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Thinking Like a Horse: How Understanding Basic Horse Psychology Simplifies Training

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Every horse inherits traits, that, when understood by the trainer, make training safer and more effective. “Anthropomorphization” is the term for attributing human qualities to our horses. Anthropomorphization can spell trouble for horse owners, handlers and trainers. Effective trainers understand how horses perceive their world, what motivates them, and how they learn.

The following general horse psychology principles are gleaned from training hundreds of horses over many years and are well accepted and verified by professional horsemen and equine researchers.

Horses are Social/Herd Animals.

A horse finds comfort and safety within a herd. The alpha horse, or leader, is the one who makes the decisions (time to go for water, shelter, or to rest) and the subordinates trust and follow. The alpha animal is often an older horse that is more dominant and has earned respect within the herd/group.

As effective trainers, we must be the alpha horse and, therefore, must be the decision maker. We call the shots as to the exact path we are going to travel, where and how long we are going to stand still and the pace at which we'll move. This takes a lot of energy and planning on our part. Whether we're aware of it or not, from the moment we walk our horses out of the stall, we are telling them what to do, or we've transferred the alpha status to them. Have a lesson plan for every step from the barn aisle, to leading to the paddock, to mounting, and to riding figures in the schooling ring.

Alpha horses confirm their dominance by moving their subordinates into retreat with a threatening gesture. No one has permission to step into their personal space uninvited. After retreating, the subordinate will open and close his mouth in a chewing motion. It is one of the ways he acknowledges the alpha, and we see it frequently in training. Body language is the major way horses communicate and we must do the same. As a regular exercise, throughout the training process, ask your horse to step away (either backwards or to the side) and yield to pressure applied to any part of his body. Handlers who step back when longeing, or in the barn aisle, are unaware that they are sending the horse the signal that he is the boss.

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Be aware that we are always training. Inconsistency, being cuddly and permissive on one occasion and slapping and jerking the horse around when he pushes too far, is confusing to him and simply unfair.

Horses are Prey Animals, not Predators.

Prey animals need to be more perceptive than predators in order to survive. When they perceive frightening stimuli, they flee and don't stop to ask questions. This fright/flight response is the source of the instant reaction time we experience as riders trying to stay on board during a spook. As alpha, we can train horses to trust us in the presence of something spooky, and thus override the flight response. Through repetition, we can desensitize them to a spooky object, overriding the fright response.

Riders are often quick to lose patience with the horse that spooks at imaginary ghosts. The fact is, the horse perceives far more than we are aware of. Programmed to be on the lookout for danger, horses are quicker to detect stimuli than humans. They have a wide field of vision because their eyes are situated on the sides of their heads, as opposed to humans with binocular vision. Horses have a limited view of things directly in front, but compensate by turning their heads slightly to see this area. Their wide field of vision allows them to see most of what lurks to the side and behind them.

In addition, horses can hear a wider frequency of sounds than humans and, with ears that swivel around like radar, they can localize the source of the sound.

If a horse is trapped and cannot find a way to flee from what's frightening him, he will fight. Picture a horse pulling back when tied, or having his leg tangled in a fence. In training, we must always provide a way out, or an open door. When we ask the horse to bend with our inside rein, our outside rein needs to give. Freedom is a reward. In the words of the well known trainer, Ray Hunt, "make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy." The trainer should avoid creating fright. Emotions and adrenaline do not foster learning. The horse can only think of fleeing the situation and his movements become quick and unnatural, rather than soft and calm.

The only possible benefits of creating fright would be when a horse has exhibited truly aggressive behaviour, such as kicking or biting; the trainer must then assert his dominant status, followed by an instant reward when the horse responds positively. It is important for horsemen to be in control of their emotions, as well as the timing and intensity of their cues.

Horses Learn Differently than Humans.

Horses' brains are structured differently than humans' and this might explain some of the frustration people encounter when they try to use human logic in training.

The horse has a far smaller ratio of brain size to body size than the human. Much of the human's comparatively large brain is dedicated to the thought processing cerebrum. This area controls memory, communication, and association. The horse's brain, however, is largely cerebellum, the part that is responsible for gross muscle co-ordination, balance, and body functions, and thought to be involved in learning patterns of movement ⁽¹⁾.

We can't count on our horses to interpret and reason through a skill that we are teaching them. Horses learn by repetition and drill, and come to associate cues with movements.

In the human, there is a mass of neural fibres that connect and communicate between the two hemispheres of the brain. There are relatively few of these connective fibres in the equine brain, which would suggest there's also less transfer of information from one side to the other⁽²⁾. This could explain why a horse suddenly spooks at an object that he's passed by multiple times going in one direction when asked to travel by it going the other way. Or this could explain why, when a horse has mastered the turn on the haunches to the right, the turn to the left seems to be a completely new skill to him. Schooling must be done equally on both sides of the body with little time saving when schooling the second side.

The next time you're tempted to anthropomorphize:
"My horse is having a bad day;"
"My horse is just stubborn;"
"Our personalities clash;"
Remember;
Horses and humans are wired differently.
Try thinking like a horse!

For further study in this interesting area, I recommend books and/or articles written by the following authors: Dr. Robert Miller, Dr. Temple Grandin and John Lyons. Many horse magazines publish their articles.

References

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Lindsay's popular horsemanship clinics take her throughout Canada and into the United States, creating thinking horsemen of her students by teaching the "hows" and "whys" of riding. For more training articles and tips, visit her website, www.lgrice.com, or contact Lindsay Grice Practical Training for Horses and Riders, (519) 938-8815, lindsay@lgrice.com.

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