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# STRIDES

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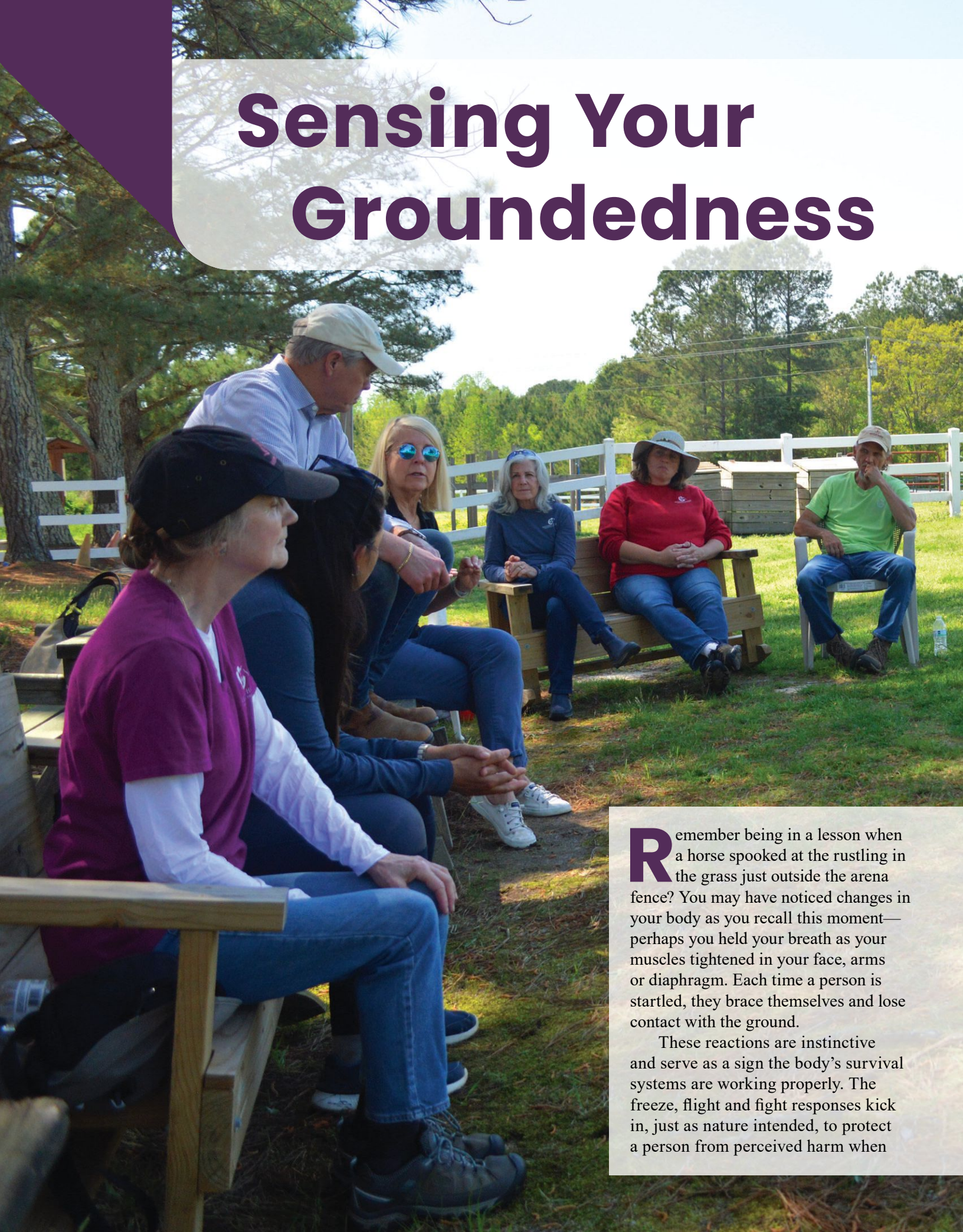


## GROUNDWORK ISSUE

- Horse Agility
- Sensing Being Grounded
- Developing Horse Leaders
- Lateral Work

  
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# Sensing Your Groundedness



**R**emember being in a lesson when a horse spooked at the rustling in the grass just outside the arena fence? You may have noticed changes in your body as you recall this moment—perhaps you held your breath as your muscles tightened in your face, arms or diaphragm. Each time a person is startled, they brace themselves and lose contact with the ground.

These reactions are instinctive and serve as a sign the body's survival systems are working properly. The freeze, flight and fight responses kick in, just as nature intended, to protect a person from perceived harm when

▼ Becoming agile in moving from a more aroused state to a calmer one gives a person confidence to respond rather than react to upsets like when a horse spooks. Photo courtesy of Lasell Bartlett

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something surprising happens. It's similar to what occurs when horses encounter unfamiliar or sudden experiences, such as a branch falling on a breezy day or a mouse scuttling away in search of a midday meal.

When this happens, people also lose some connection to their executive functioning and mobility. Ideally this only occurs for a second or two because, during a lesson, a person's attention and full faculties are needed, whether someone is instructing, volunteering or participating in the session.

Although the autonomic nervous system's response cannot be prevented, two practices can help you regain your sense of groundedness after it is disrupted. Practice becoming more aware of the environment to better anticipate and respond to unexpected events. Also, practice how to settle after being startled.

## **The Body's Response to Upsets**

The practice of sensing groundedness becomes doubly important because many people

have been startled, even terrified, by overwhelming events in the past. These may include a fall from a horse, an automobile accident or a near-miss or being bullied at school. These memories can be stored in the body, heightening a person's response to present-day surprises. For example, someone may not only be reacting to a startled horse in the moment but also to unresolved experiences that were never fully processed.

Further complicating a person's ability to settle are the body's automatic responses to threats. The body will tend to choose the same

survival response that worked in the past because it kept the individual safe. The fight response may appear as trying to forcibly stop the horse's reaction. The flight response may include taking a step back from the startled horse or looking away and seeking safety. Or the person might freeze, seeking safety in immobility. All these hard-wired survival responses happen faster than a person's awareness, which makes them difficult to interrupt without intentional practice. It takes considerable effort to first become aware when a survival response arises, and then second, to interrupt it and make a conscious choice about how to respond.

When a person startles, their body tenses up, which blocks their contact with the ground, and leaves upwardly held energy in their bodies. The muscles that tightened in response to what upset them stay

tightened, preventing them from relaxing. Fortunately, what goes up also wants to come down. If a person can release the bracing in their muscles, the energy moves downward again, grounding them.

## Connecting to Others

A person's sense of groundedness develops from their body awareness and connection to the ground beneath them. When someone is embodied and connected to the earth, they can access a calmer nervous system state. Becoming agile in shifting from a more aroused state to a calmer one gives a person confidence to respond, rather than react, to upsets, such as when a horse spooks. This agility enhances their ability to sense safety and restores their connection to the ground, which lowers stress.

Sensing one's groundedness is important because humans share

energy fields with horses, other humans and all living beings. In these shared energy fields, a person may feel—consciously or unconsciously—what others are experiencing. Perhaps you have observed that when one horse spooks, or a person in a group startles, the rest follow. It takes practice to not react when a horse or person near you startles.

Providing a safe environment during lessons is a priority. A key element of promoting safety comes through the group's shared resonant fields. In other words, if one horse or person is calm, the other horses or humans are naturally drawn toward this calmer autonomic nervous system state. Instructors know from experience that this influence can go both ways. If one person becomes aroused, upset and less grounded, the whole group may follow. Horses are finely attuned to their surroundings



▲ In her workshop, Lasell Bartlett teaches participants how their sense of groundedness develops from their body awareness and connection with the earth beneath them. Photo courtesy of Lasell Bartlett

and are experts at reading the tone of the group. Simply speaking calming words or having calm intentions won't work to settle a horse if a group continues to be dysregulated. But if the group is able to embody a more settled state, the horses will often respond by quieting down as well.

Physical injuries or emotional challenges can also interrupt a person's sense of embodied connection to the ground. When someone is injured or upset and is unable to integrate the changes and return to a settled state, they accumulate a storehouse of held energy—whether it be kinetic (movement), emotional or mental (such as thoughts and beliefs).

Any single event can disrupt someone's groundedness. Whenever a person is knocked off balance by an upsetting experience, their body immediately works to restore equilibrium and safety. If those efforts are interrupted, the person cannot complete the natural cycle of arousal and settling and is left with residual energy until they are able to relax again.

So how can a person calm down a dysregulated nervous system? Some ways include exercising, going for a walk, talking with a trusted friend or sitting quietly and reflecting on the experience. Another way to enhance a sense of groundedness is to stand barefoot on the ground or touch animals, like horses, who are naturally grounded. Based on the quantum-based concept of humans as rechargeable batteries, the subtle bioelectric signals from the earth are thought to enhance one's health by reducing brain fog and improving mood.

## Grounding Exercise Benefits

The following exercises can benefit participants, staff members and volunteers or anyone who has

ever become dysregulated. The goal is to help someone become more aware of their emotional and mental state and ground themselves in the present moment so they can more easily relax after becoming unsettled. Each exercise ends with reflection questions that can be contemplated individually or discussed in pairs or groups, with one person reading the directions for the others.

Give yourself permission to begin with a self-focused mindset. The more you practice paying close attention to yourself—your thoughts, emotions and sensations, as well as your inclinations or inhibitions to move—the better you will be able to know yourself. As your self-awareness deepens, your ability to keep yourself and others safe increases.

To safely experiment with these exercises, it is best to be in the presence of another person. Paying

attention to your body can be settling (you might breathe a sigh of relief) or unsettling (you might feel a bit more stirred up than before), so proceed cautiously. Take care of yourself, be gentle and be ready to stop if your stress level becomes uncomfortable. If at any point you find that doing the exercises brings up distress that does not resolve quickly, take a break to drink some water or tea, stretch, wiggle, dance or walk. If none of those activities help you relax, please seek out a friend or animal companion and spend time in the presence of their calmer state, which can help you shift toward a more peaceful state yourself.

To incorporate these exercises into your program, begin with a staff member—such as a program coordinator, mental health or hippotherapy professional or seasoned instructor—leading staff members and/or volunteers through



▲ Grounding exercises can help someone become more aware of their emotional and mental state and return to the present moment so they can more easily relax after becoming unsettled. Photo courtesy of Lasell Bartlett

an exercise. Once a staff member has experienced these exercises and found they can easily stay connected to their sense of groundedness, they might introduce one exercise during a lesson. Because some participants may become dysregulated, plan adequate time for them to do a familiar activity afterwards that supports settling, such as walking or grooming a horse or having casual conversations with others.

## Exercises

Orienting by looking around is a simple way to initiate settling wherever you are and may help if you are upset by unpleasant memories or expectations. Noticing what is present in the environment replaces triggering thoughts and the accompanying emotions, sensations and physiological reactivity to what happened in the past or what may happen in the future. When you look around, you move your eyes, head, neck and possibly your shoulders and torso. These movements are wired to body systems that orient a person to their environment and help them determine if they are safe or in danger.

When a horse senses possible danger, their body tightens and their eyes fix in one direction as they assess the environment for possible threat, which could be as simple as the yellow cone they have seen a dozen times before. You may be exasperated and wonder why they are still concerned. When a horse spooks, it's common to cope by asking "why?" Unfortunately, those thoughts can distract a person from reconnecting to their groundedness. When you can stop questioning and instead focus on grounding yourself as soon as possible, you can become a calming influence on your horse, who then can settle and resume being the horse everyone feels safe with and loves.

### Exercise: Orienting to the Environment

1. Find a comfortable standing or sitting position.
2. Notice your breathing without changing it.
3. Look around, moving your head, neck and eyes—perhaps also your shoulders, torso, hips and legs.
4. Notice where your eyes naturally want to look, whether in the room, through a window to the outside or perhaps into the open space rather than at an object or surface.
5. Allow your eyes to pause or wander.
6. Look behind you. Then look above and below you.
7. Identify the exit routes.
8. Notice the colors and shapes around you.
9. Pay attention to what is happening inside you as you look around.

#### Questions for discussion:

- What changed as you looked around while intentionally moving your body?
- Did any part of this orienting exercise help you relax a bit?

Combining the practices of orienting and sensing your groundedness brings the best results. However, practicing each separately also helps someone become more proficient with both. Later you can easily bring the two together.

### Exercise: Leaky Sandbag

1. Stand or sit comfortably.
2. Imagine your body is a sandbag that begins filling up with sand.
3. Notice the weight of the sand and where it goes as the sandbag fills.
4. When your sandbag is full, notice how your feet connect to the ground.
5. Notice how this impacts your breathing, your posture and your thoughts and feelings.
6. Imagine there is a small hole in this sandbag at the bottom of your feet, where the sand slowly leaks out.
7. Notice what changes in your body as the sand leaves through the bottom of your feet.
8. When the sand is gone, pause and bring awareness to your breathing and sense of groundedness.
9. Check in with yourself—would you like to add sand again, and, if so, how much?
10. Take time to explore and experience emptying and filling your sandbag.

#### Questions for discussion:

- What did you appreciate most about imagining your body as a sandbag?
- How did different amounts of sand affect your awareness and sensations?

## Exercise: Gravity and Levity

1. Stand or sit comfortably.
2. Notice your breathing without changing it.
3. Shift your position if doing so helps you feel more at ease.
4. Bring your attention to gravity, the energy that pulls you toward the earth.
5. Notice your sensations and emotions, your breath and your contact with the ground or surface beneath you.
6. Bring your attention to your experience of levity, the energy of centrifugal force that lifts you up, countering the gravitational pull.
7. Again, notice your sensations and emotions, your breath and your contact with the surface beneath you.
8. Repeat steps four through seven.
9. Pause to reflect on any changes you sense.

### Variations:

- Practice this while walking alone or with someone.
- Practice this while gently petting a horse, dog, cat or other animal companion.

### Questions for discussion:

- Which was easier to sense, gravity or levity?
- Did either sensation feel emotionally uncomfortable?
- Do you prefer to notice gravity or levity?

Lasell Jaretzki Bartlett's motto is, "It's our nature to get along," which reflects the curiosity, kindness and creativity she brings to helping people develop embodied awareness and a sense of safety that can support the best relationships imaginable. A PATH Intl. Instructor and Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning, she is the author of *Getting Along with Rusty: Horses, Healing, and Therapeutic Riding (Mostly a Memoir)* and its companion workbook *Becoming the Designated Calm Person™*, the first in her series, *Cultivating Connections: Experiential Exercises for Home and Horse Barn*. As a licensed

clinical social worker, she became a practitioner of Somatic Experiencing®, Bodywork and Somatic Education™, Brainspotting™, Somatic Resilience and Regulation® and Transforming Touch® and brings decades of experience to her clinical and educational work. She has volunteered extensively to assist Somatic Experiencing® trainings here in the US and abroad and she also assists EQUUSOMA® trainings, and is an approved session provider for both trainings, and is an approved consultant for EQUUSOMA® at all levels. Learn more at <https://lasellbartlett.com>, or contact her at [lasell.bartlett@gmail.com](mailto:lasell.bartlett@gmail.com).



▲ One way to enhance a sense of groundedness is to stand barefoot in contact with the earth or touch animals, like horses, who naturally stand barefoot on the ground. Photo courtesy of Charleston Area Therapeutic Riding

All exercises are excerpts from  
Sensing Our Groundedness Workbook  
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