

A VOICE FOR HORSES

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Interview with Trauma Expert Karine Vandenborre

How did you come to focus your work on traumatized horses?

Well, I started horse riding when I was 13. Nobody in my family was into horses, but it was in school, it was sports day, and we could choose between different sports, and I choose horseback riding—and immediately, I was sold. So, after that I started riding in a riding school, and one day a horse arrived there. His name was Farao, and he was very, very afraid of humans. You can read that story on my website. It's the story of how it all started, and when the seed was planted.

So, Farao was a horse that was afraid of humans. You couldn't touch him. You had to lure him out of his box to clean the stables. And I believe that it was then that the groundwork was laid for my future work with horses because I learned how to build trust with that problematic horse. From then on out, I started being interested in communicating and working with difficult horses. One way or another, I always came across horses or people that had difficulties with each other.

That way, I grew into it. Also, because of my studies, experiences, and everyday training with horses, I learned more about horse communication. I learned



PHOTO: KARINE & TOM VANDENBORRE

Karine walking in complete liberty outside with a horse who was previously very difficult to approach and touch

specific things to do, how to build trust with horses. And that's how my Liberty Connection work started to grow because I learned that the first thing traumatized horses need is trust, friendship and a natural bond—which is the opposite of what a lot of trainers say, namely that you need to dominate a horse and make him respect you, that you need to show him who's the boss. That is totally untrue, not even with horses that are defensive or aggressive and show defensive or aggressive reactions. It's always a sign if they do that. Before you can work on that behavior you need to gain their trust. In my work with traumatized horses, I focused on that because I saw a lot of horses that were misunderstood, and

people used a lot of force and dominance-based training techniques. My experience with traumatized horses told me that this was not the right way.

That's how I came to focus on it because I really love the feeling of being able to help these horses, being able to help them find trust again. It's always such a beautiful moment when you see that shift happening because every horse, even if it's a really difficult or dangerous horse, when the shift happens, you can see they are still kind and soft, and they are willing to build a bond because that is what nature wants them to do. It's their nature. They need to have a bond with the other horses in the herd, but also with everybody around them

who is also a social animal, as we humans are. And they build bonds naturally if you know how to do it. So yes, my work with traumatized horses started in my teenage years and evolved over time. I was in my twenties when I finally started doing it professionally.

What are some common signs that the horse may be carrying trauma, and how can people learn to recognize them early?

Well, some common signs are, of course, that the horse is reluctant to make contact with the human or with his owner, that he always carries tension, and that it's difficult to build a bond.

There are small signs that tell you that you have to do something: a tight jaw, harsh eyes, a tail that clamps down, stiff movements. These are all signs that the horse holds chronic tension in his body. Other signals are: a lack of curiosity, difficulty with standing still, flinching when you touch the horse, becoming easily frustrated or withdrawn. I always tell people to watch the horse's eyes, watch his body, watch how your horse breathes. Learn to recognize small signals. And this begins with slowing down yourself, doing less and being more present with the horse so you can truly see and

feel all these signs. You may sometimes get the feeling that something is wrong. The horse is not as open as it should be or could be, for example.

Other signs can be biting and defensive or aggressive behavior, but it's the small signals that are often not recognized. Horses can also be shut off, shut down, and unwilling to make contact. They do everything you say, but they are kind of closed off.

This can also be a sign of trauma, but of course, it's not always trauma in the sense that it was a traumatizing one-time event. It could also be just a long period of training in the wrong way, communicating in the wrong way, so that the horse is not really afraid or traumatized, but it is reluctant to communicate with a human because he knows he doesn't get the right communication back, or people don't understand him, or he feels a lack of trust from the human and so on. So, if you think you have a traumatized horse, even if you're not sure, I would always recommend starting with liberty connection work. This approach evolved because of my work with severely traumatized horses, and it is helpful for every horse. Even if you don't have a traumatized or fearful horse or tense horse, just do the connection work.

You can never go wrong with it. It's a natural way of bonding, a natural way of learning how to communicate with your horse, learning how to connect with the horse in the most natural way so you don't have to wait for the signs that things are going wrong to start doing this kind of work. But, okay, if you see tension, if you see reluctance to make contact, if you see fear, if you see certain things that trigger the horse to become defensive or aggressive, or if you see some kind of triggers that make the horse want to run away... Yes, that can be a sign that your horse is carrying trauma.

In your experience, what are the most common causes of trauma in horses today, both in recreational and professional sport environments?

Well, many horses experience trauma because people were too brutal with them, too dominant, sometimes even too cruel, but not always. Sometimes it's because they were misunderstood or certain signs were ignored. And so according to the sensitivity and the character of the horse, trauma kicks in quickly, or it takes more to get a horse to become traumatized. So, it can be different things.

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Karine Vandenborre. Professional horse trainer/instructor, and expert in relational and training problems between horses and humans. Especially known for her Liberty Connection Work, and her work with problematic and traumatized horses.

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PHOTO: KARINE & TOM VANDENBORRE

The first exercises from Liberty Connection Work are especially well-suited for horses with trauma

What I see a lot is that horses were mistreated. And with mistreated, I mean, the horse was punished or the horse was treated in a wrong way. I remember a horse, for example, the horse as a foal had been taken away from his mother in a very brutal way and they forced it into a trailer. The foal wasn't weaned in a soft way. It was just taken away by three men in a very aggressive way.

And this horse was really severely traumatized for years. The owner could not handle the horse, could not even approach the horse. And again, with connection work, the problem could be solved. But it was a very severe trauma in that horse. So that was a way, it was kind of a cruel thing that happens to that foal.

But it doesn't have to be that way. It can just be a horse that was hit a few times with the whip during riding. And now the horse is afraid of the rider. For example, it's traumatized

while riding because of the whip, which I think is cruel. But for a lot of people using the whip is not so wrong.

They use the whip to make the horse go forward, but for that horse it's too much. So, you really have to look at each horse individually, at his sensitivities. It all depends. In sport environments, there's a lot of pressure to perform.

What I also see a lot is that they are started too early under saddle, which can be very traumatic for a horse because it's also physically painful. Then, schedules that are too intense, harsh training methods, all these things can leave deep scars. And even the so-called good stables sometimes miss the emotional needs of the horse. That's what I see a lot in sports environments. And then you see that loneliness, lack of movement, and inconsistent handling can be very overwhelming for horses in domestic settings.

Also, there's the trauma of not being heard. This happens when the horse is being corrected for expressing something like fear or pain and is then punished for doing so. That can also cause trauma. Trauma can be caused by what we do but also by what we fail to feel or honor in a horse.

Can you describe your approach to helping a traumatized horse heal?

My approach always starts with connection and presence. I work with the Liberty Connection Work method. I already explained that it evolved from my work with so-called problematic, traumatized horses. This connection work is done in true liberty, so not in a picadero nor in a round pen. A big riding arena or even in a big field is ideal. So the horse has space and distance, and he can use space and distance, and you too as a human, to communicate with the horse. We have eight connection exercises, and we start with the foundational connection exercise, which is bonding time. This exercise is about being together without an agenda, allowing the horse to choose closeness or distance, being still, being aware of your own body and breath. From there, we can give the horse time to connect of its own accord. This means that we will not be the first to go to the horse, but the horse should be given the time to connect with us first because when that happens, it is so powerful—especially

in a horse that lacks trust in humans.

Especially with a horse that has been traumatized and fears humans because the moment he decides: Okay, this human is safe enough to go and smell and touch and make contact, this is when the first big shift happens. And from there on, we go further with the next Liberty Connection Work exercises. So, we really rebuild trust by using the natural language and behavior of horses, herd behavior. And it's always with softness, with patience, but also with clarity. We learn how to communicate in a clear, unambiguous body language. Then the horse knows: Okay, I can understand this human, and I can communicate with this human in my way. Of course, we are in a human body, so the horse needs to adapt to that. But there are some universal body language ways that any horse as well as other animals can understand. And then there are some things that are typical for horses that we can apply in our Liberty Connection Work. The main thing is that the horse is free. It's free to distance itself. It's free to increase the space between us. And that's what makes this work so valuable.

It's not a quick-fix method. It's really something that may take time with some horses because it's the horse that chooses when he's ready for the next step. And we give the horse that freedom and that space. So, the horse should always be

able to get out of our circle of influence because that is the key when you want to work with a traumatized horse. A lot of people underestimate what it means for a horse to be able to choose the space and distance it needs to feel comfortable around a human.

How can everyday horse people create a more trauma-informed relationship, even if they're not trained therapists?

Well, I teach this to my students every single day. I have beginners amongst my students, who are really working with horses for the first time, sometimes older people who finally want to make their dream of owning a horse come true, but they're truly beginners, and even they can learn how to know and how to help their horse if they have a horse with trust issues or a traumatized horse because it starts with awareness. Trauma-informed horsemanship means being sensitive and aware to why a horse might behave in a certain way, to feel into the horse, to see what the horse is telling you, and not to judge or correct it, but instead to ask yourself: Is this resistance? And why? Is this a cry for help? Why is this happening? To slow down in those moments, to observe without judgment, and also to accept the horse's No. Be curious about their No, and be curious about their boundaries and their needs. And you don't need to be a therapist. You just need to be

present and compassionate and willing to feel towards the horse and with the horse.

When horses are met with empathy instead of pressure, they can begin to trust again. And that changes everything. So, when a horse feels, you go into contact because there's something that I call going into contact and being out of contact. And this is something I teach my students: the difference. When a horse, even a traumatized horse and a very difficult horse, feels that you can go into contact, you open the door for the horse to go into contact as well. And that's when the connection starts to grow. It's a really beautiful way of being and working with horses.

Do you see parallels between human trauma and equine trauma in your work? And what can horses teach us about healing and resilience?

Absolutely. I can see parallels. Horses are incredibly sensitive. They are social beings, and they are group animals just like us. Just like us, they need safety, they need connection, they need expression, and they need freedom and autonomy. And when those needs are compromised, trauma can result. What's beautiful is that horses live in the body, and they don't intellectualize healing like we do. They show us that trauma is stored physically, and they can also show us how it can be released through movement, through breath, through connection,

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Somatic Experiencing, continued from page 17

had commented on how good it tasted. Later, he had laughed and even made jokes. It was as if a lost part of him had returned. Gently. Quietly.

The Root Chakra and the Return to Earth

I couldn't forget that moment. The silence. The power at the heart of the herd. And then it struck me: his hands had rested on Magic's root chakra. It stands for grounding, safety, trust, and life force. It is the foundation of our existence. And perhaps that's exactly what happened: a reconnection. A return. Not just physically—but also at the soul level.

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In the herd.

Carried by the rhythm of nature.

With yourself.

*There is a space waiting—
where you don't have to do anything,
and everything is allowed.*

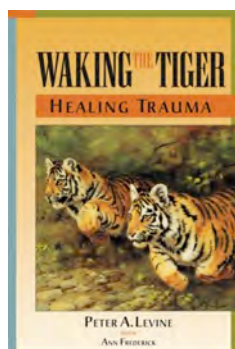
*Where you can rediscover your own resources,
remember forgotten strengths, and quietly grow.*

A listening.

An arrival.

A quiet call—back to yourself.

Book Recommendation:
Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma
by Peter A. Levine



A groundbreaking work on trauma healing. Levine's method, *Somatic Experiencing*, is a holistic approach in which the nervous system learns to gently regulate itself—through sensing, breathing, small impulses. Healing doesn't happen through telling, but through experiencing—step by step, at your own pace.

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through understanding, through relationship. And that's very beautiful. We can learn from that as well. Trauma in humans is stored physically and emotionally, as in animals, but they don't intellectualize it. We do. We start to think about it. We try to rationalize it sometimes, but it's not possible. We have to do the work, the bodywork and the emotional work. And we can help horses with that, but they can also help us by showing us when we can relax, when we can release.

Because when we release, when we relax, horses react to it, so they can teach us that. Their resilience is powerful. They don't hold grudges. Or how do you say that? So, when we meet them with true presence, with true softness of body and mind, they can let go. They can open up and begin to shine again, you could say. And horses can teach us to feel our way through and to return to softness, to breathe with awareness, trust fully again. Actually, they invite us to heal alongside them.

What message would you most like to share with the readers?

My most important message is that your horse is always speaking, even in silence. When he stands there, he is telling you what's going on. Even in stillness.

You could see it in his body, in his energy. Listen with your heart, not just with your hands. Be willing to unlearn what you think you know and to slow down and to do less and to feel more, feel towards your horse, go into the contact, and healing and true connection come when you dare to be present with yourself and with your horse.

So first be present and connect with yourself and then connect with your horse. Also, it's not about fixing your horse. When you have a traumatized horse, or a hurt horse, or a horse with negative experiences, which are not necessarily traumas, don't fix your horse, but create a space where your horse can return to who he really is. And that is the most beautiful journey you can undertake together with your horse, returning to who you truly are and who your horse truly is.