

The Yin and Yang of Horse Health

Applying Chinese herbal theory can help calm even the most difficult equines.

by Emily Esterson

"Fury" was the perfect name for the coal black Arabian that Nikki Smith purchased at a sale in Bloomington, IL. Smith, owner of Smith Horse Company, has plenty of horse experience. The family has been breeding and training Arabians and Quarter Horses for a long time. They'd hoped the two horses they purchased at the sale would be trained as school horses, or resold as performance horses.

Smith quickly changed Fury's name to Sprinkles. Castrated late and with little handling, Fury had retained some stallion. He was impossible to catch. When she entered his stall, he turned and kicked with both hind feet. Catching him in the pasture required leaving him alone and frightened enough to follow his herd mates to the barn. When Fury went by, Smith would grab his halter. "No one could handle him but us."

In spite of his gentler name, he never settled in. Four months passed, then five, then six. No improvement. Normally she'd give a horse every chance, but he was dangerous enough that she'd begun to talk to her vet about possible euthanasia.

Many humans have sought out alternative therapies when Western techniques have failed them. Although not new-Chinese theory has been practiced for 3000 years at least-medical researchers have begun to study Chinese techniques more extensively for both human and animal applications.

For example, a recent study examined related clinical trials to see whether scientific evidence supports recommending Chinese herbals as a treatment option for people with pre-diabetes. Although the results were inconclusive, the researchers noted that a comparison found that lifestyle modification combined with Chinese herbs was twice as effective as lifestyle modification alone in normalizing blood sugar levels.

There is also some evidence from randomized clinical trials that some Chinese herbs may contribute to longer cancer survival rates, reduction of side effects, and lower risk of recurrence for some types of cancer, especially when combined with conventional treatment, according to the American Cancer Society.

When it comes to animals, the traditional Chinese herbals already have a tradition of use-early Mongolian books on horsemanship note the use of Chinese herbal techniques in diagnosis and treatment of early equines. Today there are many veterinarians who have studied acupuncture and Chinese medicine alongside, or in addition to, their western veterinary studies.

Smith didn't have any experience with Chinese herbs, but when she heard about an herbal supplement based on traditional Chinese theory, Sprinkles was simply out of options. She started him on a supplement called Serenity, from Herbsmith, whose CEO and founder is a practicing equine veterinarian. Within a couple of weeks, Smith noticed that Sprinkles was less suspicious. "He was a little more relaxed around me," she says. "I was able to walk him without fearing that he'd kill me." Smith continued working with Sprinkles. She worked him in the round pen six days a week and made sure he got plenty of turn out. Still, Smith says she believes the Chinese herbal supplement made him more cooperative. "It took the fear edge off of him."

The earlier known mentions of traditional Chinese healing theory were found in the iChing, in 700 BC. Fundamentally, the theory says that yin and yang are the basis of diagnosis and treatment. The two must be in balance for an individual (animal or human) to be healthy. A third element, Qi ("chi"), or the even flow of electrical currents through the body, is necessary for a horse to be healthy.

Chris Bessent, D.V.M., has been practicing holistic veterinary medicine utilizing Chinese herbs, acupuncture, food therapy and chiropractic on all ani-

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mals. With almost two decades of using Chinese herbal combinations in her practice, Dr. Bessent channeled her wealth of knowledge and experience into Herbsmith, Inc. She says when Qi is obstructed it is manifested in disease and ill health. "I liken it to a nice simmering pot of water. You need some warmth and coolness or fluids."

Serenity's formulation comes from the balance of herbs and how they interact with the Five Elements: Wood, fire, earth, metal, and water are at the root of all beings, and are in constant movement and change. The Five Elements link the body and the natural environment. From a Chinese perspective, the liver facilitates the smooth flow of electricity through the body.

When Qi is flowing and Yin and Yang are in balance there is health. The horse tends to be classified as "wood." When, however, that balance is upset, it manifests as irritability, anger, aggression and spookiness-characteristics of wood. "Anytime the liver or gall bladder are not in balance," says Dr. Bessent, "It tends to effect fire, which is the heart and pericardium."

"I see inflammatory processes, such as arthritis and tendonitis, every day. It signals to me that there is not a smooth flow of Qi. The liver has become unbalanced, which starts to have an impact on inflammatory process and anxiety."

The herbs are combined to balance and harmonize the liver and heart. The herbs work together in a synergy. The effect of 12 herbs combined is greater than any single herb. Horses who are easily frightened often have heart "shen" disturbances. Heart shen is considered to control the calmness or grounding of the mind. Herbs have been added to the particular formulation to calm the heart shen and therefore decrease the fear of spooky things in the horses' environment. Constrained Liver Qi and heart shen disturbances often occur together.

Horses don't have to be as extreme as Sprinkles to benefit from Chinese herbal therapies. They can be simply a little tense about leaving home, or a bit spooky. Herbals have very few, if any, side effects. Although some herbals may cause a positive drug test for competition, removing the supplement from the horse's diet in accordance with the USEF's recommendation of one week before competition doesn't have much impact on the horse's behavior. They also address horse health issues from a holistic, whole body point of view, according to Dr. Bessent. Pharmaceuticals tend to treat individual symptoms.

There has been a tremendous amount of clinical research, as well as anecdotal evidence of the favorable impact of Chinese herbs. Some evidence shows that chronic conditions such as gastric ulcers, fatigue, poor digestive function, endocrine dysfunction, chronic cough, asthma, and heaves in horses can not only be addressed to restore health, but can also be avoided by using herbal therapy.

Sprinkles has been on Serenity for more than five months. His progress has given Smith hope for this once frightened horse. She now trusts him enough to let the kids around the barn handle him. Although she still hasn't ridden him, she's seen his fear subside and built her trust in him. "He'll be a good boy for somebody some day." 🐾



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