

WHAT HORSES REALLY WANT

Unlocking the Secrets to Trust, Cooperation, and Reliability



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Photographs by Jerry Acton

•
Introducing
**Protector
Leadership**
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chapter 7

Interpreting the Causes of Unwanted Behavior

“Behaviors such as rearing, which often lead to horses being described as ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous,’ are in fact a result of the horse coping with stress in the only way it knows how....By the same token, ‘stubborn’ and ‘unwilling’ horses have frozen up and withdrawn as a means of minimizing the stress being placed on them.”

—Dr. Carrie Ijichi (*“Researchers Develop Subjective Equine Personality Test”*)

Horses want security, not conflict. Behavior problems are a sign that something is wrong, and often appear after subtle early warning signs have been overlooked. If a horse becomes distressed enough, his behavior escalates to a level we cannot ignore. Labeling behavior in a negative way (bad, pushy, flighty, disrespectful, stupid, stubborn, ornery, vindictive, and more) puts the focus on changing the behavior instead of addressing the cause. Meanwhile, negative interactions undermine our horses’ trust in us.

The real cause of a problem, however, is not always obvious. Any behavior has multiple possible causes, and horses’ coping behaviors differ based on their individual personalities.⁵² Fortunately, when we encounter behavior we do not want, there is a limited set of likely causes. The following list is a composite drawn from a variety of sources. This chapter describes the dynamics around these causes. Pain and anxiety rate the most attention because of the frequency with which they occur.

When I asked my veterinarian what percentage of behavior problems were caused by pain, her immediate response was, “The vast majority.” She explained

that includes not only current pain, but memory of past pain, and anticipation of pain. Other equine veterinarians and chiropractors I have queried said the same thing. Behaviorist, Dr. Sue McDonnell, describes undetected pain as “...one of the biggest persisting threats to domestic horses’ welfare.”⁵³

Statistics back them up. Pain is the first cause that should be ruled out when problem behaviors occur, especially aggression.

The prevalence of anxiety-related problems is reflected in the many calming supplements advertised for horses, and the popularity of books and articles on rider anxiety. Anxious horses make people anxious, and rightfully so. An anxious horse is focused on monitoring his own safety, and primed to react to anything

he sees as suspicious, making himself a potential danger to rider or handler.

Although some horses are inherently anxiety-prone, much anxiety is the result of situations that are stressful to a horse, or that he anticipates will be stressful. Problem behaviors might result from a single, specific cause, or from a series of smaller stresses that add up to more than the horse can cope with in the moment. This is akin to what happens to us when we’re having a bad day, everything seems to be going wrong, and a perfectly reasonable request from someone else suddenly feels like too much, and the other person has no idea why we’ve lost patience.

I have saved anxiety for last because, as you read through the first nine topics, you will notice that most of these scenarios can cause or contribute to anxiety. This shows what a pervasive problem it is.

Whatever the cause of a problem behavior, we humans are usually a big part of it. Once we understand what is going on, we can be part of the solution instead. Future chapters describe how Protector Leadership skills can help.

Keep in mind that a horse’s behavior might reflect treatment from previous owners, handlers, or riders, and you are dealing with the fallout. In this case, this is your opportunity to show the horse that you are offering the security he is looking for. Even if you never fully overcome the effects of his past, you can change

Causes of Problem Behavior

1. Pain
2. Insecure balance
3. Confusion and misunderstandings
4. Inconsistent expectations
5. Punishment
6. Boredom or fatigue
7. Living conditions and diet
8. Pressure the horse cannot relieve
9. Stressful situations
10. Anxiety

his behavior for the better. Good leadership has turned more than one “difficult” horse into a legendary partner, including Alexander the Great’s Bucephalus, Kim Walnes’ Gray Goose, and Frederic Pignon’s Templado, to name just a few.

Always keep your own safety in mind. If you suspect a horse’s behavior could endanger you, get more experienced help. If you *are* the more experienced help, consult and strategize with other people who take a positive, non-punitive, approach to horsemanship.

Pain

The statistics on pain are shocking. Back pain impacts anywhere from 27 percent to 100 percent of ridden horses, depending on the study population, yet three out of four horses with back pain are not recognized by their caretakers as having pain.⁵⁴ A study by the Animal Health Trust in the U.K. found evidence that “nearly half of the sports horse population in normal work may be lame, but the lameness is not recognized by owners or trainers.”^{55 56}

How can this be? Many horses work in spite of pain, and pain is often overlooked because horses hide it so well. This had survival value for their ancestors as prey animals because any sign of pain or weakness would be a red flag signaling predators, “Easy pickings over here!” This stoicism is a liability for domestic horses

because signs of pain are often mistaken for “bad behavior” or training problems.

Common Signs of Pain

- **Avoidance or resistance** include resisting being caught, grooming, saddling, or mounting; reluctance to go forward, bucking, refusing jumps. The horse is trying to avoid the situation or activity associated with pain.

- **Compensatory behaviors** are things like poor transitions, changing gaits, wrong leads, a favorite diagonal. The horse is trying to work in spite of pain or stiffness.

- **Tension or stiffness** can show up in tight or rigid muscles, wringing tail, bracing against reins, difficulty bending. Tension may also show in subtle ways, such as a horse’s expression.

- **Posture** is a red flag when you see a high head, low back, and inverted neck.⁵⁷ Legs might slant toward each other, or a hind leg might trail out the back (fig. 7.1). Even if a horse’s behavior is acceptable, this posture tells you his body is not comfortable.^{58 59}

- **Anxiety** can come from any stressful situation. That includes pain or anticipation of pain just as it does in people; it is a physiological response.



7.1 At age six, Brandy's "goat on a rock" posture showed pain: high head, low back, inverted neck, legs slanting toward each other.

- **Depression, changes in temperament, or any behavior not typical for a given horse.** Being aware of what's normal for a horse helps us spot these changes.
- **Aggression** is a well-recognized reaction to acute pain. That is why we muzzle an injured dog, no matter how sweet he normally is. In horses, *chronic* pain is also associated with aggression. *Any horse who shows aggression should be carefully evaluated for pain.*⁶⁰
- **Lameness** can prompt behavior changes before a horse is obviously lame.

The Animal Health Trust study mentioned above lists these behaviors as early warning signs of pain:

"...Ears back, mouth opening, tongue out, change in eye posture and expression, going above the bit, head tossing, tilting the head, unwillingness to go, crookedness, hurrying, changing gait spontaneously, poor quality canter, resisting, and stumbling and toe dragging."^{61 62}

Pain Is Often Caused by What People Do—Or Fail to Do

- **Riders** who are poorly balanced tend to hang on reins and bounce on backs, making horses sore, tense, and braced in self-defense.⁶³ Any rider who uses stronger cues than necessary can create discomfort.
- **Equipment** can cause discomfort when it is poorly designed, poorly fitted, improperly used, or simply not right for that particular horse. For example, Western, dressage, and treeless saddles are often too long for short-backed horses, placing the rider's weight behind the last rib, where the spine has no support. Bits are uncomfortable when a rider has heavy hands, but alternatives such as hackamores or bitless bridles simply shift the pressure to a new place, such as the poll or the bridge of the horse's nose. These are both sensitive areas without the pliability of the mouth. Restrictive equipment such as draw reins or side reins can

cause pain when used to force a horse into an unnatural posture.⁶⁴

- **Good hoof balance** is crucial for overall comfort and long-term soundness.⁶⁵ If you doubt this, imagine putting a shim in one side of your own shoes. Sooner or later, some part of your body will feel the pain of having to compensate, whether it is your foot, ankle, knee, hip, or back. In horses, long toes with low heels are a particularly common problem that stresses tendons and ligaments, alters posture and gaits, and can cause back pain (fig 7.2). Just imagine wearing shoes that are too long for you, and low in the heel.

- **Dental and TMJ (temporomandibular joint) problems** can cause pain in many parts of the body, as anyone with a TMJ problem herself will understand. A comfortable bite and healthy TMJ are supported by lots of head-down chewing time that domestic horses frequently do not get.⁶⁶

Insecure Balance

Balance is critical for a prey animal. He might run or fight in spite of pain, but falling leaves him most vulnerable, so anything that makes him feel less than confident of his balance is a source of anxiety. This is a commonly overlooked cause of unwanted behavior.

We do many things that challenge



7.2 Sapphire's arthritic knees forced her retirement from riding. Years of long toes/low heels likely hastened the progression of damage.

a horse's balance, starting the first time we ask a youngster to pick up a foot and stand on three legs. Carrying a rider might look easy, but that too is a learned skill, as I discovered the first time I mounted an untrained two-year old Thoroughbred. The trainer I was assisting assured me that the colt was not going to buck as I feared because he would be too busy keeping his balance. Finding this unbelievable, I leaned to the side to test it. Sure enough, the big fellow tottered sideways.

Even a trained horse's balance is challenged (fig. 7.3) when he must cope with a poorly balanced rider, difficult terrain, insecure footing, tight turns, or being forced to carry himself in an unnatural posture.

Good balance is dictated by gravity and equine biomechanics. Head and neck movement is part of a horse's natural

7.3 Shiloh is off balance, my fault for startling her with a twirl of my lunge whip. If I did not immediately slow her down, I could expect her to either buck or charge forward and pull the lunge line from my hand. The angle of her body and legs shows why lungeing on a too-small circle is hard on a horse's joints.



balance in every stride. Restricting this movement compromises balance. That is why, when a horse trips, you let the reins slip through your fingers so he can use his head to help regain his balance.

Training that dictates how a horse should carry his head can compromise balance. This happens when a horse is taught to carry his head too low for his conformation, thus making him heavy on the forehand. It is also an issue when a horse is required to tuck his nose behind the vertical. Instead of learning to balance, horses must compensate for being off-balance, resulting in stiffness, pain,

and orthopedic problems. If you doubt that restricting a horse's head movement is a problem, try tucking your own chin to your chest, and then go do something athletic. Also notice what that does to your breathing and your ability to see where you're going (figs. 7.4 A & B).

A horse's reaction to balance problems is often illogical from a human point of view, as Susan Harris describes in *Horse Gaits, Balance, and Movement*. Some horses slow down or stop, as you might expect. Losing balance is scary, however, and their instinct to escape scary situations prompts many horses to speed up or even buck.⁶⁷

You may see the “speed up when off balance” dynamic, for example, in a horse who rushes jumps. A rider holding him back interferes further with his balance, which increases his anxiety and makes the rushing worse.

Confusion and Misunderstandings

When a horse does not understand a cue, he must guess what to do. This is a common occurrence.

Perhaps the horse has not been taught the meaning of a cue, a cue is not given clearly, is accompanied by a conflicting cue, or is different than the cue the horse was previously taught. It is never fair to assume a horse knows anything just because someone says so; horses are often sold with claims that their training is more extensive than it really is. Meanwhile, people are frequently less clear than they think they are. Blaming the horse for the human’s mistake creates anxiety and undermines trust, just as it does in people.

Inconsistent Expectations

Inconsistent expectations also leave horses guessing. Is this the day I can dance around and pull on the lead line, or the day I’ll get jerked and scolded? Can I trot to catch up to the horse in front of me or will my rider yank my reins and



7.4 A Gracie came to my sister Dani with a habit of tucking her nose behind the vertical. She still does so occasionally despite careful remedial training and a customized bridle without a bit. Notice the tension in her neck, the constriction at her throat, and the restriction of her visual field.



yell at me? When my rider asks for a canter, does she really mean it, or if I pretend not to notice, will she give up?

Such inconsistencies are a recipe for anxiety, resentment, and even aggression, especially if the horse is punished for gambling that today is his lucky day. A leader who cannot maintain consistent

7.4 B The bulge in Sapphire’s neck shows a long-term consequence of over-flexing a horse’s neck. Since we never rode her that way, this damage was done early in her life.

expectations and fair consequences does not inspire trust or confidence.

Punishment

Few horse trainers list punishment as a *cause* of problem behaviors, but equine behaviorists such as Dr. Sue McDonnell most certainly do, and so does the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB). Punishment does not address underlying causes of problem behaviors or show the horse what you want instead. It can backfire for several reasons.

- **Punishment causes negative associations** with people and/or the activity involved. Confusion, resentment, and anxiety are likely if the behavior being punished was allowed or rewarded, however inadvertently, in the past.
- **Intermittent punishment actually strengthens the unwanted behavior** when horses gamble that they will not be punished *this* time.
- **Even mild punishment can cause fear** in some horses, and this fear can be generalized to other situations. If the behavior being punished was caused by fear, then punishment increases the fear and the likelihood of fear-related aggression.

While punishment may suppress fearful and aggressive behaviors, it can also

suppress the *warning* signs of aggression. In that case, a horse overwhelmed by fear can become aggressive without warning, the equivalent of fear-biting in dogs.^{68 69}

When a horse does something dangerous, a swift and stern reaction may be called for, but your reaction must be fair, predictable, and make sense to the horse. See chapter 9 (Power and Pitfalls of Pressure—p. 102) for non-punitive body language that lets horses know they have stepped out of line.

Fatigue and Boredom

Horses cannot focus or perform their best when they are tired, any more than we can. They also have the same sorts of reactions to boredom that we do: tune out, go on strike, or create their own diversions.

Much training is based on repetition in the mistaken belief that repetition is the only way horses learn. Not so. They also learn by observing, experimenting, exploring the world, and generalizing what they already know to future situations. They actually learn faster and work more reliably when you encourage them to use these innate ways of learning, as described in future chapters.

Although repetition is needed to develop smooth responses to cues, and the muscle memory to carry out actions correctly, this does not require boring drills. Practice can be incorporated into



7.5 Bored with weaving through cones, Bronzz picks one up instead.

a variety of activities that hold a horse's interest and keep him thinking.

Too much repetition can hide problems, especially when the symptom involves a lot of energy. If a horse is rushing, pulling, tossing his head, prancing, or bucking, for example, these symptoms may be reduced or even go away when the horse is fatigued by enough repetitions. This does not mean he has learned anything or that the problem is solved. He is just tired.

Horses have varying degrees of tolerance for boredom and individual ways of telling you they are bored. Brandy tunes me out, getting slow and sloppy, or just

walks away if she is at liberty. Bronzz is more likely to initiate a lateral move I have not asked for or pick up the nearest object he can get his mouth on. People are rarely amused when bored horses get creative, and I think that's a shame. It gives us glimpses into their personality, and can be quite entertaining (fig 7.5).

Living Conditions and Diet

In the "olden" days, when horses worked long hours, it was customary for them to be tied in straight stalls to eat and rest. A "loose box" was a luxury by comparison. Today, when horses generally spend few

hours working, confinement to a stall is a recipe for health and behavior problems no matter how luxurious the accommodations might look to people.

When horses worked long hours, a measure of oats at the end of the day provided valuable calories and nutrition. “Nutrition” programs designed by modern feed companies are designed to sell more

The further a horse’s living conditions deviate from moving, socializing, and eating forage, the more likely behavior problems are.

feed. Any concentrates beyond what’s needed to maintain body condition just fuel a confined horse’s frustration.

As described in chapter 4 (p. 43), the further a horse’s living conditions deviate from

moving, socializing, and eating forage, the more likely behavior problems are. Training does not change that. Calming supplements make sense if they address a nutritional deficiency that causes anxiety. But if anxiety is provoked by external situations, then supplements at best treat symptoms, not the root causes.

Pressure the Horse Cannot Relieve

Pressure is a basic part of our communication with horses. From the ground we exert pressure when we move a horse by touch or with a remote gesture using hand, body, rope, or whip. When riding, we use pressure through our legs, seat, weight, reins, whips, and spurs. All

equipment places some type of pressure on the horse; that is how it works. Alternatives such as bitless bridles or rope halters just shift the pressure to different locations, which may or may not make any individual horse more comfortable or responsive.

Theoretically, pressure is gentle, the horse recognizes it as a cue and responds accordingly, we release the pressure, and all is well. Much can go wrong between theory and practice. If our meaning is not clear to the horse, or he is uncomfortable doing what we’ve asked, he cannot relieve the pressure. Then the pressure becomes a source of anxiety, and we are the cause.

Problems associated with pressure are compounded by the fact that most of us were taught to *increase* pressure when a horse fails to comply. Use more leg or pull the reins harder. As pressure increases, a horse can feel trapped and increasingly anxious until he is desperate to escape. Depending on his personality and background, he might try to physically escape the situation, threaten the person putting the pressure on him, or disengage emotionally and ignore the person.

The amount of pressure required to cause anxiety varies with individual horses, but in general is far less than you might think. This was demonstrated in a study where two groups of ponies were taught to back up on a verbal command. One group was trained with reward (food), and the other with pressure (a

whip waved in front of them, *not* touching them). Monitors showed that the whip trained ponies were stressed not only during their training sessions but in anticipation of them. They also learned more slowly, performed less reliably and, when turned loose, avoided their trainer and other people as well.⁷⁰

Stressful Situations

Stress can be ongoing if a horse's living situation does not meet his needs (see chapter 4—p. 43), or he has pain or other medical problems. Vision loss, for example, can lead to bolting, spooking, bucking, balking, or refusing jumps.⁷¹ Stress can also be ongoing if a horse has the wrong human partner or the wrong job (more on this in chapter 18—224). Anxious horses who do well with one person might be stressed when handled or ridden by multiple people. Ongoing stress can leave a horse in a perpetual state of anxiety.

Occasional stress is inevitable, whether it is a veterinary visit, trailer ride, changes in owner, separation from equine companions, or busy events such as shows or group rides. Future chapters describe ways to help horses cope with stress better so they are less fearful of stressful situations and of the world in general.

Anxiety

As the previous topics in this chapter show, many things can trigger anxiety. Behaviors that tip you off to anxiety can be summed up in four words: **Fight**, **Flight**, **Fidget**, or **Freeze**.

- **Fight** includes any aggression, from mild threats to overt attacks. From the horse's point of view, it is self-defense.
- **Flight** shows up in escape attempts such as spooking, bolting, backing, turning away, or refusing jumps.
- **Fidget** is excess motion such as dancing around, tail swishing, head tossing, pawing, or startle-like reactions to cues.
- **Freeze** means a horse goes rigid and refuses to move (fig 7.6). It may be mistaken for stubbornness or resistance, especially since applying pressure increases the anxiety.
Additional signs of anxiety include loose stools, which suggest immediate fear; and stereotypies and ulcers, both of which indicate historical and perhaps ongoing anxiety.
- **“Hidden Anxiety”** can explain some dramatic behavior that seems to come out of nowhere. Horses might be obedient in spite of anxiety if they are cooperative or eager to please, afraid of the

7.6 Gracie freezes in alarm at a strange sight in her pasture. Since Dani did *not* apply pressure, Gracie quickly scoped out tripod, camera, and partially hidden human behind it. Then she calmly walked on.



consequences of non-compliance, or so food motivated that they will do almost anything to score a treat. If the buildup of anxiety goes unnoticed until a horse is overwhelmed and can no longer control himself, the result can be an explosion that leaves everyone wondering, “Where on earth did that come from?”

Our Shiloh fits the category of highly treat-motivated. The first time I started to blanket her, I cued her to stand still, which she did, anticipating a treat. As I lifted the blanket, however, I saw that while her feet were still, her body was practically vibrating with tension.

Had I looked only at Shiloh’s obediently still feet and proceeded to throw the blanket over her back, she would probably have panicked. The result would have been ugly and entirely my fault. Fortunately, I spotted her distress in time to back off and introduce the blanket slowly.

Hidden Anxiety explains some situations where a rider is anxious and cannot explain why. She senses her horse’s tension but because he is not *doing* anything wrong, she discounts her own uneasiness. If you find yourself in this kind of situation, please take your own anxiety seriously before you get hurt.

🔗 Summary

Horses want to be physically comfortable and emotionally secure. Some discomfort and stress are inevitable in life, but when it is severe or consistent, it interferes with a horse's welfare, behavior, and performance, and jeopardizes your safety. Understanding the underlying causes of these problems points you to solutions.

- **Physical Issues—Pain, Living Conditions, Diet**

Solutions involve addressing causes of pain, and providing living conditions and diet that support good mental and physical health.

- **Training Issues—Insecure Balance, Boredom, Fatigue, Punishment**

Solutions require training that helps a horse learn good balance, riding that does not interfere with it, and planning rides to avoid undue fatigue or boredom. Punishment is not training and should be used only in exceptional situations.

- **Communication and Confidence Issues—Confusion and Misunderstanding, Inconsistent Expectations, Pressure Horse Cannot Relieve, Stressful Situations, Anxiety**

These issues are best addressed with improved communication, life experiences that build horses' confidence in themselves, and leadership they trust. Parts Four through Seven describe how you can use Protector Leadership skills to accomplish this.

THINGS TO TRY

- ▶ Check out a book, article, or website that describes equine body language and how to interpret different behaviors. The most scientific is *A Practical Field Guide to Horse Behavior* (Eclipse Press, 2003) by Sue McDonnell, Ph.D. with over 300 pages cataloging specific behaviors and the reasons for them, illustrated with sketches and photographs. Sharon

Wilsie's *Horse Speak* looks at body language in the context of two-way communication between our horses and ourselves.

- ▶ Look for an explanation for a behavior that has puzzled you, or a new interpretation for a behavior that might mean something different than you thought it did.