, among them insulin resistance and a history of laminitis. After a year, Lady was joined by an aged Connemara mare owned by a friend. The pasture mates have an in/out situation with box stalls opening to their paddock paradise. Joyce has worked to clear inroads through her property that encourage the horses to meander and forage on the move.

"Several times a day," says Joyce, "I go out and place hay throughout the track I've made around a central forest area. The track is bordered by a single line of fence on each side and is four or five horses in width, so there's plenty of room to move around. The horses are free to go into their stalls or out into the track or onto a dry lot throughout the day and night. We feed them a vitamin supplement, and I distribute different types of hay to give them plenty of nutrition and variety. They're also turned out on grass for short periods, but they're able to move freely and forage twenty-four/seven."

Joyce has noticed remarkable results: "These horses are in their twenties and I instituted this three years ago," she says. "Now Lady's bloodwork shows that she's no longer insulin resistant, and she hasn't had any problems with laminitis since she came here. The farrier says the hooves of both horses are healthy and strong. And the Connemara mare has blossomed."

Establishing this environment isn't easy. For example, Joyce says, "it's a lot of work to haul the hay around the track area each day."

Her efforts have paid off, she says. "It's been very rewarding to give these horses this life, and they're much easier to work with because they're content. This has been a great lifestyle choice."

Chiropractic

Dr. Eve Capkanis, owner of Blue Star Chiropractic in Amherst, approaches each horse following a pattern. "First I want to create a relationship of trust," she says, "to let the horse know I'm doing something not 'to' her but, rather, 'with' her. I observe the horse's breathing, her attitude, and how she holds her body before I find my way into feeling the spine, hooves, and upper chest. A horse will often drop her head, snort, yawn, or close her eyes to express the release of tension as she feels the relief of a chiropractic adjustment.

"When I first saw Alberta, she was in bad shape emotionally and physically," says Eve. "She stayed away from the other horses except the horse she arrived with when she came to Blue Star Equiculture Draft Horse Sanctuary." (Eve volunteers at Blue Star.)

Alberta, a six-year-old Belgian, came from the Camelot Horse Auction in Cranbury, New Jersey. Her past is unknown.

"The first time I approached Alberta, I felt a bubble of energy surrounding her," says Eve. "I could only get so close to her. I respected her space and created rapport at the edge of her bubble of safety. I knew this was significant so she wouldn't feel threatened by my presence, and I ended our first session there, without touching her. Our second session, I felt the same bubble around her but I wanted to get closer so I could check her spine. I respected her and took her lead in our engagement. When I felt her guard drop, I knew it was okay to take a step forward . . . and Alberta took a step toward me. I took another step, so did Alberta. I was able to scratch her withers and

put my hands on her. I took a few chiropractic contacts and she dropped her head and took a deep breath. During our third session, I was able to pet and interact with her. I got the feeling she wanted me to know she was okay. I watched as she walked to another horse in the herd, began grooming the horse's withers, and turned back to look at me as if to tell me she was okay now."It's possible to do healing work from afar: "It doesn't have to be hands-on," says Eve. "It's important to meet the horse where the horse is with love and respect to build a rapport. I didn't ask anything of Alberta — I allowed her to set the pace in our interactions."

Eve has been a chiropractor for 20 years. She graduated from Hunter College, in New York City, and received her doctor of chiropractic degree from Life University, in Atlanta. She's been working with horses for four years.

"Chiropractic addresses the root cause of disease as opposed to fixing symptoms," says Eve. "It's most effective when utilized on a regular basis, just as we use other treatments, such as the dentist, to maintain health. Think about how the body heals a cut or a broken bone," she says. "Our bodies have an innate intelligence to be self-healing. The brain and the nervous system are the master control systems; the spinal cord is the delivery system for that communication. Physical, chemical, and emotional stress and trauma can disrupt the nerve impulses from the brain to the rest of the body. This impairs the body's communication process, causing the symptoms of disease.

"In horses, as with humans, symptoms can be problems with digestion, behavior, limited motion, and pain. Chiropractic care reduces nerve blockage in the body and restores optimal communication between brain and body. When chiropractic care is received regularly, it supports the resilience of the body, making it more adaptable to life's stresses."

Nicole Birkholzer, who lives in Westhampton, called Eve for help with Jesse. "My thirty-two-year-old Percheron gelding had a debilitating hip injury that left him with little control over his hind end," says Nicole. "His hips swayed left to right at the walk, and he couldn't lie down because he didn't have enough strength to push himself back into the standing position.

"Eve worked with him, and after the first session, Jesse's body was more in alignment. He must have felt good because that night he decided to take a nap. When I came out to the barn in the morning, he was down and well rested, but he couldn't get up. He tried several times, but his hind end just wasn't supporting his efforts. I made an emergency call to Eve; she came right over and treated Jesse while he was lying in his run-in shed.

"A short while after Eve left, Jesse gave it another try and, lo and behold, he made it," says Nicole. "All in all Jesse needed five adjustments to realign his body. After that, he no longer swayed, and walked and even trotted through the pastures."

Says Eve: "I make sure a horse knows I don't view him as a thing to be controlled, that I respect him, and that I'm there to help."