



Photo courtesy: Caroline Hamilton

Headshaking Relief with Craniosacral Therapy

by Caroline Hamilton

Headshaking syndrome is surely one of the most perplexing conditions to afflict the horse and human partnership. For the horse, there is ongoing discomfort and - it must be assumed - pain, while the owner is presented with an unhappy horse who is hard to ride and a lack of identifiable treatment options.

Caroline Hamilton talks to Maureen Rogers, founder of Equine CranioSacral, and presents a case study of another horse that obtained relief from this debilitating condition.

As a syndrome, headshaking can present a vast array of signs, but only a few are mandatory for a veterinary diagnosis.

Most obvious is the repetitive, involuntary vertical shake of the head, usually with a sudden, intense downward flick of the nose; although, it can be a side-to-side movement, ear twitching or an intermittent spasm where the head is thrown up. There is no one description. This can happen when being ridden or loose in the paddock. Some headshakers are seen to vigorously rub their nose and muzzle on objects, to stamp their feet and even lose control altogether, running into fences and trees.

The potential triggers are numerous. Those most commonly identified are insect and plant allergies, photosensitivity, dental issues, pullback injuries, chiropractic issues, and poorly-fitting tack. Many cases are termed idiopathic (no known cause) or are considered neuropathic, being associated with problems with the trigeminal or facial nerve.

Until now, no approach has shown consistent success in resolving headshaking syndrome. Individual successes are reported, but the approaches have been as varied as the presumed triggers in those horses. However, there have been positive developments in the field of equine craniosacral therapy that may lead to a greater understanding of the condition, as well as presenting a viable treatment option.

Uniquely, as a therapy, craniosacral works on restriction in the joints between the cranial plates of the skull. Founder of Equine CranioSacral Maureen Rogers explains that this restriction causes localised compression in the cranium which, in turn, affects the soft tissues of the surrounding area, including the facial nerve.

"With photosensitivity, there can be pressure in the horse's cranium on the bones that form the orbit of the eye. And that amount of pressure impedes the eyes' ability to actually move and function properly. In my experience, many of the horses that have been photosensitive have been successfully treated by decompressing the cranium," Maureen says.

"With allergic response headshaking, a lot of that is associated with compression on the nasal passageway. The mucous membrane starts to swell as the pollens irritate it, but there is nowhere to expand to, because of the cranial compression, so it inflames. Those issues have gone away when the head shaking has gone away. So that's a big one as everybody thinks, "Oh these horses have allergies", but it is more from all of these areas being compressed. A noseband that's too tight will be one of the major causes."

When treating a headshaker, you need to look at all the variables - choice of tack, weather, changing patterns - and watch the responses. The important thing is to have a veterinarian diagnose first, ruling out things like fractured or infected teeth, guttural pouch infection, tumours, etc.

The shaking is to disperse the pain. What is the underlying cause? External influences will also contribute to it. Some horses headshake after dentistry due to the compression created by the process.

A frequent cause of compression related to headshaking is lasting damage from an old injury to the horse's head. "As a craniosacral therapist and bodyworker, I have worked with a few headshakers and describe here one case that illustrates how this can happen. "

"Annie (pictured left) is a 16 hh, eight-year-old thoroughbred showjumper who continually nodded her head when ridden. She also dragged her hind feet, which was being attributed to laziness. Alarming, Annie had also developed a habit of rearing.

When called out to treat the horse, I was immediately struck by the severe asymmetry in her facial bones. I have found that horses that rear usually have problems in the tissues of the poll where the headpiece of the bridle sits, and are reluctant to be touched in this area. It can be due to a previous injury. Among other traumas, tissues can be damaged easily by a horse pulling back when tied up. This was often when young and the problem has never been dealt with.

I asked the owner whether the mare had had a bad accident and enquiries were made. Eventually, a previous owner confirmed that Annie had indeed experienced a head injury as a foal. This meant that damaging repercussions had been building up for nearly seven years.

I went on to give Annie three craniosacral treatments. During the first, Annie started to nod her head and would not stop - a sure sign of tissue changes occurring in the body. This continued once she was back out in the paddock, yet ceased a couple of days later. After this, the owner reported that Annie was picking her back feet up more when ridden and was more settled. The headshaking had stopped entirely and hasn't returned since.

There could be no doubt that the cranial compression had eased. The rearing was still happening when Annie was spooked, but it's likely that this had developed into a behavioural trait over time, with a root cause of pain.

Cases such as Annie's demonstrate how multifactorial headshaking syndrome can become, with an underlying cause and additional external influences. Fathoming



Equine CranioSacral Workshops- Hope For Headshakers

Watch the video to meet Hektor, an ex-thoroughbred racer that suffered from headshaking for 10 years before finding permanent relief. This short video introduces people to equine craniosacral therapy, discusses possible causes and shows the successful results for one horse. Hektor lived the last eight years of his life headshaking free.

Maureen Rogers' video, Hope for Headshakers, about the Equine CranioSacral approach and workshops in Australia can be seen on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlbvkgJJoXI>

these out can be very hard for the concerned owner, who wishes only to see the problem cease."

Maureen Rogers states that the easiest starting point for the owner is simply to take a good long look at their horse's head. "The simplest thing is to look at the symmetry of the horse's face. Notice the balance of the eyes - it's easiest for us to look from the left to right eye and see if they are set differently. One may be higher, or one may be set further around than the other. The horse's head is designed to be symmetrical and balanced, so this means something is wrong.

"If you can see dents or divots in the skull, it's a sure sign of an injury in the past, which has led to lasting compression. Even if you can't see asymmetry, there may still be compression between the plates,

which an equine craniosacral therapist can identify and treat," Maureen says.

Maureen explains that another location to investigate is the masseter (jaw) muscle. "Every headshaker I have treated has had some severity of tightness in the masseter muscle. It's a sign there may be problems in the TMJ (temporo-mandibular joint), the temporal bone portion to the mandible, which is close to where the trigeminal nerve emerges."

In treating the underlying cause rather than the symptoms, Equine Craniosacral is certainly providing a new treatment route for headshakers, with the potential to change the fortunes of many affected horses and their owners for the better.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Caroline Hamilton has been a practitioner and teacher of equine therapies for 20 years, with a particular interest in rehabilitation and saddle fit. Caroline now takes groups of horse lovers to destinations around the world to visit horse establishments and other equine practitioners.

