

Autonomous Horsemanship

EDITED BY



AUTONOMOUS HORSEMANSHIP



AUTONOMOUS HORSEMANSHIP IN SHORT

- respects the horse's autonomy and rights as a living being
- focuses on the relationship, not on manipulation or control
- avoids force, tools, treats, or tricks that undermine trust
- communicates and understands each other, especially in difficult situations
- lets the horse choose to participate voluntarily, rather than forcing compliance
- focuses on the process and not on fixed expectations of an outcome

and above all

- prioritizes the horse's instincts, needs and choices



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AUTONOMOUS PHILOSOPHY

- is a philosophy on how humans connect with horses in a compassionate and ethical way
- is a way to find practical solutions through direct communication within the relationship
- deepens human-horse communication and builds trust, improving safety and wellbeing for both species
- seeks a harmonious partnership where both horse and caretaker feel safe, understood and able to thrive



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WHY AUTONOMOUS HORSEMANSHIP IS IMPORTANT TODAY

For emotionally mature humans, the overarching goal shared by practitioners of all horsemanship styles is the promotion of equine welfare and expression of natural behavior. In other forms of horsemanship, well-meaning people place constraints on horses' freedom and agency in an attempt to control their behavior. Since they are intended to produce reliable and obedient riding horses, training techniques rely heavily on conditioning, restraint and dominance to achieve compliance. Is this true equine welfare?

Inherent autonomy beyond reward and punishment

Autonomous Horsemanship practitioners avoid the use of rewards and punishments, seeking instead to build true understanding and trust through attentiveness to the horse's needs and preferences, allowing the horse to choose their own pace and level of engagement. The human seeks to learn the horse's "language" in order to communicate effectively and collaborate as equals, without forcing the horse to follow any predetermined agenda.





AUTONOMY, COMMUNICATION AND PARTNERSHIP VS CONTROL, CONDITIONING AND TRAINING

Autonomous Horsemanship views the relationship as one of mutual learning and growth, while other horsemanship is rooted in the idea of human supremacy over the horse. *AH* sees the horse as an autonomous being with their own agency, while other forms of horsemanship aim to manipulate horses to do what the human directs, asserting control and dominance over the horse.

Conditioning the horse using treats, force or punishment undermines any form of partnership and mutual learning.

Transformation is only possible with openness, compassion and willingness to learn from each other.



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1: LISTEN TO YOUR HORSE WITH CURIOSITY AND RESPECT

Spend time with horses simply for the sake of connection. The focus is on mutual understanding and companionship.

Cultivate an open, calm yet focused presence around horses to allow for communication and understanding to emerge organically.

Approach horses with curiosity, respect and an attitude of service to the horse rather than service from the horse. The goal is for human needs to not infringe on the horse's autonomy and self-directed life.



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2: COMMIT FOR A LIFETIME

Provide sanctuary and retirement care for the rest of their lives. Allow them dignity and peace. Sometimes we may be faced with a choice between euthanasia and hospice. This is a deeply personal decision and we look for an agreement that can be understood between horse and human when this time comes.



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- Plant and maintain live, growing foliage and vegetation. Fresh herbs, shrubs, and grass patches provide mental exercise as the horses forage. The growth and change of live plants over time will help them maintain interest.
- Unlimited access to fresh, clean water is vital for horse health. Autonomous systems must reliably provide water 24 hours a day.
- Ensure adequate exercise. Mental and physical stimulation are closely linked for horses. Lots of opportunity for exercise, wandering, exploring, and social interaction with herd members will stimulate the mind as the body is activated. Lack of physical activity can lead to issues with mental stagnation and stereotypical behaviors.
- Injury or illness: Without routine checkups and observation, health issues may go unnoticed until a medical emergency develops. Autonomous systems need to allow for regular veterinary check-ups and health monitoring of horse

- Obesity and related issues: Without monitored feeding and exercise, horses may become overweight or even obese, leading to problems like laminitis, insulin resistance, and osteoarthritis. Feed amounts and types must be carefully monitored. If obesity is an issue, forage of lower nutritional value can help maintain optimal weight while still allowing horses 24 hour access to food.
- Weather issues: Extreme heat or cold, lack of shelter, and lack of appropriate blanketing can all potentially harm horses. Protection from weather extremes is essential for health and safety.

Regular oversight and management by professionals are still essential. Close monitoring will allow for the best possible health and welfare outcomes for horses in autonomous care.

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Image: Shamaya Sutton with Appeal Democrat

4: MENTAL HEALTH

There are several ways to provide mental stimulation for horses in *Autonomous Horsemanship*:

- Include obstacles, terrain changes, and interactive features in the horses' living space. Things like natural obstacles (trees, bushes, rocks, ponds), ramps, poles to weave through, platforms, tunnels, etc. will engage the horses' minds as they explore and interact with these features.
- If a small space can't be avoided, provide toys and puzzles that dispense treats when manipulated. Things like large treat balls, ropes, cones, lick mats and other toys the horses have to move or manipulate to get to the treats inside will help keep them occupied. Rotate different toys to continue stimulation. These should only be considered short-term solutions. Adequate space and a harmonious herd should be the autonomous horseperson's goal.

- Add stimulation through the senses. Things like essential oils, soundtracks playing nature sounds or music, objects with different textures and more can stimulate horses through smell, sound, and touch. Rotate sensory stimulants to prevent habituation.
- Provide interaction and bonding time with caretakers. While autonomous, the horses should still get regular interaction with the people who care for them. Consensual grooming, and simply spending time with the horses can help stimulate them mentally through social bonding and learning. The more voluntary the horse consents to touch, the easier it will be to help them if an illness or injury makes it necessary.
- Stereotypies: Repetitive behaviors like cribbing, stall walking, and wood chewing can emerge in response to boredom, stress, or confinement. Lack of stimulation and interaction must be addressed to prevent stereotypies.
- In-fighting: Without monitoring, some horses may become aggressive toward other herd members, causing injury. Herd dynamics must be carefully managed to minimize aggression or distress.
- Isolation: Horses are social animals and require interaction, bonding, and herd structures. Confinement in stalls and small spaces can cause severe stress, health issues, and behavioral problems in horses.



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5: MINIMIZE CONFINEMENT

If healthy, reduce the amount of time your horse spends in stalls or small spaces. Give them as much freedom of movement as possible.



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6: NO RIDING

Riding is incompatible due to the risk of infringing on a horse's sovereignty, agency and bodily autonomy. Riding involves an inherent power imbalance and potential for harm.

The weight of a rider strains a horse's musculoskeletal system in ways that compromise their health and wellbeing. Tack like halters, bits and bridles restrict a horse's natural range of movement and ability to make free choices.

Some trainers believe "consent-based" riding may be possible if negotiated with the horse's full interest and consent in mind, but there is not a clear path for how true consent could be meaningfully obtained or assured in practice. Horses under human care are still ultimately dependents unable to refuse human contact, even if interaction is attempted in the most compassionate manner possible.

The core of *Autonomous Horsemanship* is valuing a horse's freedom, self-determination and ability to live according to their own nature and instincts - not human desires or intentions. Any use of the horse that involves directing or changing the horse in some manner for human benefit, even if well-intentioned, asserts human priorities and runs counter to this philosophy.



Consider whether riding is truly compatible with a horse's best interests, or if there are better ways to honor their sovereign selfhood.

Any human use of horses ultimately relies on at least some degree of control or management that restricts the horse's autonomy, even if attempted sensitively. True ethical equilibrium may not be possible as long as horses are living as captive dependents.

The key is to approach a horse with humility, curiosity and a willingness to challenge conventional human-horse power dynamics.

Start slowly and be open to letting go of practices that do not align with the ethos of respecting horses as autonomous beings.



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7: NO TRAINING

There is no "training" in the conventional sense within *Autonomous Horsemanship*.

The goal is not to change horses, but for humans to change how we relate to and view horses - seeing them as sovereign beings worthy of freedom and autonomy.



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8: REMOVE TACK

Remove bits, bridles and saddles and start spending time with your horses as they *are* to get a sense of them as an autonomous being.

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9: CONSENTUAL TOUCH AND GROOMING

Touching and grooming is done at the horse's pace and preference, with no requirement that the horse submit to or accept human contact, giving the horse full choice and control over the process. The human follows the horse's cues and lead, only interacting in ways and for as long as the horse consents. Applying force, compulsion or restraint would be contrary to *Autonomous Horsemanship's* ethics.

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11: ADEQUATE EXERCISE

An enriched environment with obstacles, terrain changes, shelters, and natural features that prompt natural horse behaviors like walking, trotting, cantering, rolling, etc. This can also help horses self-trim their hooves. This type of mental stimulation will also keep horses engaged and active.

24-hour access to forage and water to promote wandering and grazing. Free access to resources will encourage horses to move frequently and naturally.



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12: CONSISTENT HERDS

Having a consistent herd group without frequent additions or removals of members will promote harmony among the horses and encourage natural movement and social interaction.

A stable herd group so horses can form social bonds and a harmonious hierarchy. New members should be introduced with care. A consistent group will usually feel safe exercising, foraging, and engaging in other natural behaviors together. In the wild, horses choose which herd they live with.

Some stay with their families (even young stallions,) some search for another herd that feels more comfortable (e.g. some herds have a lot of movement, some are more quiet and peaceful.) Some spend time in a different herd and then return to their family herd. If there is enough space, horses will naturally choose the group they prefer to live with.



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13: HORSES AREN'T HEALERS

Horses are not responsible for bringing us peace or healing. Our relationship with horses can reveal where we need to develop. It can reflect and magnify our beliefs and behavior and show us where we can grow and change. We find peace and healing through changing our values, our attitude, our mindset, our point of view. Horses are simply horses. We are the ones who can help ourselves.



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14: THINK CRITICALLY

Horses, along with many other animals and plants have been domesticated for the use of humankind. This has resulted in significant environmental and climactic changes beginning when humans started to intensify their foraging strategies more than 10,000 years ago. Domestication ended authentic freedom and made use of others for food, work and safety. Is domestication an abuse of power? Domestication is based on the intentional manipulation of the emotional and neurobiological development for the purpose of controlling others' behavior. A practitioner of *Autonomous Horsemanship* thinks critically and learns about our history and the impacts of domestication on horses and other plant and animal species. By understanding our shared history, roles in society, and responsibilities to one another, we can work to overcome the harms caused by systems of oppression and domination that result in domestication. With knowledge and compassion, we can build a more just and equitable world for all.



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**ADVOCATING FOR
AUTONOMOUS HORSEMANSHIP**



How can we help horses live more autonomously in our lifetime?

- Lead by example - The best promotion of *Autonomous Horsemanship* comes from people genuinely living its values and ethos in the way they relate to and care for their own horses. This sets an example that others may be inspired by.
- Promote shifts in public perceptions of horses - As ideals of animal welfare and autonomy change, social norms around horse usage could shift to value horses more for their own sake than for their utility to humans. This would enable more horses to live freely. Revoking social license to use horses is something that could happen.
- Start compassionate conversations - Have open, non-judgemental dialogues with horse owners about rethinking human-horse relationships from a perspective of empathy and the horse's needs. Ask thoughtful questions that help owners reflect on their own practices.

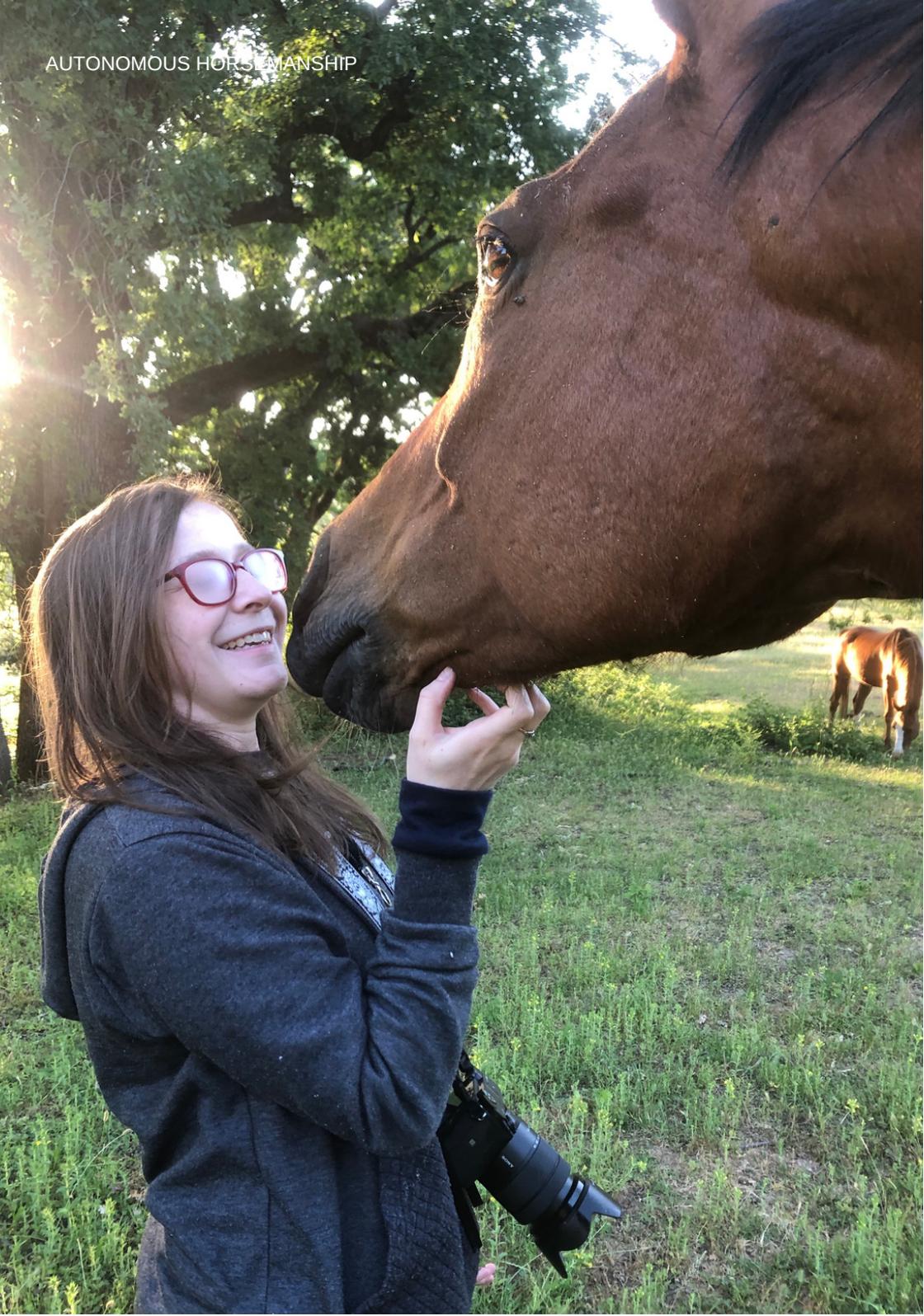
- Provide educational resources - Share books, articles, documentaries and other media that shed light on *Autonomous Horsemanship* and help horse owners reevaluate common assumptions around training, riding and horse management. Start a wider conversation.
- Focus on benefits - Highlight how *Autonomous Horsemanship*-aligned practices have the potential to improve horse welfare, build better trust-based relationships, enhance owners' self-knowledge and safety, and increase joy derived from human-horse connections. Appeal to owners' values and self-interest.
- Avoid judgment - Critiquing current horse owners for practices seen as unethical from an *Autonomous Horsemanship* lens will likely make them defensive. Focus instead on compassionate curiosity, asking how relationships could become even more fulfilled and ethical.

- Shift narratives around wild horses from "problematic" to worthy of protection. Frame wild horses not as invasive species interfering with human land management goals, but as integral parts of the ecosystem deserving of proper habitat and humane treatment. Recast the conversation.
- More sanctuaries and rescue facilities - There could be an increase in permanent sanctuaries and rescue facilities that provide horses a home for life with no requirements or expectations placed on them. Horses at these facilities would have as much freedom as possible.
- Increased adoption of horses as companions. Rather than seeing horses as tools for work or sport, more people could adopt horses simply for the purpose of companionship and connection, with no demands placed on the horse.



- Host discussion groups and workshops. Organizing in-person events where horse owners can come together to learn about and discuss *Autonomous Horsemanship* principles can provide community support for those interested in changing their practices.
- Decreased support for breeding of captive horses. Breeding horses perpetuates inequality and does not lead toward true autonomy. Cultivating human contentment independent of animal breeding and control is a long-term step towards *Autonomous Horsemanship*.
- Donate and volunteer with organizations working to help horses live autonomous lives. There are non-profit groups focused specifically on equine advocacy, and habitat conservation programs. Donating money, time or resources can help scale their impact.

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DEEPER SOLUTIONS



There are ways we can encourage greater emotional maturity, happiness and fulfillment within people to reduce the desire to breed and train captive animals

- Promote and practice mindfulness and self-awareness. Techniques like meditation, yoga, journaling and other forms of introspection can help people gain insight into their desires, needs, attachments and aversions. This inner work leads to greater emotional balance.
- Foster compassion and empathy. Cultivate people's innate capacity for empathy by connecting them to stories of animals' inner lives and emotions. When we understand animals more deeply, the urge to dominate them lessens.
- Address loneliness and lack of meaning. Many people seek relationships with animals out of a sense of isolation, lack of community or search for purpose. We must directly tackle these human needs through connection, exposure to nature and opportunities for meaningful work that benefits others.

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- Support children in developing secure attachments and self-worth from an early age. Children who receive unconditional love, healthy guidance and opportunities for self-directed play and exploration are less likely to grow into adults who depend on dominating or controlling animals to feel whole.
- Shift cultural narratives around status, power and materialism. Challenging dominant ideologies that equate worth with domination over others can help people find self-esteem in more peaceful, inner-directed ways that do not involve subjugating animals.
- Build communities centered around human-human relationships. When people's needs for connection, belonging and significance are met within loving human communities, the impulse to try to fulfill those needs through animal relationships often lessens.

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Ultimately, promoting more holistic human wellbeing through inner transformation, social connection and shifts in cultural narratives may reduce the tendency to see animals as things to be owned, bred and controlled for human ends. This requires addressing existential human needs directly while cultivating values of empathy, compassion and respect for all life.



Many Paths to the Heart is a nonprofit organization that seeks to inspire and support people to transform their relationships with horses into relationships of trust, compassion, and open-hearted communication – relationships that support the welfare, dignity and freedom of both horses and humans.

You're invited to join us as a member of the community.

Many Paths to the Heart is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. We gratefully accept donations from people like you to support our mission to improve the well-being of both horses and humans.

<https://manypathstotheheart.com/>



Autonomous Horsemanship. The Key Principles.

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