

TEACH YOUR HORSE TO LOVE SCARY THINGS



AN ETHICAL EQUITATION CLINIC

BY ROBIN FOSTER, PHD, CAAB

Many horses are frightened around some objects, places, and other animals. Freezing and bolting are common reactions. This handout includes 10 basic steps to change these unwanted behaviors and help your horse feel safe around scary things using positive techniques that are safe, fun, and based in science!

READ YOUR HORSE'S BODY LANGUAGE

1. How does your horse react to the scary object?

- When does your horse first notice and pay attention the object without reacting? This is the "SAFE" distance.
- How close can you get before she plants her feet, moves backward, spins away? This is the "THRESHOLD" distance.
- How does your horse tell you that she's feeling nervous? Does she swish her tail? Lean forward or backwards? Have a tense mouth and tight lips? Arch her neck?

2. What are your horse's SAFE and THRESHOLD distances?

- Your horse's brain is primed to learn at the SAFE distance because it is the right balance of attention and adrenaline. Being too close—called OVER THRESHOLD—can trigger an instinctive FLIGHT response. When this happens the thinking part of the brain shuts down and the action part takes over.
- The safe distance will be farther from the object if your horse is already amped up, is in an unfamiliar arena, or if there are a lot of other horses and people around.

APPROACH THE OBJECT SLOWLY AND CASUALLY

3. Approach the object casually with a slack lead rope.

- Stay relaxed and positive. Focus on your horse's needs and set your personal goals aside.
- Don't let your nervous horse get so worked up that she spins and bolts! When she stops approaching the object, stop with her and keep a slack lead rope. If she looks tense, move away from the object a few steps.

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't let your curious horse drag you toward the object! If your horse pulls hard, stop slowly and firmly. If your horse stops with you, relax the lead rope and give her time to look and think, but if she keeps pulling, move further away from the object and try again. |
| <p>4. Your horse should be relaxed and feel safe.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell when your horse feels safe? Look for a soft eye, ears forward, head and neck level or down without tension, and body centered over four legs. Your horse might sniff the ground, look away from the scary object briefly, or release tension by blowing or licking and chewing. • If your horse becomes tense or nervous, freezes, or tries to turn away, STOP! If she does not relax after a few seconds, lead her away from the scary object. (See the diagram at the end of this handout for more instructions.) |

CHANGE HOW YOUR HORSE FEELS ABOUT THE OBJECT

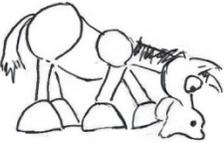
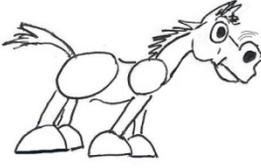
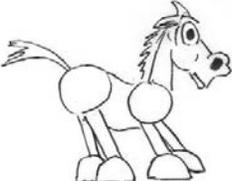
| | |
|--|---|
| <p>5. Create a new positive association with the object.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objects can be scary when they are unfamiliar, move in threatening way, have been linked with pain, or when your horse is generally overwhelmed. • Pair the scary object with something pleasant like food, wither scratches, and praise. Your horse will learn that good things happen when the scary object is around and will feel SAFE! This technique is called COUNTER-CONDITIONING and it helps replace negative associations with positive ones. |
| <p>6. Reward calm behavior with treats, praise, and scratching.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can also change negative feelings about the object by rewarding calm behavior. Give your horse something she really values when she remains relaxed around the object. Reward often! This is called POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT. • What do horses value? Treats, of course! They also like wither scratches and kind words from their human friends. |
| <p>7. Reward calm behavior by moving away from the object.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When your horse stays relaxed around the object, you can also reward her by taking away something that is unpleasant. This is called NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT. • What is unpleasant to your horse in this situation? Being close to the scary object, of course! So move away from it and tell your horse what a great job she did! She will be calm, happy, and learn to trust you. |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>8. Don't use force! It adds to your horse's fear and creates an unsafe situation.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't use force. Your horse looks to you for safety and protection. Forcing her to move closer to the scary object by pushing and pulling violates this trust, can make her even more fearful, and she will probably start to react sooner! Force can be unpleasant or even painful, and usually happens because the handler is tense or frustrated. All of this will confirm your horse's suspicion that the object really IS scary and unsafe! Even worse, your horse will associate YOU with the fear and discomfort. • Don't use harsh punishment. Hitting or yelling at your horse, or jerking on the lead rope, when she freezes, backs up, or tries to escape from the scary object add pressure and pain, and makes the situation even more unpleasant. • Force and punishment create a safety hazard because your horse may try to escape by pulling, spinning, or bolting. When your horse does this someone can get hurt! |
|---|--|

LET YOUR HORSE SET THE PACE AND PRACTICE OFTEN

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>9. Gradually move closer to the object.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't rush! Let your horse's reactions set the pace. For training to be successful your horse must feel SAFE around the object. • With practice, the SAFE distance will shift closer to the object. With a relaxed lead rope (a smiling "U" shape) move closer to the object until you see the right balance of attention and arousal in your horse. Repeat the reward and counter-conditioning steps at this new safe distance. • Gradually increase the intensity of the scary situation. This is called SYSTEMATIC DESENSITIZATION. The goal is to decrease distance from the object, add duration near the object, increase the intensity of scariness, and work with more distractions. |
|---|--|

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>10. Practice for about 15 min every day.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your horse will learn best if you practice nearly every day in short sessions, over several days, weeks, or even months. This is called distributed or SPACED PRACTICE (versus using the less effective approach with fewer, longer training sessions, called massed practice.) • The repeated, relaxed exposure to the scary object helps create lifelong changes in your horse's behavior and builds a strong, trusting relationship! |
|--|--|

| RELAXED AND CURIOUS | | TOO AROUSED | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Exploring | Attentive | Fixated | Frozen | Escape |
| Body Language and Behavior | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxed body • Soft mouth, eyes, and ears • Sniffs ground • Glances up at object • Easy to look away from object • Moves slowly to explore the environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pays attention to object; gathers information • Ears forward • Eyes focused on object • Attention is easily shifted away from the object | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate arousal • Tension in body and face • Intent focus on object • Air scents; breathes hard • Leans body toward object • Has a hard time shifting attention; may turn to flee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mouth closed, lips tight and pursed • Ears may flick forward and back • Braced; leans away from object • Won't take treats or gobbles them • Unable to shift attention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigid body • Backs away from object • Swings in a wide arc away from object • Moves to end of lead; pulls away from object • Spins to bolt |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| What To Do | | | | |
| <p>Follow your horse and let her move around the arena.</p> <p>Slowly and casually approach the scary object.</p> | <p>Perfect! This is the SAFE distance.</p> <p>Slowly stop your horse and wait until she is no longer focused on the object.</p> <p>Reward with a treat or scratch.</p> | <p>Caution! Your horse could go either way at this point.</p> <p>Turn your horse to face sideways or away from the object. This will break her fixation and help her relax.</p> <p>Reward with a treat, scratch, and kind words of praise, and casually move away.</p> | <p>Too close! Move away from the object until your horse relaxes.</p> <p>Use aids to prevent your horse from backing up, spinning, or bolting.</p> <p>When you get to the SAFE distance, reward with a treat, scratch, and praise.</p> | <p>Whoops! Your horse is in flight mode.</p> <p>The best you can do is to follow her without making a fuss. When she calms down, try again but don't get so close!</p> <p>At the SAFE distance, reward with a treat, scratch, and praise.</p> |

Robin Foster, PhD is a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist and consults on problem behaviors in horses and dogs through Adaptive Animals www.adaptiveanimals.com. Contact her at adaptiveanimals@gmail.com or rfoster@pugetsound.edu