

## **Horse Psychology & the Language of Horses**

By Julie Goodnight

© 2007 All rights reserved

[www.JulieGoodnight.com](http://www.JulieGoodnight.com)

Before we can ever hope to understand, let alone control and communicate with a horse, it is important to know the basic psychology that motivates a horse's behavior in the first place. First and foremost, horses are prey animals and flight animals; it is difficult for humans to appreciate what it is like to be a horse. Even though horses have been domesticated for thousands of years, we have done little to dummy down their instinctive behavior. Although their predators are few and far between, their instincts tell them to fear for their lives at every waking moment because around every corner or down any new path, there may be lurking a predator waiting to eat them for lunch.

Horses are herd animals, again related to prey-dom, meaning their survival is dependent on the herd. There's safety in numbers. Herd behavior is another important motivating factor for a horse and is constantly present in our everyday dealings with horses, more so than is often recognized. Every movement a horse makes has meaning and when given a choice, the horse will always move toward the protection of the herd.

One of the most fundamental concepts in understanding horses is that beyond all else in life, what a horse wants is safety and comfort. They do not want to fear for their lives; they want to feel safe, comfortable and taken care of, so they can relax and not have to think too hard or make any decisions. In short, what the horse wants most is a benevolent leader that will provide him with security and comfort.

One difference between a dog and a horse is that a dog will leave safety for food, but a horse will leave food for safety. A dog is reliant on the pack for his food (since dogs hunt cooperatively), so most of the dog's pack behaviors revolve around staying in good graces with the pack leader to get his share of the food. A horse is not reliant on the herd for food; he can take care of himself that way since he is a browser; the horse is reliant on the herd and herd leader for safety and comfort.

All behaviors in all animals, human included, fall into two categories: instinctive and learned. There are seven categories of instinctive behaviors in the horse, or those behaviors that are almost fully formed at birth. They include flight (react first, think later), reproductive, combative (defensive and aggressive behaviors), ingestive (eating and drinking), eliminative (what comes out the other end), gregarious (drawn to herd) and investigative behaviors (once a horse determines something will not eat him, he becomes very curious).

It is important to know and understand the instinctive behaviors of horses so that you can influence them through training and distinguish them from learned behaviors. Under the right circumstances, a horse can learn a behavior on the very first opportunity. For example, if you start to bridle a horse and he jerks his head in avoidance and you take the bridle away and back off for a few seconds, the horse has learned that to avoid the bridle he should throw his head up. The first time may have been an instinctive reaction to scary stimuli but if his reaction is rewarded because throwing his head caused the stimuli to go

away, he has now learned something. The second time he jerks his head away for bridling, it is learned behavior.

A horse's brain is about one third the size of the human brain. Although the horse is highly trainable and his memory is excellent, his capacity for reasoning and problem solving is not good. When a horse encounters a problem (lets say there is an annoying pull on his mouth from the bit) he begins to experiment on what he must do to make that annoying thing go away. So he pulls on the rein, throws his head up, roots with his nose, and keeps guessing until finally guesses right and moves his nose in the direction of the pull. If at this critical moment he meets an instant release, he learns the right answer and next time when he feels the pull on the bit, he'll remember to give in to the pressure to get the release. He does not try to reason his way out of the problem by wondering where the stimuli came from or what meaning it might have. He just starts guessing in his reactions until it goes away. Whatever he was doing and wherever he was at that moment, is what he thinks made the pressure go away. That's why the timing of the release of pressure is so critical.

Most of the problems we have with our horses stem from learned behaviors and bad timing on the part of the handler. Whatever a horse is doing when you release him is what you are training him to do, for better or worse. Therefore, you should only release a horse from a cue, directive or stimuli when he gives the correct response. The timing of the release is critical; you only have a three-second window of opportunity in order for the horse to make an association with his actions and the release. The sooner in the three seconds the release comes, the more likely the horse is to form an association and the ideal timing for the release is half a second.

Another important component of horse psychology is understanding herd hierarchy and how the human fits into the pecking order. The desired relationship between horse and human is that of a herd of two. According to the laws of the herd (the only rules horses really understand) the hierarchy is linear, meaning each and every individual of the herd is either dominate over or subordinate to each and every other individual. Think of the horse-human relationship as a herd of two, and within that herd, one is dominant and one is subordinate. Ideally, the human is the dominant member, but that is frequently not the case.

The pecking order in the herd is established when the dominant horse (alpha individual) controls the resources of the herd (food, water, shelter, other horses) and controls the space and actions of the other individuals. In working with horses, it is critical to understand how your own actions can influence your position in relationship to dominance and subordination. Hand feeding treats to a horse causes a horse to think he is dominant because he controls the human's actions and takes away food from her. It is important to think about action and reaction; if the horse makes an action to which the human reacts, the horse is in charge; if a human makes an action to which the horse reacts, the human is in charge.

The herd leader, or alpha individual (a/k/a boss mare), is responsible for the safety of the herd and with a second's notice, must be able to motivate the entire herd to flight. She earns the respect, admiration, obedience and, most importantly, attentiveness of the herd by dominating every move they make and by controlling the resources of the herd.

Although the alpha enjoys many perks, like first access to food and water, the best shade and the best rolling spot; along with these perks come the awesome responsibilities of protecting the herd and keeping order.

The alpha controls the actions of each herd member by using her body language, postures and gestures to communicate with others. When her head is down in the grass and she is quietly munching, herd mates will be relaxed. When her head comes up, ears prick forward and her muscles tighten, the rest of the herd knows to prepare for flight. They will follow her anywhere on her signal. Just to make sure the horses all pay attention to her in times of stress, the boss mare will periodically push the other horses around a little so they are in the habit of responding to her.

When she directs her gaze at an individual, flattens her ears, bares her teeth and takes a step toward him, the subordinate horse knows to immediately move away. If the subordinate doesn't respond quickly enough, the alpha might leave some teeth marks on his rear end. Subordinate herd mates will quickly learn to watch the body language of their leader at all times and to respond without question to her movements. Wouldn't it be nice to have the kind of relationship with your horse in which he responds to your requests without challenge, negotiation or compromise?

If you have the opportunity to observe a herd, you will learn to recognize the subtle communications that constantly occur. For instance, a frightened horse will elevate his head, tense his ears, raise and stiffen his tail and hold his breath; all of these actions communicate an outside threat to the other horses and they will instantly act the same way and look in the same direction. Horses always mirror the emotions of the animals (including humans) around them.

Horses communicate with their entire body from head to tail, with head position, ear position, facial expressions, feet, tail, mouth, teeth and nose. They make communicative gestures, display body language that reveals their emotions and even have a few audible communications.

Horses employ many gestures that have meaning and are very quick to learn sign language from humans, when it is used. Horses gesture in many ways; pawing indicates frustration and the desire to move; bobbing the head to the ground means the horse is contrite and accepts subordination. Snaking is a gesture made by lowering the head with the nose pointed out and teeth barred; it is a dominant, herding behavior. Moving the hip in towards a threat or cocking a foot indicates the horse is becoming defensive and thinking about kicking. Tossing the head high with the nose moving in a circular motion is a defiant gesture—the equine flip-off.

Reading a horse's body language will tell you a lot about his emotional state. Horses are highly emotional animals and one of the most sensitive mammals. A relaxed and safe horse will lower his head (the lower it goes the more relaxed he is), relax his ears, lick his lips, chew, drop his tail and take a deep sigh. Any change in elevation of the horse's head downward indicates the horse is relaxing and any upward movement indicates tension. A stiff tail pointed down but with the bottom of the tail bone sticking out between the tail hairs indicates that the horse is ambivalent and may be in a transitional phase (i.e., unsure of his emotions, like when he is transitioning from dominant to subordinate).

Horses receive communication from humans with their body language as well, whether the human knows it or not. The first step in controlling a horse's actions is to control your own body language. A horse will notice your posture, eye contact, your foot movements, the elevation of your shoulders, the tone of your voice and the rhythm of your breathing. Be aware of the actions on your part and know that you are constantly communicating with your horse through your own body language. If your horse takes a step toward you and you back away, you have just told him he is in charge. If you get scared, tense your muscles and hold your breath, your horse will mirror your actions and instantly become frightened. If you are not alert and aware of your environment when handling a horse (i.e., your looking down at the withers and being passive) he will know you are not in charge and will feel compelled to step into the leadership role.

Try this body language exercise next time a horse is tense and 'on the muscle.' Standing next to him (or from the saddle) take a very deep breath, exhaling with an audible sigh and allowing your shoulders, neck and head to drop. Nine times out of ten, the horse will mimic your behavior and sigh and drop his head lower as he relaxes his muscles and becomes calm and subordinate. A horse can relax in the presence of strong leadership; knowing that he is being taken care of and will be safe and comfortable; that is why a horse gladly accepts subordination.

Horses are limited to just a few audible expressions that they use to communicate: the whinny, nicker, snort and squeal, all of which have varying deliveries and subtle inflections. The four audible expressions each have specific meaning. Nickers are the guttural, low-pitched pulsating expressions and occur most often just prior to being fed and announce the horse's presence and anticipation. Stallions will also nicker at mares during reproductive behavior to draw the mare's attention. Mares typically give a third type of nicker to their young foals when the mare is concerned about the foal. Basically all three types of nickers mean, "come closer to me."

Whinnies or neighs are high-pitched calls that begin like a squeal and end like a nicker and it is the longest and loudest of horse sounds. The whinny is a social call and seems to be a form of individual recognition and most often occurs when a foal and mare or peer companions are separated or when a horse is inquisitive after seeing a horse in the distance. The whinny seems to be a searching call that facilitates social contact from a distance.

Snorts and blows are both produced by forceful expulsion of air through the nostrils. The snort has a rattling sound but the blow does not. The snort and blow communicates alarm and apparently serves to alert other horses. The snort may also be given when a horse is restless but constrained and in this case it should be taken seriously as a sign that the horse is feeling trapped and alarmed and may become reactive.

The squeal is a high-pitched outcry with meaning as a defensive warning or threat that the annoyed individual will become aggressive if further provoked. Squeals are typical during aggressive interactions between horses, during sexual encounters when the mare protests the stallion's advances and when a pre- or early-lactating mare objects to being touched anywhere near her sore teats.

Horses also make body noises that are not communicative but may tell you more about the horse's physical state. They may groan and snore; the groan occurs mostly when the

horse is lying down on his side (lateral recumbency) and is often made by a tired horse as he lies down. The groan may also be an expression of prolonged discomfort like when a horse is colicking or a mare is in labor. The snore is usually labored breathing in a recumbent horse and sounds a lot like the human snore.

All horses, no matter how high in the hierarchy, will gratefully accept the leadership of another individual, as long as the leader has demonstrated their commitment to controlling and protecting the herd. For a horse to accept a human as leader, that human must be able to control the horse's space, maintain discipline in the herd and must never betray his trust by causing him fear or discomfort. Once they have accepted the individual (horse or human) as leader, they will be relaxed, compliant, obedient and happy.

In natural horsemanship, we use ground work (round pen and lead-line) to control the horse's space so that he becomes subordinate. Beyond just controlling his space, we learn to communicate with the horse through our own body language, gestures and even audibles, to develop a strong bond and trust between leader and follower through consistent communication and discipline. The horse must be treated firmly but with kindness and above all, your interactions with the horse must be consistent so that he can learn to trust you. This kind of relationship with the horse is the ideal, but one that many horsemen find illusive.

To have a horse that is happy, respectful and obedient, who willingly does whatever you ask and responds to the most subtle cues, you must first become his leader and earn his respect. Learn to control your horse's space and communicate with your own body language in a way that he understands, and you will not only earn his respect, but his admiration as well.

For more information on horse behavior, how to improve your leadership skills with a horse, train the horse, ride better and have more confidence around horses, visit [www.JulieGoodnight.com](http://www.JulieGoodnight.com). DVDs by Julie Goodnight on behavior and ground training will help you teach horses better manners and learn better leadership skills. Specialized training equipment ideally suited toward this type of training is available online or by calling 800-225-8827.