EQUI-BOW EXPLAINED

Bodywork is an important component of maintaining and improving the performance of the Equine athlete. Even if there is no acute injury, too much tension in one area will cause compensation in others, creating discomfort and often-undesirable behaviour. Bodywork is thus essential in releasing restrictions and creating a balanced body that the athlete can use to perform even better. Equi-Bow Canada is an innovative bodywork modality that incorporates techniques from Bowen, Cranio-Sacral therapy, Feldenkrais, myofascial release, and more. Equi-Bow is a neuromuscular re-patterning technique that affects circulation, fascia, muscles, and organs. The result is a bodywork method that is both gentle and profound, and that works with Equine physiology in an integrative way as a complementary support to veterinary medicine.

THE TECHNIQUES

With Equi-Bow, the practitioner uses their hands to generate a piezoelectric charge within the tissue that travels back to the nervous system, and influences the body to re-balance and heal. The movements are often described as "rolling" and are performed in precise locations on the body depending on the issue being addressed: muscle interfaces, fascial connections, tendons, or muscle bodies.

Cranio-Sacral techniques also work with the connective tissues of the body, using a light continuous touch to bring the body's awareness to an area of restriction, and facilitating the movement of the cranio-sacral fluid. In response to the contact of the practitioner's hands, the body will often release tension or "unwind". Feldenkrais and myofascial release techniques are additional bodywork variations, all with the goal of gently guiding the body towards a healthy state.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Equi-Bow acts primarily on the nervous system, which has both a voluntary and an involuntary component. The voluntary portion, or somatic nervous system, logically, is associated with the movements that we choose to control. The involuntary portion, called the autonomic nervous system, is further broken down into two parts: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic.

The sympathetic system mobilizes body systems during physical activity, such as increasing the heart rate and air intake, while constricting blood vessels and movement in other systems like the digestive tract. By creating the ideal conditions for movement, the sympathetic system turns the body into an efficient athlete. This system can also be activated by stressful situations and is responsible for the "fight or flight" response.

The parasympathetic system acts as an opposing mechanism to the sympathetic. It conserves energy and promotes the physiological functions of resting and digesting: reducing the heart rate and air intake, dilating blood vessels, and relaxing the digestive tract. In the parasympathetic state, the body processes its food and undertakes cellular repair, healing and fueling itself for the next time it is called upon to move.

Equi-Bow works with the parasympathetic system to promote healing and well-being. As it is surprisingly easy to trigger the body to enter a sympathetic, "fight or flight" response, it is necessary to use a gentle touch in order to bypass the body's instinctive resistance to force. This gives the body maximum opportunity to use the parasympathetic system to heal and re-pattern the neuromuscular connections. The benefit of using techniques that address the nervous system is that because the nervous system so profoundly affects everything that a body does, changing the way that the neurons fire will result in both emotional and physical responses.

FASCIA

Equi-Bow uses fascia as the main conduit to access the nervous system. Fascia is connective tissue made of collagen that wraps around every part of the body: muscles, organs, and joints. It blends with ligaments and even provides attachments for some muscles. Fascia is everywhere in the body and is completely interconnected in one piece from head to foot. Equi-Bow works by stimulating neural receptors in the fascia, encouraging the nervous system to enter the parasympathetic state where it can rest and process.

Fascia looks like a densely woven spider's web and is filled with nerves, blood and lymph vessels, and fatty tissue. It provides support, protection, and shock absorption, and it also acts as a medium for cells to communicate with each other. Depending on its location, it can be thick or thin.

To protect the body, fascia remodels itself in response to physical stress, dehydration, and even emotional trauma. For example, a horse that overexerts itself may strain a muscle beyond what it was comfortably capable of at the time. The fascia will stiffen around the muscle to support it as it heals, and to protect it from potential future injury.

Even after the muscle is healed, the fascia will stay tight, because it doesn't know that what happened was a one-time accident. When ridden, the rider may find that the horse struggles to

improve, and may show uneven movement in another area of the body, as it attempts to function within comfortable limits and compensate for the original restriction. Consequently, addressing the health of the fascia allows the body to return to a state of balance and function optimally.

A TYPICAL SESSION

Equi-Bow practitioners are trained to assess horses based on their physical presentation, and make note of specific areas of concern for the horse. After assessment, the bodywork begins. The practitioner will make a series of moves in a specific area of the horse's body, and then step back to allow the horse to "integrate" the work. After this pause, the practitioner resumes work on the next section of the body.

In the integrative state, horses will often become quiet and still. They may display signs of deep relaxation including closed eyes, droopy lips, or lowered head and neck. If a protocol is particularly profound, they may yawn, snort, stretch, or experience sweating or respiratory drainage.

Horses that are acutely sore or emotionally compromised may display anxious behaviours while they release, such as fidgeting or mouthing a lead rope. These behaviours frequently lessen during the course of a session, or over multiple sessions as the underlying issues are addressed.

The first session is always the same, addressing the main muscle groups of the body and creating a baseline balance from which to work with in future sessions. It is important to do this preparatory work to avoid overwhelming the body and contributing to overexertion as the nervous system incorporates new patterns of movement. Subsequent sessions are longer and incorporate additional bodywork specific to the horse's needs.

As with any bodywork, after a session, it is important that the horse be allowed time to rest and integrate the work that's been performed.

EFFECTS OF EQUI-BOW

The effects of Equi-Bow techniques are varied and will depend on the individual horse. Common effects are:

Improved Posture

By balancing and relaxing the fascia and muscles, Equi-Bow allows the horse to resume a normal, neutral posture. When standing in neutral posture, all four cannon bones are perpendicular to the ground. The head and neck will be lowered, and the muscles will appear rounded and relaxed.

Improved posture will often have the effect of diminishing the appearance of conformational flaws. Many things commonly identified as conformational may in fact be related to posture and can be improved. Conformation refers to the skeletal structure of the horse, while posture is the stance the body adopts as a result of muscle development, injury, and habit. So, a ewe neck may be the result of neck muscles that are short and tight, while the appearance of cow hocks may be the effect of underdeveloped hindquarters.

Higher Quality of Movement

Mobilizing the pelvis, spine, and neck allows the body to have a greater range of motion. The increased balance allows the horse's movement to be more functional, which allows for the full expression of their ability. This may mean more impulsion, a larger stride, a better jump, and so on. In turn, a higher quality of performance is achieved.

Improved Proprioception

Re-setting the nervous system will affect the horse's proprioception, and if it has been compromised in some way, this will result in more correct movement. Gait abnormalities such as cross-cantering, late lead changes, and rope-walking can be minimized or eliminated altogether once the nervous system has the opportunity to learn or remember the correct patterns.

Improved Attitude

Owners and riders of horses that have received Equi-Bow work frequently comment on the improvement in their horse's behaviour and attitude. They may be more interested in people, less reactive under saddle, and easier to train. As attitude and behaviour are often indicators of pain, Equi-Bow's ability to address global physical discomfort makes it a useful tool in improving equine behaviour.

Pain Reduction

Reducing inflammation is a key component of pain reduction. By increasing circulation and balance, non-affected muscles and joints are then better able to support the weaker areas. Relaxing the nervous system also interrupts the body's perception of being in crisis, allowing for healing to take place sooner. This means that Equi-Bow can be useful in acute pain situations such as laminitis or colic, or chronic pain such as arthritis and old injury.

Combined, these changes can result in dramatic improvements in performance and behaviour. It is very gratifying as a practitioner to see horses improve in health and well-being - that's what it's all about!

The Equi-Bow community is small and committed to the holistic well-being of horses. In addition to bodywork, the curriculum includes workshops on saddle fit, balanced feet, and anatomy. As the faculty is dedicated to the expansion of knowledge about equine anatomy, soundness and well-being, classes are open to all interested horse people. For more information, see **www.equi-bowcanada.com**.