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'It's like having Cait with you in person, riding alongside!' Kate McKenzie

INTRODUCTION

Whatever amount of riding or horsemanship experience you have, the purpose of this book is to encourage and inspire you to gain greater satisfaction and enjoyment by becoming a more effective coach for yourself and your horse.

In my day-to-day work with horses and riders, I find the unifying theme underlying all the different things I do is that of helping humans and horses to enjoy each other's company. This applies whether teaching riding, starting and bringing on young horses, or tackling specific problems. It's also crucial in confidence coaching. I meet many people who are on the point of giving up riding due to having lost their confidence, and are experiencing tremendous regret and even guilt because they no longer feel able to ride

or to enjoy being with the horses they love so much. Helping them to find ways forward that work for them is tremendously rewarding.

There are many ways to enjoy the company of horses without riding them. While most of the clients I work with want to ride, there are many people who have horses they don't ride, and I've written this book with these people also in mind.

Not just another riding and training manual, *Heart to Heart with Your Horse* is less about telling you what to do and more about helping you to explore what you want to do and how you might do it. You will become more confident and self-reliant and better able to enjoy your horse's company – and, from his side, he'll enjoy being with you more!

Topics tackled include identifying your needs and those of your horse; setting goals; improving your emotional connection and communication; problem-solving; bringing out the best in both of you; preparing for success; coaching for confidence, performance and personal development; working with a riding instructor; and keeping a horse at livery. There is an appendix on new trends in horsemanship, including going bitless and barefoot. And a section on further reading at the end is followed by an invitation to visit the website and take up your opportunity for a free personal coaching phone call, with further options for meeting up with like-minded people, reading articles, taking part in courses and workshops and receiving personal telephone mentoring.

Throughout the book I have used female pronouns for the humans and male ones for the horses; this isn't to indicate any particular gender significance – it's simply to make it easy to distinguish who we're talking about. (And of course it doesn't apply when talking about specific individuals who happen to be either mares or men!)

What exactly is coaching?

While it doesn't necessarily exclude instructing, coaching isn't quite the same thing. A good coach takes part in a shared process of exploring what works well for the client, rather than just issuing instructions from a position of expertise. The coach encourages the client to take an active part in the learning process, helping her to clarify aims, explore new things, reflect on what works well or could be improved, and come up with creative ideas for what to do differently. You could say that a coaching session is more 'client-centred' (to borrow a term from the world of counselling), meaning that it's directed by the client's requirements, as contrasted with a lesson in which an instructor who has a particular area of expertise teaches a specific skill. There's a place for both approaches, of course: there will be times when you identify a particular skill you want to learn and you'll want an instructor to teach it to you.

You'll still need the instructor to be a good coach, though, so you'll find it easier to learn what he or she is trying to teach you!

Coaching yourself is similarly all about facilitating learning and making it fun, interesting, and rewarding. And since you're both coach and client, you treat yourself with the same care and consideration as you'd treat someone else.

Equestrian coaching is especially interesting because there are three participants in the relationship: the coach, the client and the horse. In addition, the principles of coaching apply in how the rider and horse relate to each other, and if you can set up the kind of learning space in which the horse feels able to participate fully then the most amazing things can happen. You can treat your horse as your client, and coach your horse. You can even allow your horse to be the coach, with you being the client; this occurs

when you connect with your horse completely honestly, with the genuine willingness to learn from him and respond to what he is communicating.

Learning how to learn

The key to learning anything lies in knowing how to learn. Think of a riding lesson in which you felt tense; perhaps you were scared of the horse (a bit jumpy on a windy day), or anxious about the task you were set (those jumps look colossal), or maybe resentful of the instructor's attitude towards you (does she really think you're screwing up deliberately?) or towards your horse (hitting him isn't helping). How easy was it for you to learn? How easy was it for your horse to learn? How much did either of you enjoy yourselves? Hmm... Now remember a lesson in which you felt relaxed and inspired; or, if you can't remember one (what, *never*?!), imagine what such a lesson might be like. Notice how much more receptive to learning you are when you're relaxed; when you don't have to protect yourself you can focus on learning and have the confidence to try new things.

This is the mark of good coaching: it makes learning easy and enjoyable for all concerned.

Going deeper

I believe that we're only just beginning to wake up to the multi-level possibilities of horse-human interaction, that go way beyond the obvious physical aspects of our borrowing the superior speed, strength and agility of the horse.

Most conventional riding instruction in the past has tended to focus on observable physical technique with relatively little attention paid to inner attitudes, feelings, beliefs and values. But, as today's riders are increasingly recognising the need to address the deeper, inner levels, so the equestrian world is beginning to draw on developments in sports coaching, human psychology, equine psychology, and inter-species communication. Good coaching addresses the inner levels of mind and spirit as well as the outer physical skills. And horse-facilitated coaching for human personal development is expanding the possibilities for horse-human interaction in new and fascinating ways.

NLP in coaching

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a practical approach to coaching that provides effective methods to work with both the inner psychological and outer physical levels. NLP can help us to improve our awareness of how we perceive ourselves and our world (the Neuro aspect of NLP), how we communicate with ourselves and others (the Linguistic aspect), and how we do what we do (the Programming aspect). You could say that NLP is really about 'de-programming', as improving our awareness of habitual ways of thinking and acting enables us to explore different options, freeing us to become more spontaneous and more authentic. Enjoyment is an important part of NLP; among the criteria for assessing an NLP session, along with 'How effective is it?', is 'How enjoyable is it?'

Horses love NLP! They love it when humans are happy, and they love it when humans are moving towards greater awareness and authenticity – maybe because the humans become so much nicer to be around! Much traditional horse training has been based on correction, and punitive methods are still widely applied, including harsh use of bits, nosebands, spurs, whips, auxiliary reins, and various other gadgets of control and restraint. Imagine what it would be like to have someone tell you to do something, but make it

difficult or impossible for you to carry out the order. So they punish you for not doing it. Or they issue instructions in a language you don't understand and then, as you hesitate, not knowing what to do, they punish you. As you get more confused and scared, they punish you more, until eventually, by accident, you do what they want, so they stop punishing you – and that absence of punishment is your 'reward'. Terrifying, isn't it? It's also terrifyingly common in the equestrian world.

NLP brings in a radically different perspective: drawing out the best in someone, whether human or horse, within a kind, warm approach that encourages learning while promoting confidence and enjoyment. The emphasis is on effective communication, which means enabling horses and humans to understand each other and build mutual trust, respect, and delight in each other's company.

PRACTICE

Here's a little NLP exercise for you to try. It's a reflection on the following question:

How might things be different for you, if you were to act 'as if' you believed each of the following four NLP ideas or 'presuppositions'?

Notice the careful wording of the question. There's no need for you to believe any of the four ideas, or engage in philosophical speculation about whether or not they're true. You only need to imagine yourself acting 'as if' you were open to them as possibilities, and consider some of the possible implications of doing so.

☀ *If what you're doing isn't working, do something different.*

☀ *There's no such thing as failure, only feedback.*

☀ *A positive intention underlies even apparently destructive behaviour.*

☀ *We are all doing our best at any given moment, even when screwing up spectacularly. (Of course we could do better if we had more resources, but meanwhile we're doing as well as we can with the resources available to us at the time.)*

Take a few moments for reflection, asking yourself the question about each of the four ideas with reference to yourself and your horse, and, if you like, to your life in general.

As you go through this book you'll find a variety of ways, many drawn from NLP, for exploring options for you to change and develop as a rider and horse-person. You'll also find a chapter on horse-facilitated coaching for personal development, which encourages you to apply elsewhere in your life the insights and skills you gain with the help of your horse.

We're going to begin in Chapter One by taking a look at what's important to you with regard to your riding and horsemanship: what you want, where you'd like to go, and what you're willing (or not) to do on the way.