

In Practice

How much Equine Breathing should I do in each session?

One of the most common questions asked. The following two cases give an indication of how to decide how much Equine Breathing to do in each session.

Dinky

This three year old Exmoor (a native breed that still roams wild in the UK) stallion is diminutive in size alone: his heart, character and zest for life are anything but. Dinky was rescued from the abattoir. He was destined for Woburn Abbey Safari Park as lion food but had caught his rescuer's eye. He was in a pen beside the rendering room for several days shaking with fear and as thin as could be.

Dinky was rescued with 5 other youngsters that had been destined to be lion food. He was in the worst state and his rescuer, Kath feared, over the first day or so that he would not make it. But he was a fighter and made a miraculous recovery. Kath had her hands full with six totally untouched wild youngsters to start and Dinky spent several months regaining his health and communing from a distance, but he remained unhandled.

I had the privilege of working with Dinky intensively for a couple of months and it was fascinating to watch the raw equine instincts so prevalent in his behaviour.

Dinky's fear of humans was strong. Initially it was not possible to even get near him, let alone touch him. Even after some days, he remained very protective of his own space and really couldn't bear to be touched. On my retreat after gentle strokes or rubs that were supposed to be enjoyable for him he would shake his neck vehemently and I got a clear impression that I had violated his space.

I did countless hours of quiet body work; reiki, massage, trigger therapy and rocking, but it took weeks to diminish the exceptionally strong 'into pressure' reflex (evolved, some think, to try and avoid having your guts ripped out by a predator that has got hold). My work uses the advance / retreat (reward) method. When I stepped up to his quarters he would sink and cringe, arching his spine laterally towards me so that his hips sometimes touched mine. As soon as the reflex relaxed I retreated as a reward.

This into pressure reflex was quite useful very early on because if I could manage to press my fingers into his quarters his reverse push often stopped him running away. For several weeks I could give Dinky an enjoyable body work session and diminish the into pressure response, only to find the reflex back as big as ever each following session!

I was keen to start Equine Breathing as soon as possible because I knew it would be helpful, but Dinky was particularly protective of his nose so I had to be careful not to frighten him. Because of his extreme wariness and dislike of contact, I used advance and retreat to start doing Equine Breathing. I taught him to put his head down for it and then I was able to use it's powerful calming effect in my routine as I would with a less wild character.

Not surprisingly Dinky found it impossible to let go in the Equine Breathing for a long time and I did it in short periods of a minute or so in between the body work. Just having me in contact was very intense for him. Gradually he relaxed more and I did longer.

For about a week, longer periods of Equine Breathing caused his ear to suddenly and intensely itch. The first few days it was the left ear, and then it was the right. Presumably this was a return of an earlier symptom. I took it to mean that the carbon dioxide had risen to a certain level and as the symptom was irritating to Dinky, used it as my cue to stop for a while. If when I restarted the ear got itchy immediately, I would end the Equine Breathing there. With his trust at such a delicate stage it was better to take it more slowly.

As those of you who have tried reducing your breathing will know, you can get some strange sensations as the carbon dioxide levels build up. We want to build up carbon dioxide but it's best done gradually, the body has to accommodate the changes, or it can be uncomfortable.



Dinky joining up (licking and chewing) of his own accord in the field



Luckily Dinky enjoyed a fetlock massage which helped break through his strong resistance to lifting his feet

With a horse, once you are over the initial hump (that is, whether the horse is going to accept it or not) look out for odd signs that are telling you to stop for a few minutes. This might be a sudden intense itch almost anywhere, violent tail swishing, snorting, yawning or any return of symptom.

Try and differentiate these from signs like barging, trying to rub your hand off etc that could indicate an attempt by the horse to regain leadership by control of movement. It is best to maintain Equine Breathing through these attempts.

Although I taught Dinky to accept a headcollar early on in his training, I have worked mostly with him loose so that if he felt my presence was too much, he could just leave, and of course he did on occasion. This way I was able to see how Dinky felt about our relationship.

Jack

Jacky is participating in the 1 N trials. She wrote the following.

"My lovely horse Jack suffers with slight sweet itch (midges) and does, what could possibly be, but I'm loath to label as, 'head shake' which is just beginning to show itself again this year. As a point of interest, he suffered an injury to his lower left eye lid before I bought him. The vet doesn't think it caused any damage to the eye but another one suggested that if the injury occurred as result of a blow, fall, or knock then it might have caused nerve damage resulting in this nervous twitch like movement of his head! He only does it at certain times, like very bright days and spring time but no problems throughout the winter.

...Thursday night we went for a full session (15 mins each side, 5 mins alternately). We achieved really good relaxation, lots of licking and chewing and yawning and he almost fell asleep. During the 4th five minute session, on the left side nostril (his damaged eye lid) he had quite a violent reaction with a few seconds of bad head shaking where I had to leave him and move to the side to allow him room. It reminded me of the worst time I have ever seen him, when we were riding on a hot day in a manage filled with sand - very dusty conditions when he almost collapsed twice and which I have never seen since - I almost stopped there but I continued and he really relaxed into the last section of the session. We finished and he seemed keen to rub his nose on me."

I think Jacky did the right thing to continue Equine Breathing after the head shaking return, judging by Jack's relaxed response. Returns of symptoms can be quite worrying, especially if they are obvious, as is head shaking, or if you are taken by surprise because you never saw the original symptom. If there is any danger it is of course best to get out of the way and then once the symptom subsides, if you can continue your session safely then it is fine to do so. Clearly, if you are concerned in any way you should call your vet.

The contents of this ezine are not a substitute for veterinary advice. If the reader has any concerns they should seek independent professional advice from a vet.