

Soft Eyes - A window to more Success with your Horsemanship

By Susan Strong Kelley Level 3 Centered Riding Clinician

“Soft Eyes allow for a greater field of vision, more awareness of your own and your horse’s body, less tension, and easier, freer forward movement.”

What are Soft eyes and how can they help you obtain a better outlook and success in life on and off the horse? In this article, I am going to share my journey into this intriguing basic developed by Sally Swift, founder of Centered Riding. Centered Riding has 4 basics: Soft Eyes, Breathing, Centering and Building Blocks. Grounding and Clear Intent are also part of the team and are the “supporting cast” to successful riding using the Centered Riding formula.

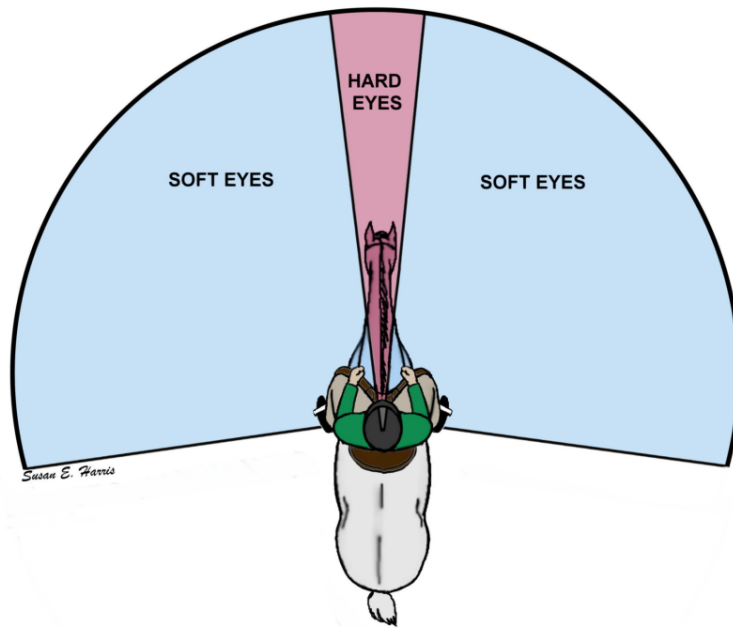
Soft Eyes has been the deepest, most elusive, basic for me to truly grasp and I keep learning more and more about how using soft eyes has transformed my life on and off the horse.

Have you heard the old saying “You don’t know what you don’t know”? When I started my journey into Centered Riding, more than 20 years ago. I attended an Open Centered Riding Clinic with Susan Harris, level 4 Centered Riding Master Clinician. In this clinic with Susan, I discovered that for 37 years, I had been holding my breath and looking down at my horse with hard eyes a lot when I rode. I didn’t know I was doing this and how negatively it was impacting my riding.

Susan Harris has graciously allowed me to share this poster from her series of the “Centered Riding 4 Basics” posters.

SOFT EYES VS. HARD EYES

ILLUSTRATION BY SUSAN E. HARRIS



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This poster shows us the typical rider's range of vision. The Red zone is the rider looking down at our horse's ears, "Hard eyes". The Blue zone is the "Soft eyes" and the subject of this discussion.

Hard eyes are easy to find, just stare at something in front of you, see nothing else but it and you will soon find that you probably stopped breathing and have stiffened up in multiple places. The use of soft eyes brings awareness, not only to your surroundings, but to your inner body in relationship to your horse and his motion.

To find soft eyes pick an object to look at with hard eyes first, then let your vision soften and relax, leaving your center of interest in the middle, visually take in the surrounding area allowing a more panoramic view by widening your awareness and seeing around the object. Soft eyes allow us to be more aware and take in what is going on around you, beneath you and inside of you.

When you drive a car we sure hope that you are not looking at the hood ornament instead of out onto the road, for you would surely crash the car. Successful drivers use soft eyes looking out the windshield to see where were going.

Here's where it gets interesting. The horse is a prey animal; he has his eyes on the sides of his head. This eye placement allows him to see his world in almost 360 degrees, he can't see directly in front of his nose or directly behind his tail.

Being that he is a prey animal, he needs to keep diligent watch for anything which may harm him, like a predator. The horse is deeply wired thru evolution, to be able to spot trouble and run away fast as his first defense.

So here we are with our eyes on the front of our heads, a predator, riding a prey animal. Our horse is a very sensitive and timid animal who has survived for centuries by escaping predators. When we ride using hard eyes on our horse, his very nature is to attempt to escape us and our aids. Using hard eyes will also result in the loss of your center, will restrict your breathing and reduce your awareness of your body and your surroundings.

As I have been living the 4 basics for a long time now, I have developed a deeper understanding of Soft eyes, which has been the most challenging basic for me to fully grasp. I now truly believe that a person with soft eyes can take in the whole picture when encountering another, be it a horse or person.

A recent experience which I had with Spirit Hawk, my young Arabian gelding, is what prompted me to write this article. Arabians are very intelligent and highly sensitive animals and Spirit is true to his heritage.

My husband was out of the country last week so I hired Dylan, a college student, to do the mowing and weed whacking in his absence. Spirit is often seen standing sentry, either in the run-in-shed or pasture, watching the activities around the farm. So, that day as usual, I brought him into the barn along with another horse at lunch time, to await the afternoon riding lesson that afternoon. I teach a lot mounted on a horse to demonstrate and often use Spirit to teach with. Spirit's stall has an open window in the back and an open Dutch door in the front so he can see all around and usually enjoys this stall over the others. When I returned from a quick lunch, Spirit was agitated and quite restless so to be on the safe side I decided to lunge him in the arena to assess his disposition. Spirit proved to be rather hot and distracted by our college student, (who had been driving the mower quicker than my husband).

While lunging Spirit, I got him to take his attention off of Dylan and back to me. I did this gently whenever he looked away from me- I would give him a well-timed "quick" tug on the line and bring him back to me mentally in both directions. I worked him for only a few minutes, until I felt that he was soft and happy working with me. My student arrived and it would appear that it was time for me to get on and teach the lesson, right? No, my soft eyes told me that although Spirit was calm and relaxed, it would be a better idea to put him back out and find another horse for that afternoon lesson. So, while the riding lesson was going on and practicing my soft eyes, I could see Spirit watching us from the shade of the shed. Now I know you are thinking that I have spoiled Spirit and let him get the better of me. Just wait, here is another benefit of using Soft eyes many do not think about!

The next day Dylan was weed whacking the hedge row along the driveway along the short side the arena, about 15 feet away from us and my brother was running his tractor on his vegetable farm on the opposite side and across the field. There were a lot of distractions going on. I chose Spirit to teach off of that morning, tacked him up and put him on a lunge line, alone, while my student was getting her mount ready. Spirit was completely different than he was the day before, soft and attentive, ready to work right away.

When my student arrived to join me in the arena, we mounted up and we started working the horses where they felt most safe, on the less noisy side, my brother's side. We then gradually worked them around the entire arena quite successfully using the 4 basics, no problem, even with all the distractions. Spirit was absolutely wonderful, unconcerned and happy to work with me demonstrating in all three gaits in both directions, during the riding lesson.

I used my soft eyes in a completely new way by seeing that although Spirit looked ready to work after the lunging the day before, instead of pressuring him into working in the riding lesson, I gave him the time to think it over. This gave him the chance to feel safe, secure and confident with his ability to be the wonderful partner I always dreamed he would be.

People with tunnel vision in life are stiff and inflexible. Soft eyes are a wonderful way to interpret life and stay relaxed and attentive. Try seeing the "whole picture" when you are moving thru life. You can practice using your soft eyes in all that you do, especially when you're feeling stressed and while riding in crowded areas. Loss of soft eyes will undermine the 3 other basics and grounding.

Learning the 4 basics, grounding and clear intent of Centered Riding takes time and is similar to making good stew, you put quality ingredients together and simmer slowly. Taking my time has certainly enabled me to become a better rider and riding instructor. In my next article, I will explain the second Basic, Breathing.