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# Back to **BASICS**

## RECONNECT AND BUILD TRUST WITH CENTERED RIDING® BASICS.

By Heidi J. Potter



**S**ally Swift, the founder of Centered Riding, would often remind her students that the basics of Centered Riding were not only applicable to riding. They were also applicable to life. They're a means to clearer communication and a pathway to becoming better balanced – physically, mentally and emotionally.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my work with horses and humans is teaching how these basics apply to all our interactions with horses, beginning on the ground.

Every horse, whether he's a rescue, a rehab or was farm-raised, only cares about two things when we enter his space. He wants to know: What are our intentions? Will he feel safe sharing his space with us? His answer will determine whether he stays or leaves.

### UNDERSTANDING INTENTION

As humans, we are instinctually full of intention. We generally approach our horses thinking about what we want to get done with them that day. In addition to having busy minds, we are often encumbered and distracted by time restraints. It helps to remember that neither of these things is important to the horse. Centered Riding basics can help before you even approach your horse. Incorporating them into your routine will help lead you to a more positive interaction with your horse, thus opening the pathway to a more trusting and enjoyable relationship.

Sally would often remind her students of her two favorite words. They were “Aware” and “Allow”.

- **Awareness:** Be aware of your state of mind. Take a moment to consider how you are feeling emotionally, physically and mentally before you approach your horse. Then, observe your horse before you join him. How is he acting and what does his own state of mind seem to be? Can you see or sense how he is feeling emotionally, physically and mentally? Let those observations drive what you do with your horse on any given day.
- **Allowing:** Before you approach your horse, take a deep, cleansing, calming breath. Allow yourself to let go of tension and stress. Relax your body and clear your mind. Allow yourself to become fully aware and in the moment. Become part of all that surrounds you and your horse. This mindful approach will bring you much closer to your horse. There is no fooling him. When you enter his space he knows instantly what condition you are in. When you approach him peacefully, with a smile, and an open heart, he will want to share his space with you.

Try to begin every interaction by becoming aware and allowing yourself to join your horse in the present moment, without intent. Your horsemanship skills, communication skills and overall interactions with your horse will improve.

# 1. Breathing

## How it affects us:

I consider our breath the most important tool we possess when working with horses. Taking a big, deep, diaphragmatic breath and releasing it slowly will rebalance you physically, mentally and emotionally. Upon exhaling, allow the breath to travel down your body, releasing tension from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. Feel your eyes soften, your shoulders relax, your torso get heavy and your legs grow long into the earth. Empty your mind of thoughts. After a few deep breaths, you should feel more confident and more connected to the world around you, including your horse.

## How it affects the horse:

Our breath can either calm the horse or alert him to danger. If you hold your breath when you get worried or scared, you're telling him: "Look out! Danger is imminent!" At the same time, he notices your body get tense. If you're on the ground, he will read your facial expressions as well; he will notice if the look in your eyes has changed.

On the contrary, when you exhale an audible breath, you tell the horse to relax and that everything is fine. He is then able to release his own physical, mental and emotional tensions. His eyes will soften and start to blink. His body will relax, his head may lower, and if you wait long enough (which you need to), he will begin to lick and chew or yawn. Some horses will offer a huge release and spend several seconds or even minutes yawning. During the time the horse is licking and chewing or yawning, please do nothing. Don't make another request of him until he stops. Only then will he be ready to re-engage with you and move on to something else.

# 2. Soft eyes

## How it affects us:

When we are deep in thought, scared or angry, our eyes get hard and full of intent. They may appear really focused or have that "shooting daggers" look. Seeing with hard eyes causes us to lose our peripheral vision and reduces our awareness of what is around us. In this way we become the opposite of the horse. To soften your eyes, simply take a deep breath, relax and smile as you look around. Now you will seem much more approachable to the horse.

## How it affects the horse:

Horses are experts at reading body language. They know how you are feeling and what you are thinking. If your eyes are hard, you become much more like a predator, the one thing they want to avoid. Looking with soft, kind, relaxed eyes will be much more inviting to the horse. Horses at liberty will often approach you once you start looking at the sky, the trees or anywhere other than directly at them. It takes all the pressure off and acts as a lure. The horses will choose to join you in the experience, without feeling threatened in any way.

# 3. Centering

## How it affects you:

Your center lies just below and behind your navel, deep in your pelvis. Imagine it as a sphere of energy that helps rebalance you in all ways, mentally, emotionally and physically. When you work with a horse from your center, your intention is very clear. Horses can and will only truly connect with you if you are mindful about where you are in space and in relation to them. There is an energy that emits from your center, outward, to everything around you. Working and thinking through your center allows the horse to respond to you in the most thoughtful, peaceful and natural way. You will feel a sense of relaxed control of yourself and your intentions toward the horse.

## How it affects the horse:

The horse lives in the moment and is acutely aware of the energy surrounding him. He knows if it feels good or bad. When we work from our brains and use artificial aids only, we are teaching the horse to respond, but this has nothing to do with connection. Your lack of connection will become clear when you approach your horse in the pasture. Does he come to you or walk the other way? When you take the lead rope off his halter in the arena, does he follow or leave you?

If you have established a true connection through your center and your heart, the horse will stay. With fearful or abused horses, this can take a long time to establish. However, we must always keep trying and these tools can be the key to your success.

*Continued on page 30.*

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# Try this simple exercise

Put body awareness and some of the CR basics into practice with this in-hand exercise. It will challenge you by directing your intent to your horse using your natural aids. Only use artificial aids (pressure on the lead rope/halter) to back up your request if and when they are needed.

**Task:** In-Hand Ground Exercise - Transitioning from trot to halt using only body language.

First consider what part of the horse's body you want to engage for a down transition. (Hint: it isn't on the head.) Whether you are on the ground or under saddle, consider changing your balance the same way you want the horse to. Remember that he is always watching or feeling what your body is doing.

## 1. Breath

While you are trotting next to your horse begin the down transition by taking an audible breath in.

## 2. Posture

Upon your exhale begin leaning your shoulders back a bit and lowering your center. When you combine an audible exhale with a change in your posture the horse learns to tune into your breath. A big exhale from you means relax and slow down.

## 3. Balance

As you come to halt drop your pelvis down and under like you are "down shifting" with your "haunches." By physically demonstrating this shift in your balance it tells the horse what part of his body you want him to use.

## 4. Voice

Use a voice command, such as "whoa" if he hasn't stopped at this point.

## 5. Patience

Be sure to give your horse time to mimic you before pulling on the lead rope. He needs to see it, think it and then tell his body to do it. This can take a moment.

## 6. Reward

The horse only learns on the release of pressure and/or when he is praised. Once he halts, praise him for a job well done. That is the only way he knows he did the right thing.

This exercise also applies to lunging. Don't worry about the unconventional look to what you are doing. Try to shift your thinking and way of "doing" to a way that makes the most sense to your horse. Using your mind, body and breath first will result in developing a greater connection with your horse. And, he will love you for it.

# 4. Balance

### How it affects you:

Keeping yourself balanced mentally, physically and emotionally is essential to being comfortable and safe, in the saddle and on the ground. When mounted, your balance is the only thing that really keeps you on the horse when the ride gets "exciting". On the ground, keeping your body aligned and in balance will help you be more stable and communicate exactly what you want to the horse. If you are unbalanced in any way, he will know it.

### How it affects the horse:

When we are balanced, we can clearly communicate in a way that the horse can understand. It is very frightening for a horse to become unbalanced, whether on the ground or under saddle. Being aware of your center and comparable parts helps us stay balanced, which

Photos courtesy of Heidi Potlter



When we approach horses peacefully, with a smile and an open heart, they will want to share their space with us.



Licking and chewing or yawning is a sign of the horse releasing stress. This will happen only when you stop asking something of him. Letting him hear your audible breath and offering him some comfort will often help bring it on. Allow him this time to process and understand that he is on the right path and/or has done the right thing. When he begins to lick and chew or yawn it is important that you don't make another request until he is done.



Horses and humans have comparable parts and the horse is an expert at reading body language. Doing with your body what you want your horse to do is one of the keys to unity and connection. This obstacle was part of a versatility challenge where the handler and horse had to trot onto and halt on the tarp with the two front hooves. It's a great example of using only the natural aids of body language and intent, with no pressure from the artificial aids of the halter and lead rope.

in turn helps the horse. Know where and what your center, feet, hands and eyes are communicating to the horse. Only when you are balanced in all ways can he remain balanced in all ways. His physical body will almost always mimic yours.

## APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES

I teach many and sometimes all of these basics at every one of my clinics, not just Centered Riding clinics. They are the foundation for success in Horse Agility, Trail Riding, Obstacle Training, Confidence Building and Horsemanship clinics. I know no better way to teach people how to work safely, successfully and compassionately with their horses.

One of the wonderful things about these basics is that they come from our natural aids. We carry them with us always. We can and should also practice them outside of our work with horses. They can lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. In order to establish a trusting bond with our horses we must be aware of ourselves first. We must ask ourselves: "How are we affecting our horse's behavior and what do we need to change within ourselves in order to change the horse?"

## PUTTING THE BASICS TO WORK

When I teach mindfulness and skill building in my clinics I often mention that it takes no experience or knowledge to cause a "reaction" in a horse. Anyone can do that with little effort.

Throw a rope, scare the horse and he reacts by running. But what if we simply just wanted to get his attention? Can we take an audible breath, look out where he is looking, or even look up and away? Can we relax our body, soften our eyes and shift our balance in a way that might cause him to look at us? In this way we show mindfulness, thus allowing the horse to offer us an "action" instead of a "reaction". Think of the horse first. Put yourself in his place and consider what it is that he might need from you.

The CR basics, along with the concepts of "aware" and "allow", give you some very powerful tools. They are applicable not only for your horsemanship, but also for you to use as you journey through life. In your horsemanship, they will help lead you to a more trusting, safe and enjoyable relationship with your horse. In your life, they offer you a way to relax, regroup and remember to appreciate living in the moment. There is a lot to be thankful for if we just see things with soft eyes and an open heart. 

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**Heidi Potter** is a Certified Centered Riding<sup>®</sup> Clinician, Horse Agility Accredited Trainer and CHA (Certified Horsemanship Association) Master Instructor/Clinician. She is known internationally for her kind, clear and compassionate way of teaching horses and their humans. She specializes in using body awareness and mindfulness in the wide variety of training and riding clinics she instructs both at home and abroad. Her specialty is combining the Centered Riding basics with Natural Horsemanship instruction. In addition to clinics she teaches all-inclusive, seven day retreats in Costa Rica and Wyoming. For more information on attending or hosting an event visit: [heidipotter.com](http://heidipotter.com).

# CAUDAL HEEL SYNDROME

## CAUSING PAIN

**CAUSE**  
Uneven loading of foot. Improper heel and toe placement.

**EFFECT**  
Narrowing of heels and frogs, improper toe landing, and lameness.

**SOLUTION**  
Trim to proper heel and toe ratio. Increase weight bearing surface of the foot by moving heels back and support the sole with a pour-in pad.

**RESULT**  
Heel and toe ratio is in balance and the sole is supported. The heels are returned to their normal position and lameness is averted.

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