

# A Different Way To Think About Grooming

## Make It A Time To Focus On Your Horse's Body And Build Your Bond

By Elizabeth Bava



**“Ahhh....You got the good spot!” Attentive grooming can be combined with some basic massage techniques to help solidify your relationship with your horse.**

Does your horse enjoy your company? Have you ever asked yourself that? Beyond riding, grooming is probably the most time we spend with our horses. Often, we are taught to groom a horse a certain way, for example by using the curry comb first, then this brush, then that brush, etc. But grooming time can be so much more than just getting your horse clean. You can make it a pleasurable experience that relaxes your horse, makes him happy, and makes him enjoy your company. Incorporate some simple bodywork (therapeutic methods using various types of touch) into your grooming routine, and your horse will love you for it.

But first, here are some thoughts on how to get yourself in the right state of mind:

Get rid of your junk. Yes, that's right, your junk. All those negative thoughts, worries, and problems, leave them at home. They don't belong with you at the barn. Remember that horses, being prey animals, are incredibly sentient and they can pick up everything in your energy field. Be ready to spend some quality time with your horse.

Be acutely aware of your breathing. Slow your breathing down. Your horse will be more calm if you breathe slowly and you both might even breathe together in sync. Don't be in a rush, and even if you don't have much time to spend, go about what you need to do in a calm and peaceful way.

Create a sacred space. Imagine you and your horse are in a bubble, and don't be bothered by others who might be around the barn. This is a special time with your horse, where you can focus on him and be totally present.

Don't groom your horse on auto-pilot. If you groom your horse on cross ties, make sure they are loose enough so he can easily lower his head below the withers. Before using the grooming tools, start by touching your horse all over his body with your hands. Notice if he enjoys your touch. If your horse does, great, if not, then make adjustments to the pressure and tempo. It may vary depending on which area of the body you are going over. Do this on a regular basis so you can notice any changes in your horse's body. Is he reactive in certain areas? Is there a flinch response or muscle twitching? Could there be discomfort or pain? How do his muscles feel? Are they supple or tight? Are there any tense areas?

If so, try to think why that might be. Think of saddle fit, training, or riding to help you analyze the why. Often, reactivity in the body can translate into behavioral issues which can be subtle or not so subtle where your horse is “screaming” at you to pay attention. For example, a reactive back can lead to pain while under saddle which can lead to poor performance, resistance to the work, or simply bucking you off.

Now it's time for some simple bodywork techniques.

A professional equine body-worker can more easily show you in person what you can do on your own to help your horse on a regular basis or in between their visits to your barn, but in the meantime, here are a few things to try:

**1.** Use the heel of your hand and go all over the horse's body emphasizing the poll, neck, withers, back, buttocks, and legs.

**2.** Most horses love to have their ears stroked. Do ear slides to help them relax and lower their head. Start at the base of the ear and gently slide outwards with the ear cupped in your hand.

**3.** After you brush the tail or mane go back and slowly comb through the tail or mane with your hands and fingers. This can be very soothing and again, promotes relaxation.

**4.** Work on the abdominal muscles to trigger your horse to lift his back. Strong abdominal muscles are essential for supporting the back which in turn supports the rider. Start behind the point of elbow with your hands placed side by side about an inch or two from the midline. Use the tips of your fingers or nails and push up, then release, as you repeat this motion going down the midline and see the horse lift his back. Do this on both sides of the body every time you groom or ride your horse.

**5.** Do circular rubs or motions with a mitt or grooming gloves besides the usual brush strokes. Grooming gloves are a great way to feel the horse's body much better than a traditional curry comb and brush.

**6.** While grooming, look for those special “sweet spots.” Every horse has them and they are different for each horse. Notice where his favorite spots are for a good scratch, or places that need tension to be released, or a spot that just feels good when you rub on it. Be aware of every stroke and every reaction your horse may have. Maybe your horse will quiver his lower lip, yawn, stretch, lick and chew.

**7.** If he pins his ears, tries to bite or even kick, you need to figure out why. There is always a valid reason. Pay attention and don't ignore such behavior thinking your horse is just being bad. Some horses are harder to read because their reactions are more subtle, so you need to be very observant.

If you practice being mindful when you are with your horse, your horse will see you as someone who makes them feel loved, feel good, and helps them relax, and not just someone who cleans, feeds, and jumps on their back for a ride. You need to be there for the horse beyond just fulfilling their basic needs. Once the horse perceives this, he will enjoy your company more than ever.