

Horse Handler Safety

Our topics for this week are:

- Leadership with horses
- Effects of the environment
- Mental health of horses
- Body language of horses
- Respecting personal space

Horses are frequently bred or purchased based on color or other physical attributes, yet owners want their horses to have good behavior which is not directly related to color or physical attributes. Behavior is a result of genetics, role modeling by well-behaved dams and other herd members, and by proper training. A good horse can be any color, or as often said “there is no bad color on a good horse.”

Handler Safety

The best way to avoid injury from horses is to understand their normal behavior, anticipate their reactions in advance, and make the appropriate adjustments to avoid the situation or deal with it safely. Horses outweigh humans 5- to 10-fold with greater proportions of muscle and respiratory ability. Handling cannot be done with force. Injury to themselves or to humans can be great due to the body size, strength, and speed of movement of horses. They can frequently find a reason for an attempt to flee, but their handler may not see, hear, or smell it. Horses that are the most likely to injure a handler are stallions, nursing mares, or sick or injured horses.

Most injuries to people from horses are not from horse aggression. They are from inherent dangers of being around horses, incompetence, or negligence. Inherent dangers include the unpredictable nature of horses, i.e., their tendency to suddenly frighten (“spook”). An inherent danger is getting in the way of a horse trying to escape a perceived danger. Horses are a prey animal with a primary defense of fleeing (flight). Aggression is usually reserved for foal protection, herd control, and stallion mating rights.

Incompetence results in injuries to handlers who assume or claim a higher level of skill than the handler actually has. Forms of negligence are providing or using defective tack or other handling equipment, failure to assess surface or ground conditions that can cause a horse to fall, and failure to warn others of known dangers with a particular horse.

Leadership

Horses have an intrinsic need for leadership in order to remain safe. Leadership is established by control of resources and movement. Handler and horse safety depend on the handler becoming the appropriate leader, and this must be done without scaring them. Anger or excitement is neither appropriate nor effective, and the horse should not be exhausted or excessively constrained. Key components of becoming the leader are: if the horse wants to stop, the leader directs it to go; if the horse wants to go to the right, the leader has it go to the left; and if the horse wants to go to the left, the leader has it go to the right.

Horses should be petted occasionally but only when they do something better than the last time they were asked for a response or action. Petting should be reserved for establishing or maintaining leadership although petting can be appropriate for simple acts, such as the horse standing still when approached in a pasture.

Petting and rest should be the reward for proper actions by the horse. The use of food as a reward is unreliable and inappropriate for training horses that are ridden or perform other work in variable environments and can destroy respect for a handler's personal space. Food has been used successfully by some trainers to teach horses to do tricks in controlled environments.

The goal for a relationship with a horse is for it to become the handler's working partner, not a pet. The working partnership is not equal. The handler must be the senior partner, the leader. Good partnerships require mutual trust. Some horse handlers can manage horses without getting their trust, but the horse will remain untrustworthy and potentially dangerous, especially to other handlers.

Expressions of attempted dominance aggression by a horse is pinning ears, dropping their head, swishing the tail, and hunching the back. If the handler does not correct the behavior with appropriate timing and metered reaction, the horse will assume it has achieved a higher social rank than the handler.

Effects of Environment

Changes in weather can make horses more difficult to handle. Wind reduces their ability to smell and hear. It can also blow horse-scary objects like plastic bags around. A sudden return to more moderate temperatures will invigorate horses that were tired from heat and flies or horses that were well-rested hiding from cold winds. Unusual objects on their horizon will concern them such as a motorcyclist on the road, a moved trash can, or a veterinary truck parked in a new location. Irritation from flies can cause distraction, stomping, and kicking. Horses kept for excessive periods in box stalls will be less attentive to the handler and more reactive when taken out to be handled. In addition, a misbehaving horse will agitate others in the vicinity.

Mental Health of Horses

Horses are happier and easier to handle if they can move readily (they were designed for continual movement including while eating), see distances, eat at will, and be with their herdmates who, in turn, re-teach them social humility and importance of personal space on a daily basis. Providing time at pasture with other horses, improves a horse's ability to be handled by humans. When horses are kept in groups in pastures and pens, their shoes, especially hind shoes, should be removed to prevent serious injury from disciplinary kicks that would not otherwise be harmful from dominant horses.

Horses that are not allowed daily opportunities to socialize with other horses, run, roll, and graze develop physiologic and mental problems. Excessive confinement prevents normal muscular activity, venous and lymphatic circulation, and health and nutrition of joints. Stiffness, leg swelling, and lameness can result. Excessive confinement can also cause or aggravate stereotypic behaviors, such as cribbing, weaving, and stall walking.

For the best response from horses, a handler must possess confidence, firmness, patience, and kindness. Horses learn good habits quickly from pressure followed by properly timed release and being free enough to make a mistake and given appropriate correction within 3 seconds. After 3 seconds, the horse will not be able to make the connection between the action and

correction.

Horses should be expected to maintain good manners. They should stand still and pay attention to the handler when being handled. They should show no attempt at dominance over the handler such as nipping, shoving, or walking on the handler. Horses should be expected to walk mannerly alongside the handler with no pulling, balking, or dragging along. They must respect the handler's personal space, that is to stay an arm's length away from the handler unless invited closer. Excessive petting and scratching horses between weaning and 2 years of age can teach a horse to move toward pressure while the basis of training is to teach horses to move away from pressure, i.e., a rein, rider's leg, or spur.

Socializing newborn foals (so-called imprinting) is believed to affect the behavior of horses for the rest of their lives, but handling foals can be overdone. Excessive handling of foals and not correctly handling weanlings, yearlings, and 2-year-olds will not yield good results. If attempting to socialize by *imprinting*, it is recommended to begin in the first 48 hours after foaling. The mare should be caught first and held by an assistant with the mare against a wall or strong fence. The mare is rubbed and groomed for 10 to 15 minutes, followed by rubbing and handling all parts of the foal's body. Exposure to clipper noise and other stimuli it will encounter later in life is also recommended. The effectiveness of foal handling can be negated if the mare is distressed and becomes agitated. Her actions will supercede any rubbing of the foal by the handler.

Body Language

Most communications between horses and from horses to humans is by body language. The body language vocabulary is not large. They use ear, head, and neck position, movement, pawing, and tail swishing. The essential body language for a handler of horses to know includes if the horse's head is up, its neck tense, the ears are forward, the eyes fixed on a perceived threat, it blows hard out the nostrils (snorts), and lifts its tail means red alert and ready to bolt. Ears held back moderately and head low can mean "I want you out of my space," but at grain feeding time, it often means "hurry up and give me food" or when working means a sign of resolve to work hard and pay better auditory attention to the rider or handler.

Pulling the ears back when aggressive, is a tighter flattening of the ears to protect them from being bitten. This does not enhance hearing. Nonaggressive horses often turn their ears backward to focus their hearing of what is happening behind them. This is a typical ear position for horses when racing and the same posture used by stallions to drive herd members from behind the herd.

Being able to see the white part of a horse's eye is a better indication of fear or aggression than the position of their ears. Dancing or swaying on the rear feet and swishing the tail rapidly back and forth (if not being harassed by flies) means "I am dominant and my patience is gone." This is a signal the horse is ready to kick. Passive body language can be licking lips, lowering head to wither's height, blinking eyes, or cocking a hind foot over onto the front of the hoof which means "oh, this is not as bad I as thought" or "been here, done that." Pawing the ground is a sign of impatience or frustration.

Respectful of Space

Horses must be required to respect human personal space, an approximate 3 ft. radius around a handler, unless invited closer. Horses instinctively push or lean toward pressure, but they must

be taught to move away from pressure (a push or an advance toward them) by tapping their shoulder or chest until they move out of a handler's space. Then, they should be immediately left alone until they invade a handler's space again. A handler should never allow a horse pin him against a wall or other solid object. This is dangerous and a sign of dominance with lack of respect for humans.

When necessary to work closely with a horse's body in a standing position, the handler should keep a hand on the horse to detect its movements and to push the handler's body away, if needed. When working low on a horse's legs, a handler should not sit, kneel, or place a hand on the ground. The handler should crouch and remain on his toes so that he can immediately stand and move away quickly if the need arises.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- **Horses are far stronger than humans and are constantly alert for possible danger**
- **Good handlers must anticipate what a horse might perceive as a danger before the horse does**
- **To be willingly handled, horses must respect their leader or handler, neither fearing him or her nor thinking it can control the handlers movements**
- **Changes in the weather, especially wind or cold, can raise horses' response to perceived dangers**
- **Grazing at pasture, being with herd mates, moving at will have a calming effect on a horse's attitude**
- **To be safe to be around, horses must be taught to be respectful of human personal space.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.