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Is he GRIEVING?

BY ELLA BITTEL, DVM



Horses experience bereavement in remarkably similar ways as we do. Here's how to help your equine through the loss of an equine friend.

Shilo, a 35-year-old Appaloosa mare, had never been too friendly with the two geldings she had lived with for many years. Yet when the day arrived for her planned euthanasia, Jimmy and Colonel became upset as the mare was led away from the pasture they had inhabited as a trio for so long.

A gravesite had been prepared on the large property and after Shilo quietly took in the view of the sunshine-filled valley one more time, the euthanasia was performed out of sight of the geldings.

All the while, both geldings were running up and down the fence line, calling out loudly. Jimmy slowed down after a little while, but Colonel continued, his distraught whinnying shattering the silence of the surrounding hills.

Grief is as real and impactful in horses as in people, though it may not always be readily observable. It is well known that grief can severely affect a person's health, so it is wise to prevent or limit the damage that can occur in both people and animals.

ALLOW THE HORSE TO SEE THE BODY

Shilo's owner felt it was too difficult for her to be present, so I offered to be with the horse during this last act of her life. After her slender body sank to the ground, I stood reverently in a solemn moment outside time. Yet Colonel's non-ceasing screams soon pulled me back into the now. As I walked along the fence line toward the stable, Colonel escorted me anxiously on its other side. I spoke to him gently, saying out loud that I was sorry Shilo could not come back, but that if he wanted to he could see her one last time. With these words I offered him an open halter. When he dove his head into it, I took it as a clear yes.

I could barely keep up with him as he headed to where he had seen Shilo disappear. As the still body came into sight, I let him step ahead by the full length of the lead. He wanted to know. He rushed up to Shilo's body, lowered his head, and in astoundingly systematic order proceeded to thoroughly investigate it. He started at the tail and ended

at her head. As he turned toward me with mournful eyes to walk back down the hill, there was no more angst or rush. He understood.

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ENERGY WORK TO ALLEVIATE AND PROCESS GRIEF

Massaging Kidney 27

When we reached the stable, Colonel stood quietly. This was my opportunity to help him start processing the grief that had enveloped him, along with the sense of exhaustion that was setting in.

Any type of great stress is capable of literally reversing the direction of energy flow through the meridians. Massaging the end points of the Kidney meridians for even two or three minutes has the power to restore the normal direction of flow (see below). To do this as a first step will increase the efficacy of any other therapeutic interventions that follow. Colonel signaled the correction had taken place by taking a deep breath.

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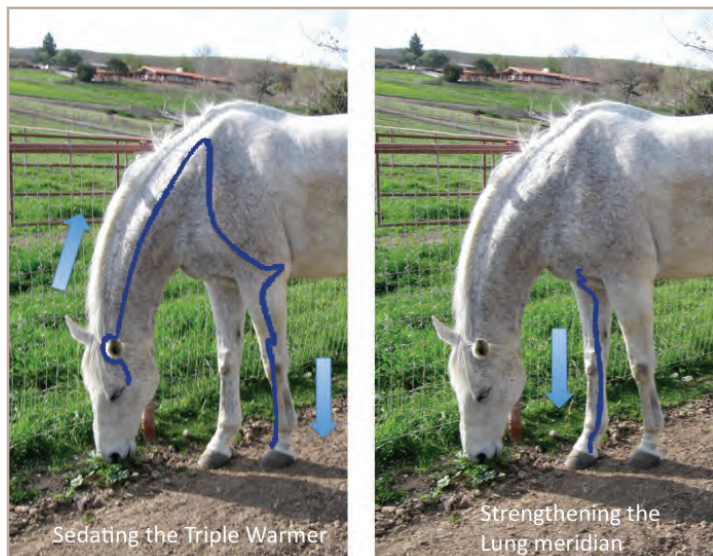
Sedating Triple Warmer

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, it is well understood how energy meridians and emotions are interrelated, giving us great pointers on how to efficiently help those who are grieving move through their emotions in a healthy way.

The Triple Warmer meridian kicks in as a first line of bodily defense when we face challenges in our lives. This can be useful in case of emergencies, supplying us short term with seemingly superhuman capacities. To be able to fully rest and rejuvenate it is important to feel safe, but this won't be possible as long as the Triple Warmer is still on alert. Stroking with a flat hand against the normal direction of flow will sedate a meridian. While we used KI 27 to correct the direction of flow in meridians, it then helped to sedate the Triple Warmer to induce relaxation. I did this on Colonel in preparation for the next step.

Strengthening Lung

Grief primarily affects the Metal element. Strengthening its Yin, the Lung meridian can be done in various ways. A quick one is to run a flat hand lightly and repeatedly along a meridian in its normal direction of flow – meaning, in the case of grief, along the Lung meridian from the chest down the front leg. As I did this on Colonel I could sense some of the heaviness lifting.



TTouch

TTouch can relieve not just physical pain, but also restore emotional balance and a sense of well being. For Colonel, I used “feathering” by lightly utilizing flicking motions of my hand, starting at his upper neck and going all the way to his thighs. Then I did python lifts down each leg, gently tapping his hoofs to help him feel grounded again.

Doing all these steps only took about ten minutes. Watching Colonel's expression change from exhaustion to mere tiredness, and from depressed to tranquil, meant the world to me. Since he knew what had happened, I was certain he would not return to running along the fence to look for Shilo. He would have grieved over her absence one way or the other, and understanding that she wouldn't return allowed him to stop waiting for her to come back. We do not need to protect ourselves or our horses from experiencing grief. We just want to do our best not to get stuck in the emotion but to face it and move through the process in a healthy way.

Any type of great stress is capable of literally reversing the direction of energy flow through the meridians.

THE GRIEVING, “NEUTRAL” AND HAPPY ONES


Some horses show easily observable expressions of grief, such as waiting for days by the gate through which their buddy disappeared, exhibiting reduced social interaction, or appearing depressed. Their eyes may be lackluster, their usual expressions of joy may fall by the wayside, and even food intake may be reduced. Sometimes they will just be a little quieter overall, which can easily go unnoticed. These signs of grieving are most likely to become apparent shortly after the loss.

Though fairly immediate physical reactions are also possible, such as breaking out in hives, developing a cough or experiencing an aggravation of pre-existing health conditions, a decline in overall health is more likely to be a long term effect of grief. While such psychosomatic connections can never be proven, given the rich array of emotions evident in horses it only makes sense to support these animals when they're experiencing grief.

Just as in people, some horses may appear “normal” yet be silently grieving. Since all the interventions suggested in this article enhance well being, my approach is to treat both horses that are obviously grieving as well as those that appear unaffected. The fact that a surviving horse did not apparently care much for the deceased one during his life is no guarantee she won't miss him, particularly if he was her only equine companion. Jimmy did not seem as affected as Colonel, for example, but clearly appreciated my offer of similar bodywork to him.

At times, it happens that a horse is downright happy over the “loss”. If this is blatantly obvious by seeing the horse become more spry and interactive, or even go up in social rank within a herd, there is obviously no need for grief support.

INTERNAL SUPPORT



Chinese herbs such as the Wei Qi Booster from Jing Tang Herbals, or another high quality immune enhancer, can help counteract the immune-depressive effects of grief. Young Living essential oil blends like Joy or Peace & Calming can soothe the spirit. Bach flower essences such as Honeysuckle and Walnut can help address the wish that things were still as they were, and open up to big life changes. The homeopathic Ignatia is well known for its ability to overcome longing for someone who is gone, whether temporarily or permanently.


DOING FUN THINGS

Intense or prolonged grieving can depress the spirit. During such times, it can be of great benefit to invite the grieving horse to participate in activities he used to, or is likely

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to enjoy. Gentle bodywork or playful groundwork such as in TTEAM, extra grazing sessions and carrots, or going for walks in nature are all examples of activities that can help the horse feel relaxed, appreciated, and entertained, reawakening his curiosity and revitalizing him.



If a horse remains by himself after the death of a buddy, look for ways to have him spend time with another horse that he resonates with. It is important to keep in mind that a horse can also grieve when one of his buddies is sold or otherwise moved, or if he is changing owners. Loneliness magnifies grief, and good company recovers the spirit, in humans and horses alike. 



DR. ELLA BITTEL GRADUATED FROM VETERINARY SCHOOL IN HANNOVER, GERMANY, IN 1994. SPECIALIZING IN HOLISTIC MODALITIES, SHE STUDIED HOMEOPATHY IN HER HOME COUNTRY, CERTIFIED WITH THE AMERICAN VETERINARY CHIROPRACTIC ASSOCIATION (AVCA) IN 1998 AND THE INTERNATIONAL VETERINARY ACUPUNCTURE SOCIETY (IVAS) IN 1999. NOW LIVING AND WORKING IN CALIFORNIA AND ARIZONA, DR. BITTEL ALSO OFFERS CRANIOSACRAL WORK AND HERBAL APPROACHES. SHE PRESENTS ON INTEGRATIVE ANIMAL HOSPICE CARE AT VETERINARY CONFERENCES AND THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM FOR VETERINARY HOSPICE CARE, AND IS ON THE ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE NIKKI HOSPICE FOUNDATION FOR PETS (NHFP). BEING AWARE OF THE LACK OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES IN THE AREA OF HER GREATEST PASSION, DR. BITTEL HAS ALSO CREATED WEEKEND SEMINARS AND ONLINE CLASSES ON ANIMAL HOSPICE CARE (SPIRITSINTRANSITION.ORG).

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