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NERVOUS HORSES

- Origins of equine anxiety
- How training can help
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HOW TO HELP A NERVOUS HORSE

If you identify the sources of a horse's anxiety, you'll be able to develop strategies to help you both cope.

By Heather Smith Thomas

Coping with a nervous horse can feel like trying to parent an amped-up toddler crossed with a moody teen. You love them dearly—you truly do!— but some days you wonder why.

Whether it's through epic spook-and-spins, a vehement refusal to stand for the farrier, or sitting back to break yet another set of cross ties, a "difficult" horse tests your patience and may make you worry for your safety and sanity.

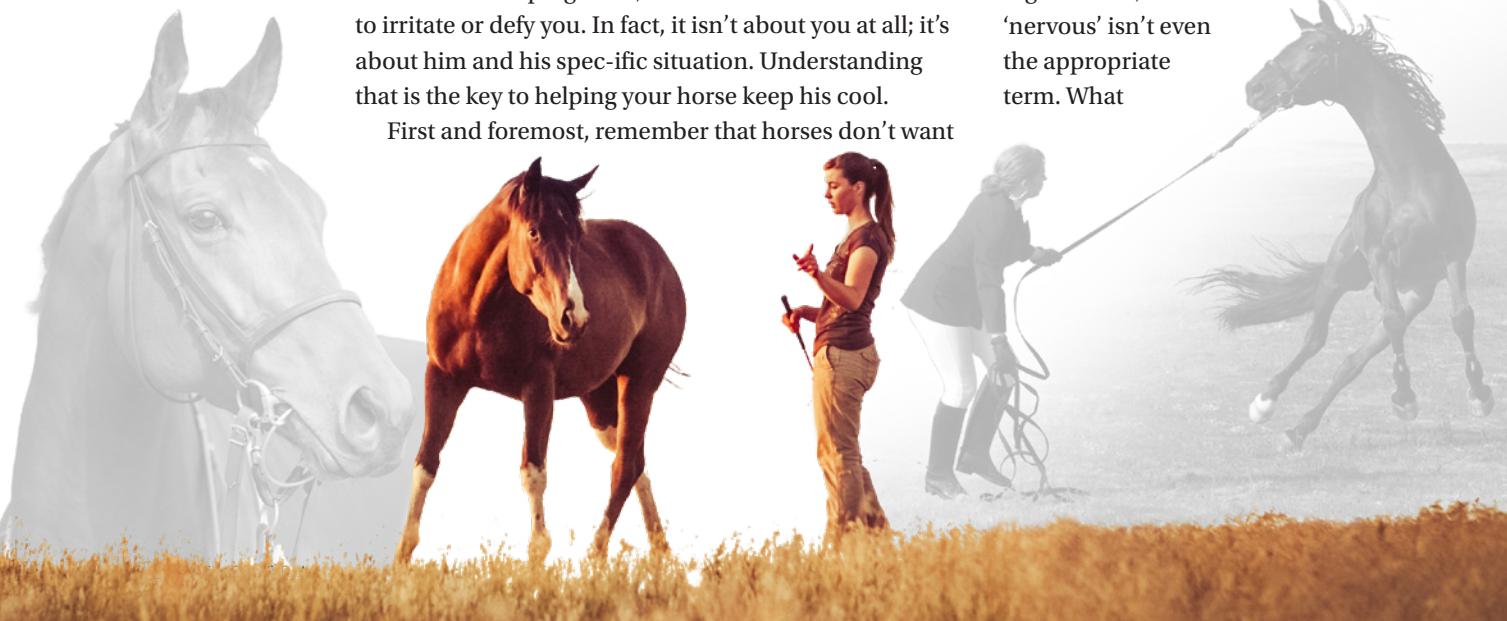
Like a developing child, a horse doesn't misbehave to irritate or defy you. In fact, it isn't about you at all; it's about him and his specific situation. Understanding that is the key to helping your horse keep his cool.

First and foremost, remember that horses don't want

to be bad—or good, for that matter—they just want to be safe and comfortable. It's easy to see a particular behavior, such as refusal to stand still, shying or jiggling, as a problem, but in most cases the horse is simply responding to his environment or experience.

One potential driver of seemingly anxious behavior is discomfort from ill-fitting tack, injury or illness. That means that any effort to deal with nervous behavior needs to start with a call to the veterinarian to schedule a thorough physical examination for the horse.

If your veterinarian rules out physical causes for your horse's anxiety, you'll need to consider whether his behavior is a manifestation of fear or simply reflects a hard-wired tendency to be more sensitive to his surroundings. Indeed, sometimes 'nervous' isn't even the appropriate term. What





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might seem like anxiety is sometimes an expression of a horse's instinct for self-preservation. Regardless of the root of the behavior, responding to undesirable behavior will require time and patience, along with a willingness to adapt your approach as needed. You can't control what a horse has learned in his lifetime, especially if you didn't raise him. What you can control, however, is the situation you are in and how you react to your horse.

DIALING BACK THE FEAR RESPONSE

What we call "nervous" behavior is often the result of fear. In a natural setting, fear quickly leads to one specific behavior in a prey animal like a horse: running away. "Horses as a species evolved to cope with danger by fleeing," says behaviorist Bonnie Beaver, DVM, DACVB, DACAW, of Texas A&M University. "They are naturally uptight and apprehensive

Turnout with a friendly herd is good for any horse's physical and mental health, but it's particularly beneficial for hotter horses.

if they don't have the ability to get away from the things they perceive as dangerous." To reduce those potentially dangerous reactions, Beaver recommends analyzing the situation and looking for ways to minimize the triggers for these horses:

- **Adopt a calm demeanor.** The body language we project as we first walk up to a horse sets the tone for the entire encounter. An aggressive approach raises his defenses at the outset. Especially if the horse doesn't know or trust you yet, striding right up—quickly and purposefully, as a predator would—may scare him, says Beaver: "This kind of approach will trigger nervous behavior."

On the other hand, your instinctive response to back off when a horse acts

up may reward nervous behavior. "Typically, when we approach a flighty horse, we stop when the horse starts reacting, and this rewards him, so that's not what we should do," says Beaver.

Instead, when approaching a horse you don't know, or you expect is likely to react, Beaver suggests easing up slowly and quietly. "If we are walking slowly and the horse is fine with our approach, we should periodically stop before he reacts, or even take a step back, and then take another step or two forward and then stop, just to gain the horse's confidence and let him know we are not a threat," Beaver says, adding, "We also should not stare directly at them as we approach, because that makes some horses nervous. This is what a predator does. In general, because their vision is much different than ours, we are better off approaching a horse more from the side, going toward the withers rather than straight on toward the head."

- **Introduce new experiences gradually.** Horses often need to be acclimated

to new objects and new situations. “Often the biggest mistake people make is waiting until they have to put the horse in a trailer, rather than taking time to trailer train that horse. So they bring him right up to a trailer and cram him into it,” says Beaver. “So now you have a horse who is shook up and upset. Once a horse gets

agitated and nervous, even when you remove the trigger it will still take him about 30 minutes to calm down.”

Instead, she suggests beginning by bringing the horse up to the trailer at his own pace—pausing as necessary if he is apprehensive—and giving him time to investigate before loading. “Let him take his

time to smell it and get used to the sound of it and figure out that it’s not going to eat him,” says Beaver. Ideally, you would start this desensitization process days or even weeks before the horse will need to be transported.

Giving the horse time to assess scary things is also a good strategy on the trail.

CALMING THROUGH CHEMISTRY

You’ll find several products—feed supplements, pheromones, aromatherapies—that are formulated to help calm horses. Some, even if not officially approved by the Food and Drug Administration for medical efficacy, are supported by scientific studies. Aromatherapy with lavender oil, for example, has been shown to reduce heart rate and other physiological evidence of stress in horses.

Another product contains calming pheromones in a gel that can be applied inside a horse’s nostrils. But, says Bonnie Beaver, DVM, DACVB, DACAW, of Texas A&M University, it must be used carefully. “The company’s studies suggest that this product will decrease the time it will take the reluctant or fearful horse to load into a trailer,” she says. “It seems to work in certain situations, but not if the horse is highly aroused and very scared.”

Calming supplements may contain many different ingredients, including vitamins and minerals, as well as traditional herbal ingredients, such as chamomile, valerian root and raspberry leaf. One product contains alpha-casozepine,

a protein derived from milk that is believed to calm nursing youngsters. Studies have shown that alpha-casozepine has a calming effect in several species.

Talk to your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist before starting your horse on a new product. They may be able to suggest brands or ingredients that are more likely to be helpful for your horse in one way or another. “What most people don’t realize is that there is actually a placebo effect with most calming medications, of greater than 50 percent,” says Beaver. “The horse owners think

their animals are less afraid because they are using product X. They are less afraid, only

because you think they are less afraid. It’s your perception. You want the horse to be better, so you think he is: You are just certain that he is less reactive than he was before.”



WHEN YOU'RE PART OF THE PROBLEM

Whether your horse is fearful or sensitive, your own behavior can be influencing his. After all, horses are masters of reading body language. So if you find yourself bracing for an expected blow-up as you hold your horse for the farrier, for example, your own anxieties may trigger, or amplify, the very behavior you fear.

If you suspect you may be contributing to your horse's nervous reactions, try handing the lead rope or reins over to a more experienced handler. If your horse settles down quickly, it's time to assess your own role in your partnership. Here are steps you can take to ensure you're part of the solution to your horse's anxiety rather than contributing to the problem:

1. Establish your leadership with groundwork.

Every time you handle your horse, he will behave as if you are a herd of two. One of you has to be the leader, and if he doesn't trust you in that role, then he will assume it himself. As self-appointed herd leader, if something frightens or agitates your horse, he will make the decision to run. Instead, your goal—which can be reached through regular, focused groundwork—is to show your horse that you are the leader.



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The body language we project as we first walk up to a horse sets the tone for the entire encounter.

2. Control your own emotions. Your horse will pick up on what you are thinking, whether you are sitting in the saddle or standing next to him on the ground. When you are sitting on him, he can feel your tension or relaxation through

your seat and legs. And if you—the herd leader—are nervous, anxious or afraid, then you are telling your horse that he should be frightened, too. “Nervousness in a horse being ridden is often due to rider inconsistency,” says

Bonnie Beaver, DVM, DACVB, DACAW, of Texas A&M University. “Often a show horse does fine at home, but when you take him to a show he goes nuts. The rider may be more tense and nervous at the show, and this makes the horse nervous.”

Containing your own emotions is a skill that takes practice and experience, and you'll find hundreds of suggestions for relaxation techniques to reduce your own anxieties. But simply taking a moment to draw and release a deep breath and consciously shake out tensions in your body is a good start. Sometimes, however, if you arrive at the barn while you're having trouble coping with other difficulties in your life, it might be wiser to skip the ride that day.

3. Use your voice—and speak softly. You don't need to keep up an incessant patter, but speaking even a few quiet words may be helpful in soothing an anxious horse. “The first thing most people do is talk in a soft, calm manner,” Beaver says. “Research shows that this really doesn't make any difference to the horse, but it tends to make the person more calm—which the horse readily picks up on—and this is what's important. If you relax, the horse tends to relax.”

“Perhaps you are riding, and the horse becomes anxious when you come across a plastic bag caught on a fence and blowing in the wind, or you come to a bridge the horse has never crossed,” says Beaver. “Give him time to look at what’s alarming him and assess this scary thing. There should be no rush to get past or over or through a scary obstacle. Horses are naturally curious, and if you allow the horse time, and a chance to explore this new thing, we don’t see the distress happening.”

• **Avoid punishments.** Reprimanding a horse for nervous, spooky behavior is about the worst thing you can do.

It tells him that he had good reason to be afraid. “This increases the horse’s anxiety level and he becomes more nervous,” says Beaver. “The person may not realize

that this has just reinforced the horse’s nervous, flighty behavior; the horse becomes even more concerned.”

• **Be aware of your surroundings.**

When planning an event that you know will stress your horse—a veterinary visit, for example—try to schedule it for a time when there will not be a lot of distracting activity around the barn and select a site where the horse will feel safe and comfortable. Avoid making obvious changes to the scene before bringing the horse in. Remember: Things that might seem innocuous to you, such as a blanket tossed over a nearby fence or a hose lying across the ground, can be worrisome to a nervous horse.



Anxious behavior may be the flip side of appealing traits: If you want a “forward” horse who is attuned to his surroundings, he may be that way even when it’s not convenient for you.

Likewise, a horse may also be more nervous on a windy day, with the trees, grasses and bushes all moving at once. Wind also distorts the sources of sounds and odors, which can confuse a prey animal, leaving him on high alert. If your horse seems unusually edgy on a gusty day, it might be best to postpone activities until conditions are calmer.

• **Avoid “trapping” the horse.**

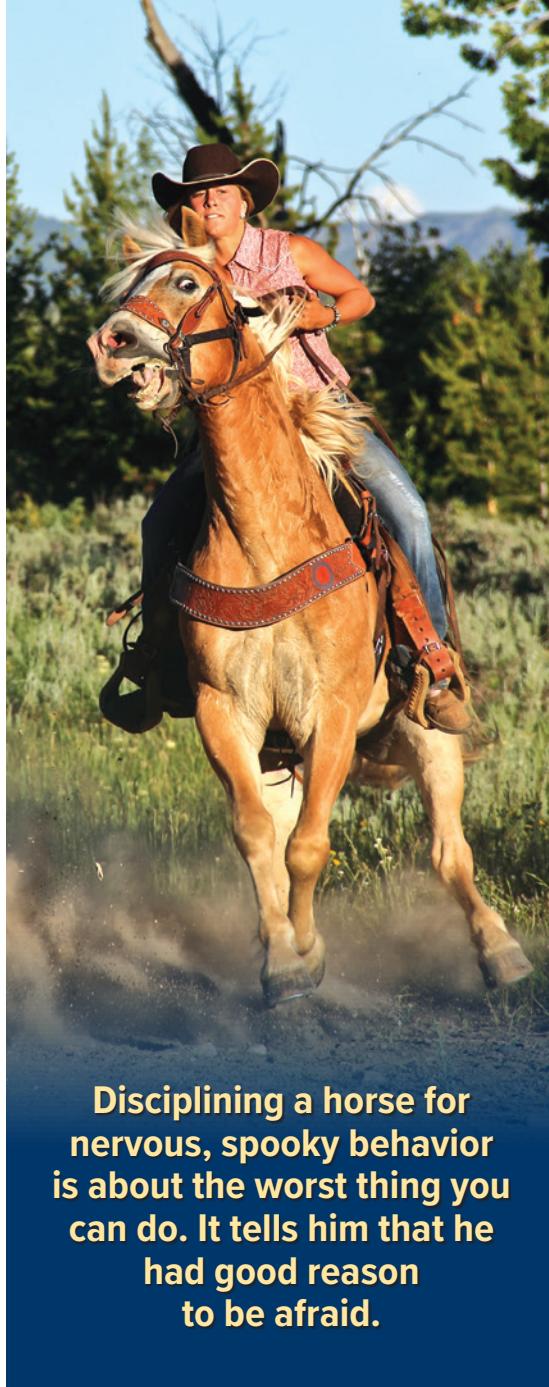
Horses are naturally claustrophobic. If you make them feel as if they cannot escape—either by physically blocking their path or using equipment that constrains their movement—you risk triggering their fight response.

Instead, focus on showing the horse what to do, using pressure-and-release techniques, rather than simply trying to force him.

• **Keep the horse moving.** An anxious horse wants to escape the source of his fears—in other words, he feels compelled to move his feet. And here, a technique advocated by many natural horsemanship practitioners comes in handy: Try to get control of the horse’s feet—let him move but direct that movement.”

This all begins the moment you mount up: Start each ride by walking around the arena on a loose rein to see how he will react to the environment. The idea is to defuse any anxieties before starting the real work.

Here, though, look beyond the common technique that calls for forcing a horse to face something that scares him. Riding up to something that causes the horse to spook and forcing him to “get familiar with it,” can makes him feel



Disciplining a horse for nervous, spooky behavior is about the worst thing you can do. It tells him that he had good reason to be afraid.

constrained, which is counterproductive. Instead, try to instill confidence in the horse by teaching him that he will not get hurt as long as he listens to you.

When a horse is nervous or wants to shy, try walking or jogging circles until he relaxes and becomes responsive again. The goal is to help the horse realize that he need not react to the scary thing and there is really nothing to worry about.

That dynamic changes, of course, when there is a legitimate reason for a horse to be frightened. If you encounter

a grizzly bear on the trail, for example, a fear response properly channeled can help attain the goal of self preservation for both horse and rider.

• **Keep it positive.** “Historically, horse training has been based on negative reinforcement—we poke a spur in their side and when they move, we take the negative away,” says Beaver. “but this doesn’t work as well with a fearful horse.”

Positive reinforcement—administering rewards for good behavior—can be a better approach. “Reward-based training has been shown, in multiple species, to be the best at preventing problems and getting the trust of the animal the fastest,” says Beaver. “It can make the horse less fearful.”

Treats and food rewards are the “big guns” of positive reinforcement, but other gestures, such as verbal praise, rubbing the horse’s neck or pausing for a rest break, will work as well. Clicker training is another form of positive reinforcement that can be successful with horses. But rewards must be administered carefully. “Many people don’t have good timing on giving the reward, and they end up rewarding the wrong behavior,” says Beaver.

BORN THAT WAY

Fear isn’t always at the root of difficult behavior in horses. Sometimes it’s just sensitivity. Certain horses, bloodlines and breeds are naturally “hotter” than others.

Keep in mind that this is the flip side of the very traits that might attract you to a particular breed in the first place—if you want a forward-moving horse who is



Food rewards are the “big guns” of positive reinforcement, but other gestures will work as well, such as rubbing the horse’s neck, offering verbal praise or pausing to let the horse rest after he’s done what you asked.

tuned into his surroundings, he may be that way even when it’s not convenient for you. “Hot bloods’ are more active than ‘cold bloods’ and tend to be hypersensitive,” says Beaver. “For some of those horses, small things are more likely to upset them.”

When learning to work with horses that have a lot of energy and are acutely sensitive to their surroundings, keep the following goals in mind:

- **Avoid constraining the horse.** As with the fearful horse, trapping or constraining the high-energy horse only exacerbates the problem. Horses who feel trapped will fight. How long they fight and how hard depends on their level of self-preservation and how you respond.

- **Increase turnout.** Time spent living in a field with a friendly herd is good for any horse’s physical and mental health, but it’s particularly helpful for the hotter horses. Once he’s had a chance to gallop, cavort and burn off some steam,

your horse will be a calmer, more relaxed partner when you’re ready to ride. A horse who lives outside will also be well accustomed to wind, rain, swaying trees and wild animals and will be less likely to spook when encountering these elements again on the trail.

- **Be prepared to back off.** Although there are ways to deal with a blowup, it is far better to prevent it from happening in the first place. That means you’ll need to be tuned in to subtle shifts in your horse’s body language. “If the horse starts tensing up, you need to figure out what’s going on, and preferably assess the environment before the horse becomes nervous,” Beaver says. Then you can take action, maybe circling or asking for a half-pass, to keep his feet busy and his mind focused on you.

TIME AND PATIENCE

As with any horse, your goal with a nervous one is to build a trusting

partnership. “When you look at horses who work at the highest levels, there is a strong bond of trust,” Beaver says. “I saw this in a horse that I had that was being trained. When the trainer got off and I got on, the horse kept looking to the trainer asking, ‘What should I do?’ because the bond to that one person was so strong that the horse looked to that person for guidance. This is what you want in your relationship with a horse: total trust.”

Even when frightened, a horse who trusts his handler’s leadership is less likely to overreact. “He might get nervous, but it won’t be to the extent that an untrusting horse would have,” says Beaver. “The nervousness will be controllable because the horse is looking to you for security and guidance. The horse learns that the rider will not put him into a situation that he is not capable of handling.”

Of course, as with any relationship, developing trust with your equine partner will take time, and sometimes it will seem like progress comes only in excruciatingly small increments. And you will make mistakes—accept that fact and simply focus on learning from them. Instead of getting discouraged, consider setbacks as learning opportunities that will help you build a stronger and more productive relationship with your horse.

You may not be able to pinpoint exactly when it happens, but as you continue to work with your nervous horse, subtle changes will be taking place. And one day you may look back and realize you crossed a threshold. Somewhere along that path, you and your horse became a team, a true working partnership based on trust and understanding. Then even the occasional difficult day will be easier to cope with. 🐾