

Recognizing and Addressing Behavioral Problems: What is My Horse Telling Me?

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Paying attention to your horse's behavior, specifically learning how to recognize changes in behavior and to address behavioral problems appropriately are extremely important to ensuring your horse(s) health and well-being and to maintaining a positive horse-human relationship. It is often easy to place blame on the horse for problem behaviors as we may attribute negative changes in behavior to the horse being naughty. Horses, like people can experience a "bad day" every now and again, but when behavior changes persist or become more severe, an underlying physical or psychological problem is frequently the cause of the undesirable behavior. Identifying the origin of the problem will allow for effective treatment and/or adjustments in management that can result in improvements in the horse's behavior.

By observing horses regularly:

- We learn what is "normal" behavior for a particular horse
- We pay attention to horse body language and are more likely to notice changes in behavior
- We can better detect and more quickly address physical problems and/or management issues

Changes in Behavior and Potential Causes

Changes in behavior can include the following:

- Negative attitude towards work
- Decline in performance
- Hyper-reactivity, spookiness, bolting
- Undesirable behaviors such as:
 - Kicking
 - Biting
 - Teeth-grinding
 - Head tossing
 - Self-mutilation

Some potential causes of attitude changes and reluctance to work include:

- Gastric ulcers/abdominal discomfort
- Soreness in the horse's back or limbs
Need to evaluate and determine source of pain
- Conflict behaviors in response to inconsistent training methods/cues
- Difficulty with thermoregulation

Excessive reactivity and anxious behaviors may be the result of the following:

- High carbohydrate diet (feeds high in sugar/starches)
- Vision problems
- Pain or fear (facial expressions and body postures can indicate discomfort and arousal)
- Inadequate training/preparation for transport, competition, etc.
- Separation from other horses
- Temperament characteristics

Undesirable behaviors can range from avoidance behaviors and head-tossing, to kicking and biting, or more severe, injurious behaviors such as flank-biting. In many cases of flank biting behavior or when we observe horses becoming increasingly aggressive towards people and/or other horses, an underlying physical problem or abnormality is often a contributing factor. Avoidance behaviors such as shying away, rearing, and bucking/kicking out may result from pain or fear associated with unpleasant stimuli, but may also become learned behaviors as a result of inappropriate timing of reinforcements during training and handling.

Solutions and Take Home Messages

Figuring out the source of your horse's behavior change and addressing equine behavioral issues can be challenging. Knowing what is "normal" behavior for your horse (e.g. eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, body postures and facial expressions, behavior towards other horses, people, etc.) will help you recognize when your horse is uncomfortable or stressed. This information is essential in order to determine the reason for the change in behavior or behavior problem. Moreover, the behavior could have more than one cause (i.e. the behavior may be the result of a combination of factors).

It is helpful to consider the context of the behavior, i.e. making note of when and where the behavior occurs. What else is happening in the horse's environment when the horse displays the behavior? It is often a good idea to record some video of the horse's behavior so that you have a visual account of what is happening. Collecting video of the horse alone in his/her stall or paddock or during times of the day when there is less activity around the farm can also reveal important information. Video is especially helpful as you work closely with your veterinarian to rule out pain/physical conditions.

When tackling behavioral problems, be patient and willing to make changes, however avoid making too many changes at once so that you can observe which treatment or adjustment in management or training has been effective. Always consider your own safety, the safety of the horse, and of those around you, and recognize when you need to seek outside help.

References and Further Reading

McDonnell, S. 1999. Understanding Horse Behavior. The Blood-Horse (Horse Health Care Library).

Mills, D. and Nankervis, K. (1999) Equine Behaviour: Principles and Practice. Blackwell Science, Oxford.

The Horse. <http://www.thehorse.com/>

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