

Because Movement Is Everythingsm

The SENSE Methodsm Newsletter for Small Animals

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The SENSE Method and the Older Dog: Sage's Story

By Mary Debono

The Golden Retriever slowly padded into the room, apparently aware of why I came to visit her. Lying down on the carpet in front of me, she closed her eyes. This light-haired beauty, Sage, is sixteen years old. And although her pace had slowed, she still enjoyed her daily outings to the local dog park.

Sage's veterinarian has said that Sage, like many older dogs, has degenerative disk disease and arthritis in her spine. In addition to causing stiffness in her back, Sage's problems affect her hind

legs. Sage moves a bit stiffly, and she sometimes loses her footing. Wearing traction booties on her hind feet when she walks on hardwood floors has helped.

Sage's guardian, Gale Darling, shares concerns that are common to those that care for geriatric dogs. She wants Sage to be comfortable and get around as well as possible, for as long as possible. Since Gale knows first-hand the benefits of the *Feldenkrais Method*[®] (with talented *Feldenkrais*[®] practitioner Sharon Moyano, of San Diego), she was sure

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What is the SENSE Method?

By Mary Debono

Animals can develop inefficient habits of moving, with some of the joints and muscles doing more than their share of the work. Soreness, fatigue, stiffness, and increased risk of injury can be the result.

Wishing to provide relief from this vicious cycle, I blended my skill as a Certified *Feldenkrais Method*[®] Practitioner for people with my knowledge of animal movement and behavior, creating the *SENSE Method*.

The *SENSE Method* is based on the work of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais, a pioneer in the field of improving human movement and maximizing potential. *SENSE* uses gentle, hands-on movement to remind animals how they can move in ways that reduce strain, with all body parts working together harmoniously. Freer, more balanced movement is the result. This reduces wear and tear on joints and

can improve comfort, well-being, and athleticism, even for older individuals.

The SENSE Method:

- ◆ Is a holistic approach that provides animals with relief from strain and tension, helping them discover more comfortable, efficient and athletic ways of moving.
- ◆ Has helped animals at all levels of performance, from agility champions to those with disabling spinal and leg problems.
- ◆ Enhances the bond between animal and human.

SENSE is an acronym for Strength with Elegance through Natural Somatic Education. Strength with elegance is the ability to play or perform athletically in a graceful, relaxed way, rather than having to counteract habitual movement

restrictions or tensions. The term "somatic education" is derived from the Greek word *soma*, meaning body. Somatic education is learning that occurs through the refinement of one's movement and senses. The *SENSE Method* practitioner works with the animal to improve the awareness and use of the animal's body, resulting in enhanced movement as well as a greater ability to learn.

SENSE helps horses and humans too! See www.SENSEmethod.com/horsesriders.htm for more information.



SENSE and the Older Dog **(continued from page 1)**

that Sage would benefit from sessions with me.

SENSE Method movements, designed to be both pleasurable and useful, are very different from touching or petting a dog to simply relax him. The *SENSE Method* helps an animal in a functional way, such as improving a dog's ability to walk, run, or jump. And *SENSE* sessions are never exactly the same, as they are individually tailored for each animal.

Many times arthritis develops because the individual overuses a particular part of the body. The reason a part gets overused is because other parts are not doing their share of the work. Those parts can sustain wear-and-tear damage.

Once arthritis develops, the nervous system inhibits movement to minimize the pain. While this is an effective short-term strategy, the lack of movement creates a vicious cycle, leading to greater strain on joints and muscles. My job was to help interrupt this vicious cycle and help Sage move as freely and comfortably as possible.

The first step is to quiet the nervous system by eliminating the background noise of chronic muscular tension and anxiety. So with my fingertips, I softly lifted the muscles along Sage's spine. My movements were very slow and light. As I lifted each small area of muscle, Sage began to relax.

In addition to helping her release tense back muscles, the delicate and evenly paced lifting movements were giving Sage's nervous system a rhythmic stimulus to organize around. Using rhythm is a wonderful way to quiet the nervous system and increase relaxation. The gentle lifts along her back were also increasing her awareness (and thus her use) of her entire spine. In addition, my

actions were showing Sage that such movement was both possible and comfortable.

After working with her entire spine, from head to tail, I used my index fingertip to gently lift the muscle in between two ribs. This movement induced a sigh of relief from Sage. I worked my way through Sage's ribcage, effectively outlining and highlighting her ribs.

Increasing awareness of the dog's body brings about a greater distribution of effort, thus relieving strain throughout



Sage enjoying her Sweet Sixteen party!

the system. The more parts that participate in a movement, the easier and more elegant the movement becomes. Coordination and balance often improve.

With the ribs on one side thus outlined, I held a rib between my fingertips and delicately explored how that rib moved. What direction was easiest? Knowing that if I go with the direction of ease, the other directions improve as well, I repeated these explorations with her other ribs. Sage was now breathing deeply and was close to dozing off.

Sage was now much more aware of how her ribs moved and could

use them more effectively. And since the ribs are directly connected to the mid-back, using the ribs more efficiently is a way to improve the use of the back.

With two hands, I lightly lifted Sage's ribcage, sliding it towards her head. Her deep breaths and closed eyes told me she felt the relief this provided to her over-worked shoulders.

I then held a small, slim, hardcover book under one paw. To improve Sage's awareness of her feet, I gently

coaxed Sage's toes to move one at a time. I did this by moving the book in different directions, putting slightly more pressure on each toe in turn. "Waking up" all the toes like this is a way to help Sage use her feet fully and thus improve her balance and movement. I also placed the book flat against her paw, because whenever the foot feels a firm contact under it, the body's nervous system organizes itself for standing. This allowed me to help show Sage a better way to stand and walk, all done while she remained comfortably on her side.

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SENSE and the Older Dog (continued from page 2)

After working with Sage on both sides, I placed one hand gently on her head and my other hand against the back end of her pelvis. I gently pushed through her pelvis, seeing a wave of movement travel from her hind end all the way to her head. My intent was to have Sage feel the relationship between her head and her hind end. This would allow her to notice, and thus to use, all the parts in between. I removed my hand from her head and placed it on her sternum, or chest bone. As I pressed through her pelvis, I was again giving Sage the sensation of connection between her hind end and her front end, this time highlighting the connection between her ribcage and pelvis.

I asked Sage to stand and helped her feel the connection between her front and hind ends as she stood and walked. This allowed her to maintain her balance more easily. After the session ended, Sage walked eagerly to the door, ready and able to go for her walk.

Months have gone by and things have changed. At almost 16 ½ years

of age, Sage is quite an elderly Golden Retriever. She has been diagnosed with cancer and is having difficulty walking. When she falls, she often needs help to get back on her feet. It is evident that Sage will not be with us much longer.

My intent as I work with Sage remains largely the same; to help her be as comfortable as possible. Sage often pants, but as I gently support her ribs, she breathes deeply. She closes her eyes and Gale comments that Sage looks like she's in a peaceful trance. I slip one hand underneath Sage's body so I can move her limbs on the side closest to the floor.

Knowing that Sage is no longer able to move freely on her own, I give her the neurological experience of freedom of movement as I gently guide her limbs through the walking sequence: Right hind, right front, left hind, left front, right hind.

Then we trot, moving Sage's limbs in diagonal pairs. Canter, or a running gait, seems to elicit the most contented look on Sage's face. We embark on a right lead canter. I guide the left hind forward, then the right hind and left front simultaneously

and finish the sequence by bringing the right front forward. We do this, smoothly and delicately, for several strides. The simulated running may remind the nervous system of the actual experience of running and evoke the feelings associated with it — the joy of the chase, the pleasure of moving one's body through space, the exhilaration of physical activity.

As I give Sage a few moments to revel in the memory of her "run," I reflect on the word "comfort," which is derived from the Latin words *com* and *fortis*, meaning "with strength." The meaning reminds me that the *SENSE Method* movements allow Sage to experience the potential strength of free movement, thus gaining comfort from that strength.

It is difficult to watch an elderly animal struggle to walk. But knowing that we can provide her with the experience of easy movement, even temporarily, brings a sense of comfort to us too.



SENSE and the Bun

By Mia Schillace Nelson

My wonderful house rabbit, the Bun, had always had full run of the house with no problems. As he got older, he had some troubles negotiating the hardwood floors, but other than that he never had any trouble getting around. Then one day in his eighth year, we came home to find him unable to use his left hind leg well at all. It wasn't paralyzed — he just seemed unable to keep it from slipping underneath himself. A trip to the emergency room X-ray machine revealed no breaks, thank goodness, but we were not given much to work with in terms of

recovery or even how to keep him comfortable. We tried acupuncture for awhile but did not notice any significant improvement.

I had known about *SENSE* for many years, and hoped that it would help my Bun. The problem was, there were no practitioners in my state! More than a year later, I was able to facilitate a visit from Pam Sourelis, who is based in the Chicagoland area, up in my hometown of Minneapolis.

At this point, Bun was nearly 10 and his leg had atrophied quite a bit. He was finding it harder and harder to get around. We had always kept him in a safe area

after his "incident," but his world was getting smaller every day. Throughout it all, he remained his sweet, affectionate self, with no intentions whatsoever of letting a little thing like a bum leg get him down.

Finally, Pam and the Bun got to work together. They worked two days in a row, in three sessions of about 15 to 20 minutes. Pam sat on the floor with him and showed his body that that leg was still there, and could still work for him. Through her work with him, we concluded that what had happened was probably a neurological

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SENSE and the Bun...

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episode, such as a stroke, but we will never really know.

In the first session, Pam introduced *SENSE* to the Bun with gentle touching and very subtle movements, with only one finger. Bun was a little dubious, but cooperative. By the second session, Pam seemed able to work a little more directly with the Bun, and he was definitely listening to what she was telling him.

Their third session was very interesting; Pam was able to use both her hands on Bun and really “have a conversation.” I could tell that Bun was very engaged in what was happening. And then, without warning, Bun jumped out of Pam’s lap and hopped into the next room—using his left hind leg, unassisted!

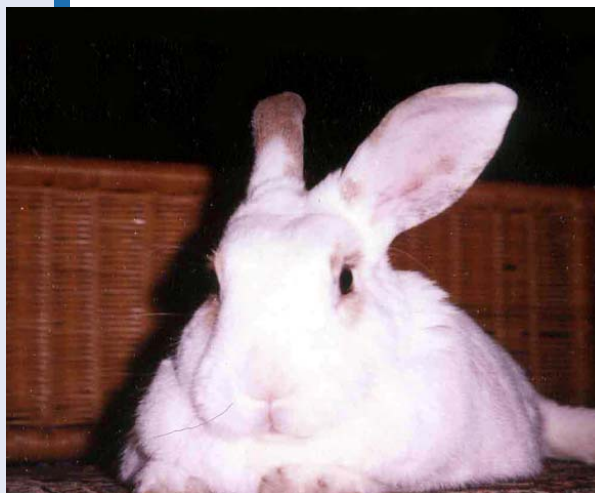
Pam showed me a few exercises I could do with the Bun to support her work between visits, which included all over, gentle touching and creating a false floor for him with my hands under his feet as he re-learned how to move efficiently. My beloved Bun could make it from one spot in the house to another, with no assistance. He began sitting in places he hadn’t been in in over a year. It was amazing and gratifying to see him able to use his body again.

Sadly, Bun died two weeks later, of natural causes. He will always be missed, and always be remembered. I thank him every day for showing me how powerful *SENSE* can be.

Pamela Speaks About Her Work with The Bun

**By Pamela Sourelis,
Certified *SENSE* Method
Practitioner and Instructor**

By the time I was able to work with the Bun, his movement had been impaired for just over a year. (See “The *SENSE* Method Helps a Rabbit Move Freely Again” on page 3.) Bun had experienced *SENSE* before, when he and Mia were my upstairs neighbors in Chicago several years earlier, so while he was a bit wary, being a bun, he was willing to give me a chance.



Precious Bun

Because I was spending the weekend in Minneapolis working with horses, I planned on working with Bun on three consecutive days. Because he was a bun, and not thrilled about being excessively handled, we kept the sessions short, about 20 minutes apiece.

In our first session, late on the evening of my arrival, I sat on the living room floor with Bun and began with gentle touching, using only my fingertips. My intent was merely to bring Bun’s awareness to his body. His movement had been severely diminished for a long time, and I

wanted to reintroduce him to his body parts and their ability to move. I outlined each vertebra of his spine, gently pushed his tailbone towards his head to remind him how his hind end connected to his fore, outlined his ribs, and gently moved his sternum (or breastbone) from side to side, all with the tips of my fingers. I would have liked to work with Bun’s feet as well, but he would not allow it. At the end of the session, Bun still had his leg tucked up under him, but he seemed much more alert and energized when Mia returned him to his area in the dining room where his bed and food were and where he now spent much of his time.

The next morning, I worked with Bun again before I left for the day. This session was similar to the first one, in that I was still attempting to bring Bun’s awareness to his body, but this time I wanted to bring his awareness to a slightly deeper level. Once again, I used my fingertips to I gently outline his spine and gently push his tailbone towards his head. But this time, instead of outlining his ribs, I gently lifted his ribcage, one side at a time, to show him that it was capable of movement and to show him the connection between his ribs and spine. And this time, when I touched his sternum, I used both hands—one hand on the point of his sternum, one hand underneath his body, directly behind his front legs. I gently, slowly moved his sternum back, forward, and from side to side, again to show him that movement in this area was possible and pleasurable, and to show him the relationship between his sternum, ribs, and spine. Bun listened attentively to this lesson. When he appeared to have had enough, Mia took him back to his area in the dining room.

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Pam's Work with the Bun... *(continued from page 4)*

Late that evening, when Mia and I returned from working with the horses, I decided to work with Bun again. I was leaving the next day and wanted to work with him as many times as I could in the time we had. I felt that the way to make the best use of our time together without overloading his nervous system with too much information was to do more frequent, shorter sessions.

I began our third session by sitting on the floor and placing Bun between my outstretched legs. In previous sessions, I had worked on my knees, bent over him. But now, I wanted to offer him a secure, enclosed space, as I was going to work at a deeper level than the previous sessions. My intent in this session was to prepare Bun's body and nervous system for standing on all four feet.

Once again, I worked with Bun's sternum. I used both hands to slide it from back to front to back to front. My touch was gentle, but I asked the sternum to move more fully than I had before. As I eased the sternum back towards his tail with one hand, I used my other hand, which was under his belly, to gently lift him onto his feet. As I eased the sternum towards his head, I gently set him back down.

After showing Bun this rhythmic movement a few times, I began alternating it with gentle pushes through the pelvis — first one side, then the other, then the sternum. I still had one hand underneath him, offering him support, and now I was raising him completely off the ground to prepare his nervous system for standing. At first, he was alarmed when his feet left the ground; Mia pointed out to me that his eyes were beginning to bug out. But he did not try to escape or bite, so I gently continued with my work.

I then set Bun back on the ground, and began working with his right hind leg. Remember, it was the left

hind that was giving Bun problems. I wanted to bring to Bun's attention how smoothly and efficiently a hind leg can work, and so to do this I worked with the one that already worked most efficiently. I placed the flat of my hand underneath his foot, making what we refer to as an "artificial floor." Unlike an actual floor, my hand could move. And so with his tiny foot on my palm, I slowly rotated my hand at the wrist, causing the "floor" to slant in this direction and that, bringing Bun's awareness to the flexibility of his foot and each of his toes. I then played with Bun's leg, gently and very slowly showing him the range of motion he had available in the leg and hip. Bun was very quiet as we worked, clearly listening to the information I was sharing with him.

"Bun jumped off my hand, shook himself, and hopped, using all four feet, into the next room."

Finally, I was ready to touch the left hind, the leg that Bun had kept tucked up under him for so long. I gently touched his toes, one at a time, showing him that the foot was not a block, that it was flexible. His foot spasmed momentarily, then released and softened. As I had done with the right foot, I now played the artificial floor game with the left foot and then showed Bun the range of motion he had available in this leg and hip. As I worked with Bun, as his body softened, I became more and more convinced that the injury he had sustained was not to the leg itself but to the nervous system, that he had suffered a mild stroke. And so at this point, I decided to play a trick on his nervous system. I eased one hand under his belly to support him and to lift him to his feet, then with the other hand I gently crossed his left hind leg over his midline—the

imaginary line running vertically through the middle of the body. I had already shown him that his right hind leg was fully functional. Now I wanted to trick his nervous system into thinking that the left hind was in fact the right hind. To do this all I had to do was move the left leg to the right side.

I had no expectations at this point. I merely wanted to give Bun this information. I still had one more day to work with him before I had to leave, and I planned on continuing our dialog the following morning. But, incredibly smart creature that he was, Bun only needed to be told once. Moments after I crossed his left hind leg over the midline, Bun jumped off my hand, shook himself, and hopped—using all four feet—into the next room.

I started laughing, Mia started crying, and Bun no doubt wondered what all the fuss was about.

The next morning, I decided not to give Bun another session. I felt his nervous system had received enough information over the previous two days and that he needed to be allowed to integrate it. I sat near him while he ate his breakfast, gently stroked him a few times. Then I showed Mia a few ways she could work with Bun until I could return to Minneapolis several months later.

I did not get another chance to work with him. Two weeks after my visit, Bun died of natural causes. Mia assures me that his last two weeks were good ones, that Bun was able to hop around the house and that one day he even scratched his face with his left hind foot, something she had not seen him do for over a year. I am forever grateful for that, and that I had a chance to work with this intelligent and gentle creature before it was time for him to leave.



Relieving Stress and Anxiety with the SENSE Method

By Mary Debono

As Sara and Boomer Bear, a black 12 year-old Standard Poodle, entered my office, it was apparent that the dog was having difficulty walking. Even more distressing was that he was in quite a lot of pain—pain that a team of veterinarians couldn't

“Even more distressing was that he was in a lot of pain...Boomer’s rapid, shallow breathing was an attempt to deal with this pain.”

find a cause for. Boomer’s rapid, shallow breathing was an attempt to deal with this pain.

What I have learned from many years of working with animals and people in pain is that rapid, shallow breathing can become part of a vicious cycle. It creates a tense, restricted ribcage, which amplifies feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. The ribcage is not expanding and contracting fully and so deprives the body of its optimal amount of fully-oxygenated blood, leading to even more pain and fatigue. My job was to find a way to interrupt this vicious cycle.

In order to best help Boomer, I needed to create the conditions which would allow him to breathe in a more relaxed, efficient way. Resting one hand ever so lightly on the fullness of his ribcage, I just “listened” to his breathing. I made

no attempt to influence him with my hand.

When I saw that Boomer was comfortable with my touch, I placed my other hand on his ribcage. Slightly apart, my two hands felt the continuous rise and fall of his rapid breathing. And then an interesting thing happened. Boomer took a deep breath. And then another. Soon he was breathing in a way that would nourish his body and help break the cycle of pain and worry.

The soft, following touch of my hands was a way to bring awareness to Boomer, putting him back in touch with his breath. A light touch facilitates “listening” by the nervous system. It’s also non-threatening, a very important

“Sara was thrilled when Boomer resumed his deep breathing for her, closing his eyes in contentment.”

consideration to an animal in pain. Gradually I moved my hands to other places on his ribcage, again with the intent of reminding Boomer that his ribcage could expand and contract more fully with deeper breaths. And that it wouldn't hurt.

Pleased with how our session was progressing, I turned my attention to Boomer’s guardian, Sara. I wanted to make sure that she had a way to help Boomer when they returned home. I

demonstrated how light my touch was by putting my hands on Sara’s ribcage. She immediately felt the lightly supportive effect and remarked at how it made her aware of her breathing.

At this point Boomer turned to me as if to say, “Hey, what about me!” Laughing at his clarity, I put my hands back on him until he resumed his slow, contented breathing. Then I suggested that Sara work with Boomer herself. At first his panting returned, but Sara immediately softened her touch as I brought her attention to her own breathing and posture. Sara was thrilled when Boomer resumed his deep breathing for her, closing his eyes in contentment.

Postscript: The next day I received a happy phone call from Sara. She told me that after his SENSE session, Boomer seemed to be much more comfortable and even wanted to go on a walk. He also slept through the night, something he hadn't done in quite a while.



Special thanks to Pamela Sourelis, Editor of the SENSE Method Newsletter. Pam is a Certified SENSE Practitioner/Instructor in Woodstock, IL. Her website is: www.sourelis-animalhealing.com.

How to SENSE your Animal's Breath

By Mary Debono

It's useful to learn how to SENSE your animal's breath before she or he is in pain. It's a wonderful way to deepen the bond between human and animal, building trust and confidence, as well as helping to relieve physical symptoms of pain and stress.

"It's a wonderful way to deepen the bond between human and animal...as well as helping to relieve physical symptoms of pain and stress."

It's important for us to be aware of our own breathing and comfort when we work with animals. It's common for people hold their breath when they're learning something new. This creates tension in us that is transmitted to the animal. Not at all what we want! So, take a moment or two and sit quietly, spine softly erect, and sense how your breath enters and exits your body.

Are you aware of how your ribs and sternum (breastbone) move? Is the movement of your breath restricted to your ribcage or do other parts of your body participate? Imagine that you can breathe through your head, arms, hands, pelvis, legs, and feet. Does your breathing change with this visualization? Think about the front, back and sides of your torso expanding as you breathe. Don't forget the upper torso, just under your neck. Have you ever thought about the back of your torso filling up with air? Now imagine that your head is a helium-filled balloon. Helium is lighter than air, so your head just floats gently above your

neck. Okay, now you're ready to work with your animal companion.

Take your animal friend to a place where she is comfortable and feels safe. Ask her to lie down on a mat or carpet. Simply place your open palm on one side of her ribcage. (If your animal's ribcage is large enough, feel free to lightly place both your hands on her ribcage. If you are working with a very small animal, you may need to use your fingers rather than your whole hand.)

Let your hand be soft and conform to your animal's shape. Remember that you are not trying to cause anything to happen, just sensing what your animal is doing.

When you are working in this exploratory way, the animal can feel safe, confident that you are

"Be sure to pay attention to yourself, too. Are you breathing in a relaxed way? Are you sitting comfortably?"

not trying to force anything. While this is important for all animals, it is essential to remember when working with those who have been abused or undergone invasive medical procedures.

Your hand simply follows the rhythm of your animal's breath. Most animals enjoy this warm, listening contact and will noticeably relax after a few moments.

After staying in one spot for several breaths, move to other places on her ribcage. Eventually move to places that are not part of

her ribcage, and notice whether you can feel her breath there as well. Do not try to change anything; just take in the sensations of her form. And remember that the softer your touch, the more both you and your pet will feel.

Watch for changes in your animal's breathing, the look in her eyes, and the set of her ears. They can indicate whether she is relaxed or tense.

Be sure to pay attention to yourself, too. Are you breathing in a relaxed way? Are you sitting comfortably? If you are uncomfortable and have tension anywhere in your body, that will be transmitted to the animal. Conversely, if you are relaxed and the feeling in your arms is one of effortlessness, that will be transmitted as well.

Spend a few moments at a time sensing your animal in this way. Gradually your sense of touch will be heightened, and both your own and your animal's body awareness will improve, leaving you both with a wonderful feeling of well-being and kinship.



Show your animal friends how much you love them! Check out Mary's SENSE Method workshops hosted by Rancho Coastal humane Society on Sunday, February 8th!

Canine workshop: 10am to noon;
Feline workshop: 1pm to 3pm.
Contact RCHS at (760) 753-6413
or [www.rchumanesociety.org/
contact/](http://www.rchumanesociety.org/contact/) for more details.

