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## General Approach

Any alarm reactions on the part of the horse is cause to stop and try another approach. The trick is to work a little stop and step back to watch the horse's reaction to the work. Let them process what you're doing because it will be completely new to them.

Sometimes the horse will react to the memory of an old sensation rather than to your work. You'll have to re-educate their nervous system that the touch you are providing is different and therapeutic. Keep two hands on the horse while you are working, this provides a good magnetic, energetic and electric connection between the two of you.

Not all of these techniques would be used with each horse. I'm illustrating them here so you can have them in your tool box when you need them. If they seem redundant study them again. I assure you each one is unique.

## The Head

I like to start with the horse's head when I work; specifically the Atlanto Occipital region. Starting here gives me a chance to meet the horse at a place on its body that has been handled by

people. The sensation of Myofascial Release is new to the horse, and I'm a new person to the horse. Initially, they don't know if I'm there to help them or not. Also, the head is far from the *business end* if you know what I mean. I can better gauge the reactions of the horse to my work, as well as the handler's reactions to the horse, (in case there's an adverse reaction to the work) while being in a safer place.

While the head is normally handled, halters and bridles on and off, it is not a place where people seem to relate to the horse. This is a shame since it's a place that the horse loves to have handled correctly.

Years ago someone explained to me that the head of a horse is the place where humans and horses can have a special relationship. That it should be kept as a special place that could be used by humans, with our hands, to reward and to bond with the animal. The logic was that horses, not having hands struggle to interact with their heads. They may try to flick a fly off their face/head but they can't reach into their ear and scratch it. And we all know how good that can feel!

Before you start to work the fascia take some time to familiarize yourself with the anatomical landmarks of the head. Find the bones, blood vessels and nerves,

from their different tissue feel.

The bones will feel like a bone, sometimes covered with a fascial *Bubble Wrap*. The blood vessels will be softer and have more viscosity to them. They may have a pulse. The nerves will feel like a string or guitar wire if they're compressed, and like a water filled tube if they are inflamed.

There's not a lot of fat on the horse's head and it's easy to pin the tissue, nerves and blood vessels, to a bone. You can avoid doing this by keeping the angle of your fingers and hands oblique to the tissue as you are working.

Many of the muscles in the head are attached to fascial sheets rather than bone and can be detached if you are too aggressive. Go slow and pay attention to the horse's reactions.

Pay particular attention to what you are doing around the zygomatic and mandible bones, these are places where you can inadvertently trap a nerve. **USE AN OBLIQUE ANGLE TO YOUR TOUCH AND BE SLOW and GENTLE.** Remember speed is the enemy of depth when working with soft tissue.

I don't want to suggest that you shouldn't try and free a nerve that's trapped in a fascial adhesion. I do want to caution you that you need to know your anatomy when working on the head and be able to feel your way through the territory.

If only because there's not as much fat or protective hide as there is in other areas.

When you are in front of the horse, keep one of your feet on their closest foot. If they decide to strike out, not at you but at the sensation they're having, you'll get a warning when the foot moves.

I can't over emphasize the benefit this head work has for the horse. The horse will appreciate you assisting them in freeing their head.

**Table 1** provides a list of some of the more common muscles of the head that you will encounter in using these techniques. While it lists muscles, the intention is to work with the fascia that defines them. The muscles are a name for the territory you will be working in. You can see from the naming conventions of these muscles that their action is often included as part of the name, Levator Labii = elevator of the lip.

<b>Muscle Name</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>Insertion</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Reference Figure</b>
Parotidoauricularis	Parietal Bone	Lateral Ear	Moves Ear	1
Cervicoauricularis	Cervical Bone	Medial Ear	Moves Ear	1
Scutalaris	Frontal Bone	Medial Ear	Moves Ear	2
Levatornasolabialis	Nasal Bone	Nose and Lip	Raise nostril and lip	3
Levator labii Superior	Nasal Bone	Upper Lip	Raises Lip	3
Zygomatic Muscle	Zygomatic	Lip	Raises lip	5
Masseter	Mandible	Zygomatic	Raises Mandible	6

**Table 1.** *Some common muscles of the head and which technique works with them.*

## Atlanto-Occipital Release

**W**hile positioned at the side of the horse, use your fingertips to engage the space between the occiput and the atlas. The objective is to very gently encourage more space in the joint by slowly sinking your fingers down as the tissue responds and opens.

You can use your other hand on the halter to bring the horse's head up and down opening and closing the joint and helping to move the tissue under your fingers.

Next gently tissue test behind the AO and engage any barriers until they release. The horse should be dropping its head in acceptance of this procedure. The last stroke should take the tissue away from the AO towards the axis.

Horses that move with their heads held in the air, sky gazing, will have closed this joint. (As will people spending too much time looking up at their computer.) For this closed AO you'll have to use some of the nuchal ligament techniques along with this one.

Repeat from the other side.



**Figure 1** *Atlanto Occipital Release*

## Frontal Bone Circles

**W**hile standing in front of, or to the side of the horse. Use your thumbs or fingertips to engage the fascia on top of the head right between the ears, and make small circles or use a “C” stroke to break up any adhesions.

Be very gentle and slow in your sinking into the restricted layer. This area does not have a lot of fat to cushion your touch, so a *pointy tool* is not advisable.

The horses seem to appreciate this work and will drop their heads while you are doing it. If it doesn't or acts irritated, try changing your pressure. You may be too soft and feel like a fly or too hard with an intense touch. If you decide to stand to one side while releasing this fascia make sure you work from the other side as well. This simply gives the horse a sensation from both sides.

If you work in front of the horse keep one of your feet on top of the horse's foot that's closest to you. This way, if the horse should strike at the sensation they're having, you'll have a warning to move out of the way. (That's two times I've mentioned this. I think it's important.)



**Figure 2** *Frontal Circles*

## Sweeping the Frontal Bone

This technique will generally relax the horse and let you get to know each other. Believe me a relaxed horse is easier to work on. However, don't confuse a relaxed horse with the one that is not engaged with the process. As you are working the horse will be moving with your work. A horse that's relaxed and moving with your work is a good thing. A horse that is dull and passively avoiding your work is not.

There's a nerve and a blood vessel running down the side of the nose. You should locate them before you start.

Using your thumbs, start at the center of the frontal bone and sweep towards the lateral aspects. You don't have to worry about your moving the bone, you won't. You DO have to sink in slowly and slowly sweep your thumbs apart. This doesn't require force, it requires time to sink into the tissue. Continue this for the entire frontal bone.

Make sure you stay on the bone. When you get towards the nose you'll be engaging the cartilage. You'll know it's cartilage because it has more *give* than bone. You don't want to push into the cartilage.

You'll also want to be careful of the tear ducts as you approach the eye. These run from the eye to the nose and you don't want to impinge on them. You can gently stroke the



**Figure 3** *Frontal Sweep*

tear ducts to move any fluid that's stuck in them, especially if the horse has a nasal discharge. Stroke the teat duct towards the nose. There's a fatty pad above the eye you don't need to work there.

## Atlanto-Occipital Sweep

The area around the AO joint is like a traffic circle for muscles of the head and neck. The Occipital muscles come in here, the Brachiocephalicus and Sternoccephalicus muscles attach here. The muscles of the ear originate here... You can effect all of them from here.

For lack of a better term I called this technique an AO Sweep. **Figure 4**

While positioned on one side of the horse use your fingertips to engage the tissue. Gently, tissue test and engage any barriers until they release. Then using a *sweeping stroke* take the tissue away from the joint. (Always end your work in an area around a joint with a stroke that takes the tissue away from it.)

The horse should be dropping its head in acceptance of this work. If it doesn't, place your hand there and let the horse get used to it. Don't try and accomplish anything other than having your hand there. The horse could be sore in this area. It's one of the spots that a bit—especially leveraged bits—work on. Also, many horses have pulled back on a halter while tied which can make this area sore. Repeat from the other side.



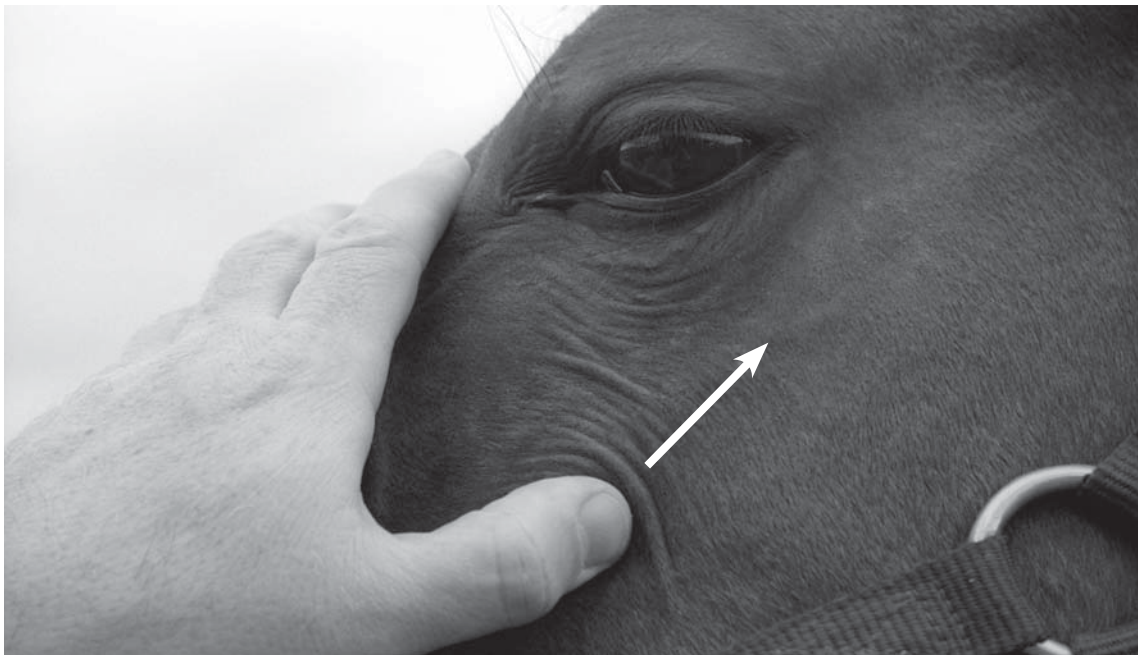
**Figure 4** *Atlanto Occipital Sweep*

## Sweeping the Zygomatic

I'm using my thumb in **Figure 5**—you don't have to—to sweep the zygomatic tissue. The direction is toward the temple. This will help to open the fascia of the Masseter.

You want to be slow and gentle here as the muscles have a tenuous attachment to the bone. Before you start to move tissue feel the zygomatic bone, it should feel clean like a bone. If you feel a, *bubble wrap* like, textured tissue, that indicates the fascia is wrapping to the bone and not moving. You can hold a constant pressure on this bubble wrap feeling tissue and it will seem to melt under your fingers. An organizing stroke will complete the release.

Remember that any time we work around a bone, WE NEVER PIN TISSUE TO THE BONE! Go slowly, feel your way and feel what's under your hand/fingers. One of the muscles that attaches to the zygomatic is called the *zygomaticus*, it brings the lips back. The Masseter also attaches here. Stop after every stroke and let the horse process the changes.



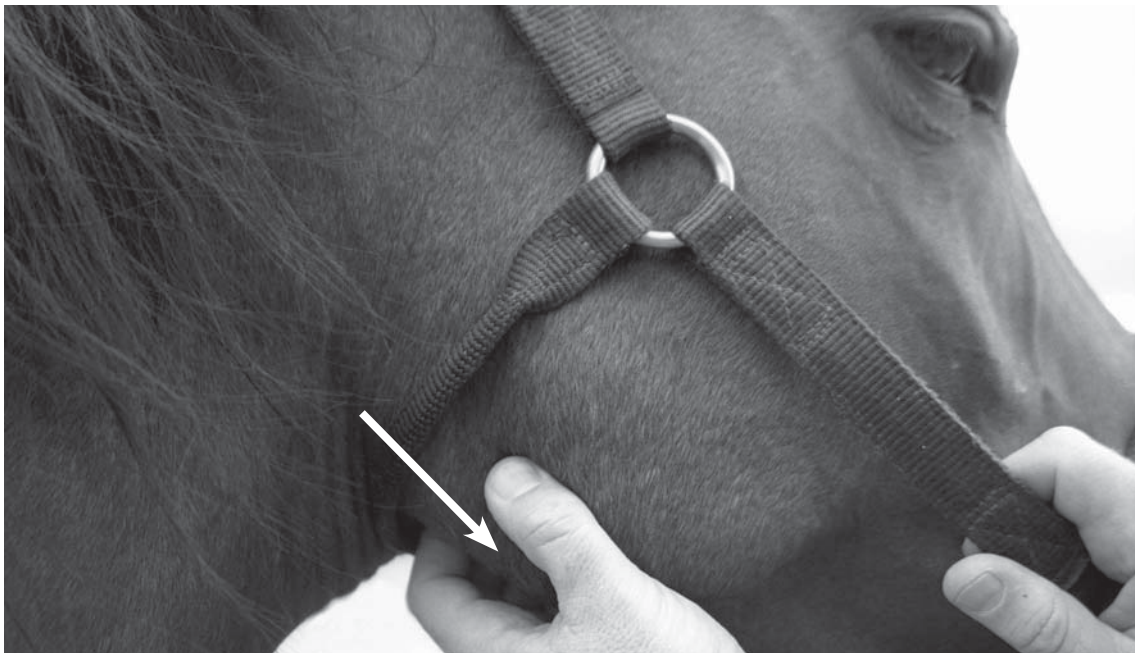
**Figure 5** *Zygomatic Sweep*

## Mandible Sweep

The tissue around the mandible can become *wrapped* around the bone, giving the bone a *bubble wrap* feeling. This in itself causes a reduction in ROM, and a closing of the space between the left and right mandibular rami. The airway of the horse can be obstructed when the space between the Rami is narrowed by soft tissue. If the horse is asked to come into a vertical headset with a closed airway it could cause the horse to justifiably rebel to keep it's nose up and airway clear.

While you need to be definitive in moving the tissue around the mandible you also have to be very aware not to trap the *facial nerve* against the bone. Slow and steady is the best course here. If something feels stringy or the horse reacts, stop and start over. If this area is very sensitive to touch it could indicate that the facial nerve is being impinged. Try to find it and slowly and gently pulse it in coordination with the horse's breathing.

Sweep the mandible clean, starting either superiorly or inferiorly. Stand on one side of the horse while working then switch sides. You may need to hold the head down with one hand gently on the nose. Make sure you work the bone's medial and lateral aspects. (Notice how soft this horse's eye is.)



**Figure 6** *Mandible Sweep*

## Masseter Compression

**R**eleasing the masseter will greatly influence the way the horse responds to the bit. Unfortunately, the heavy-handed rider may not experience the change your work will make, but the horse will.

**Figure 7** shows the tissue being swept toward the temple.

You've already engaged part of the masseter with the lateral border mandible sweep. For the first part of this release, engage the fascia layer by layer making circles with your thumbs or fingertips.

You can position yourself in front of the horse, or at one side, or reaching under the neck to the other side while the horse rests its head on your shoulder. (Work from both sides before finishing.)

Once the masseter is relaxed, engage the fascia and tissue test it to determine which way it resists moving. Take the fascia into this resistance and hold until the resistance releases. Continue this for the entire muscle. Make sure you work from both sides.

The *Parotid Gland* borders the masseter's caudal edge (towards the rear). There's no reason to work in that area.



**Figure 7** *Masseter Compression*

## The Temporal Mandibular Joint (TMJ)

I see a lot of people in my human practice with TMJ problems. Imagine how many more I would see if they had someone holding onto their jaw with a bit and reins! Unbalanced hands on the reins at the end of the bit is more of a problem than the bit is for the horse's mouth. These unbalanced hands set up a torsion in the mandible, and the TMJ takes up most of the strain from the hands of unschooled riders.

That the horse suffers from TMJ issues can be inferred when we find an imbalance in the mandible. In other words, we can assume that the horse with a mandibular imbalance also has a TMJ imbalance and therefore has TMJ issues.

You can check the relative mandible balance by holding the left and right mandibular rami in your fingers and determining if your fingers align horizontally and vertically. I say this is relative because this is a *feeling sense* that you'll have, not an absolute measurement. If you think the mandible is not balanced, you may want to refer the horse to an equine dentist or chiropractor.

An additional (that's additional not another) way to check is to feel the distance in the joint space at the TMJ on both sides, they should feel the same. You can do this easily by putting the sides of your thumbs, similar to **Figure 9**, into the space at the zygomatic arch and gauging how easily and far you can sink into the joint space.

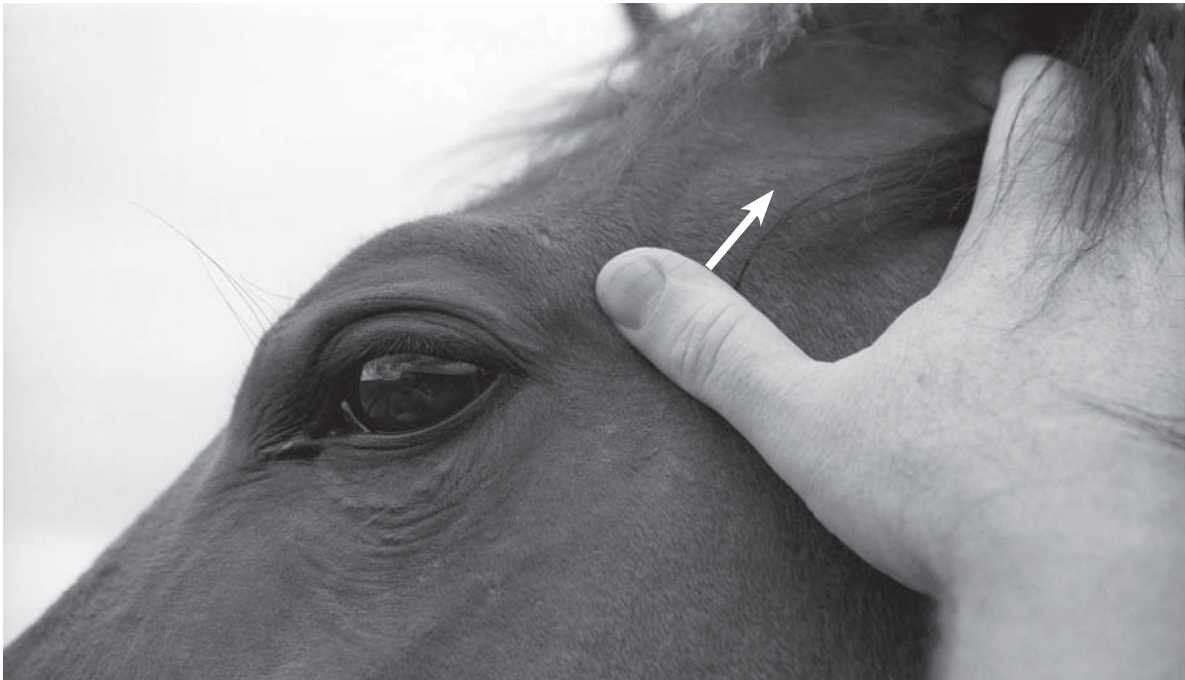
The mandible articulates in two places with the zygomatic arch of the temporal bone, on the medial side and on the lateral side. If you feed the horse something you'll see these articulations as she/he chews.

Engage the fascia and tissue test it. Take the tissue into the restriction and hold until it releases **Figure 8**. Continue to the next barrier, this is accomplished by tissue testing again as above to find the barrier.

If you gently cradle the rami of the mandible in your hands while you are in front of the horse, you will feel a gentle rocking motion in it. It will come down and out towards you and then up and back towards the head. This is the cranial rhythm and it's inherent motion on the mandible. This rhythm should cause both rami to move equally, if it doesn't you should work some more to balance it.



**Figure 8** *TMJ Release 1*



**Figure 9** *TMJ Release 2*

## Forelock Pull

This technique is not only a useful one for breaking fascial adhesions it's also one that is appreciated by the horse as a tension reliever.

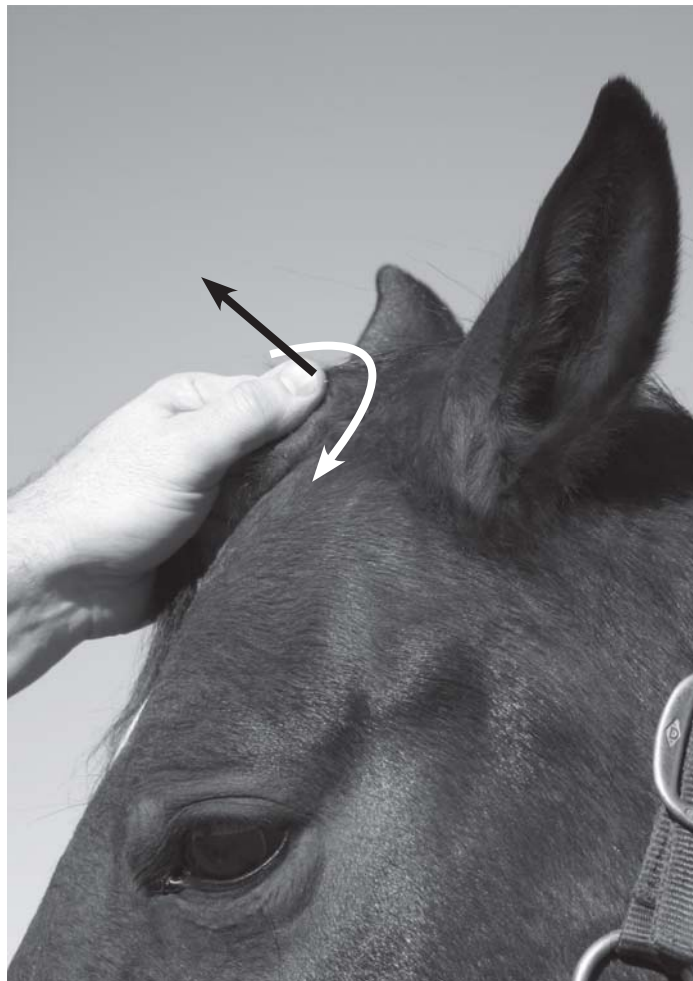
**Figure 10** How many times have you combed or brushed the forelock of a horse and had them lower their head in gratitude and submission? How many times have you pulled on your own hair to relieve tension?

You start this technique by taking up as much of the forelock as you comfortably can. Gently pull the forelock away from the head until you can feel the pull-back of the superficial fascia. Once you have reached this point you can slowly take the forelock in a circle while maintaining contact with the fascia. Start by making a small circle and slowly enlarging it to move more of the fascia.

Make sure you are making a circle and not an ellipse or some other shape. If you can't make a circle you are trying to move too much tissue at once, back off and make a smaller circle.

Take the forelock clockwise and counter clockwise. You can also take it up and down if you sense that there's an adhesion in that direction. Sometimes there will be an adhesion in one direction but not in the other.

The horse will appreciate this. Try doing this technique on yourself or someone you like and get some feedback on how it feels. As well as how sensitive your touch is.



**Figure 10** *Forelock Pull.*

## Ear Circles

Here's another technique that the horse will appreciate, if it's done slowly and gently. **Figure 11-12**

A lot of people think that their horse's have been *eared*—when a person uses the ear to inflict pain on the horse as a means to control them—I don't know how often this actually happens, but I hear it a lot.

What I think happens more often is people use the halter as some form of punishment, thereby causing the horse to dislike anything around their ears or poll.

As you can see the horse in these photos doesn't dislike this at all. But, please, be careful around your client's horse and take your time working here.

Circle the ears around their attachment first close to the attachment and then from further away as the horse submits to the feeling. This will break up any small adhesions caused by the halter. This also helps the horse by receiving a new feeling/sensation to associate with in this area.

For safety stand to the side of the horse and keep one foot



**Figure 11-12** *Ear Circles*

## Ear Sweep

The Ear Sweep is another treat for a horse. **Figure 13** According to Linda Tellington-Jones the ear should be soft and flexible, similar to a dog's. This technique brings more awareness of the head and ears to the horse. This is a great technique for lowering a horse's pulse and respiration as well as calming the horse under stress.

Begin close to the head, gently sink



into the tissue inside the ear, and work this tissue up towards the top of the ear.

You can modify this by doing small C strokes inside the ear as you work your way up the ear. Work inside and outside either together or separately.

The horse should be receptive to this work. If not, then bypass it for something else. You may want to teach this to the owner so they can acclimate the horse to having its ears worked.

**Figure 13 A and B** *Ear Sweep*

## Tip of Ear Circles

Continuing with more ear work, **Figure 14**, this technique is another special treat for the horse. It is also one that brings a new sensation to the animal helping to open its mind for further learning.

Try this technique, in fact try all of them, on yourself to see how it feels as you touch with more or less pressure. Remember that the horse can not use a finger to scratch its own head. Imagine what a treat this is to the horse to have someone spend time on these areas that aren't regularly touched. I know that I'm being a little preachy here but my horses love it.

If we subscribe to the logic that the fascia is a unitary element from the top of the head to the feet, then we would not be working all of it if we do not work with the ears.

This technique is a very simple application of C strokes to the tip of the ear. You are feeling for slight adhesions in the superficial fascia covering the ear cartilage. The ear in this area is mostly cartilage and should be flexible. The cartilage is covered by a thin covering of hide and fascia. You will be working both the outside and the inside of the ear with this technique. You can work them separately or at the same time depending on your dexterity.



**Figure 14** *Tip of Ear Circle*

## Mouth Work

**Y**eah that's right mouth work! The mouth of the horse is another place that is not related to in a very positive way. Bits, floating of teeth and treats are the only things that most horses have as a relationship between their mouth and their owner/handler.

There are a lot of horses that are considered mouthy because they are uneducated about their mouths. Beyond this, many horses have hardened their mouths against riders with heavy hands.

These illustrations just show working the lips. That's because my fingers disappear when I work inside the mouth and make no photographic sense. I want to encourage you to work inside the mouth as well, especially on the bars.

Be careful here to not hurt the tissue. Most of the muscles of the mouth and lips attach to soft tissue. You'll want to do more of a wake up touch in the mouth than try to release adhesions.

Find the respiratory rhythm of the horse, by watching the nostrils flair, and work to it by moving gently and slowly through the mouth.

You may want to wet your hands to better match the moisture of the tissue inside the mouth.

Don't forget to work the lips all the way around, top and bottom.



**Figure 15 A and B** *Mouth Work*

## Nose Work

The nose should feel flexible not hard. Can you imagine that a horse might be holding tension in its nose? Besides that possibility it's important to work this area to: complete the fascial release of the head and to bring the awareness of the horse to this area. **Figure 15**

The technique here is a combination of c stroke, circles and skin rolling. Be careful when you are working near the cartilage of the nose, don't mistake it for an adhesion and try and get rid of it.

When you are over the top of the teeth, in the lower portion of the nose, don't apply too much pressure downward. In fact there's no need for much pressure at all, go slowly and stay at an even depth.

With this type of work it's best to work a little and stop and let the horse process what you've done. If the horse likes it or is at least receptive to it they'll stay around for more. If not they'll try and leave. Giving them the opportunity to leave lets you know how much they can take of this type of work, and lets them know that it will stop. This is much better than forcing more of what they don't like on them.

I find that this type of work asks a lot of the horse in that it's providing them with many new sensations. Because of this, they may not be able to process the input into their nervous system as easily as work in other areas. With that in mind, keep a close eye on how much time you are spending here. Less is often better.



**Figure 15** *Nose Work*