



focus

on behaviour

Prevention is better than Cure

With road traffic accidents and attacks on horses by dangerous dogs reputedly on the rise, it's more important than ever to do what we can in advance to prevent accidents and avoid the need for first aid.



The Key to avoiding accidents when you are out and about is establishing a strong relationship with your horse and developing his trust and confidence so that he can remain calm in a challenging situation.

With the advice of leading horse behaviourist, Michael Peace, we are delighted to bring you this guide focussing on your horse's behaviour.

Focus on Relationship

As horse owners you know that the relationship you have with your horse can be the most rewarding aspect of horse ownership. If that relationship, on the other hand, is out of balance it can lead to frustration and even dangerous behaviour.

For the partnership between horse and handler to work there must be trust between both parties. Recognising and understanding your horse's behaviour is vital in establishing the trust that is necessary for taking horses into unfamiliar situations, such as hacking on roads as safely as possible.





The Happy Horse

What makes a happy horse?

A happy horse is one that understands the 'deal' between horse and human; he does not feel threatened and is aware that it is a 50:50 relationship. The horse knows that if he cooperates with what is being asked of him, he'll be well cared for and treated with respect.

The relationship we have with our horses is dynamic; we each have good days and bad days so the most successful relationships are those where we are intuitive to how our horse is feeling, and respond appropriately.

The happy horse is the horse that is easily reassured by his owner in a spooky situation and one that will forgive his rider little mistakes.



You know your horse is happy if he:

- has a large, generous, open, bright eye
- is relaxed through his body
- moves fluidly, not sharp and jerky
- eats up
- has a glossy coat
- is happy for you to enter his space; doesn't move away
- is easily caught in the field
- walks into his box, remains relaxed



The Unhappy Horse

Your horse may be unhappy as a result of past experiences or a situation in which he currently feels either psychological or physical discomfort.

The stressed or unhappy horse will be different in terms of behaviour to the distressed horse.

It is important therefore that you tune into your horse to recognise some of the signs; some may be obvious, others less so.



The stressed or unhappy horse may:

- Have a dull coat
- Show a small eye (the horse retracts its eye when stressed)
- Appear tense throughout his musculature
- Be tucked up - he will tend to eat less
- Sharper, less fluid in his movement
- Step away from you or move to the back of his stable
- Be uncatchable

Many of these unhappy horse characteristics are not dramatic but if we tune into our horses more and take notice, we may realise there is something that is not making our horses happy and requires further investigation. What is 'wrong' may not necessarily be serious or obvious. It may be just that you rode him too

hard last time, the bit you're using causes discomfort, his saddle's not fitting as well as it could, he has pain or discomfort elsewhere, or perhaps it's your mood or the way you move around him that needs a little refinement. The bottom line is that he may simply not understand what he's being asked to do.

The key to turning the unhappy or stressed horse into a happy horse is to:

- Never assume the horse is being naughty
- Not take his behaviour personally
- Investigate what may be causing the behaviour displayed
- Remain calm
- Be clear about what he's being asked to do.



The Distressed Horse

You will have a fairly good sense of what's wrong in these circumstances - it may be a low flying aircraft, separation anxiety, arrival at a new yard etc. Whatever it is, stressed or unhappy horses can hurt people because, in their opinion, they are fighting for their lives.



The distressed horse is more obvious to spot as his behaviour will be recognisable, with many similar traits to those we recognise in humans such as:

- Panic
- Increased heart rate
- Rolling of the eyes
- Box walking
- Bucking in the stable
- Galloping around the paddock

A calming influence

- Start from the point of view that there is a reason why, the horse is behaving in a particular way, rather than naughtiness
- Establish empathy with your horse i.e. think about how you would feel in that situation
- Understand that he needs guidance to help him understand how he should behave, not punishment or physical restraint
- Exercise humility; rather than taking the superior stance, allow yourself to relate to the horse on the same level
- Give yourself plenty of time and exercise patience
- Remain calm and reassuring using your voice and body language.

Be prepared for the outside world

We all want to be able to take our horses out to shows, hack out alone or in company on roads and bridleways - all as safely as possible. However, we know that the outside world can present a number of threats to horses. As flight animals, it is therefore essential that we make sure our horses are as 'roadworthy' as possible before venturing out.

There are a number of practical measures you can take to help your horse feel more comfortable around the unexpected stimuli you may find out on the road and more importantly, to help him take a reassuring cue from you that it's not a threat.

- Your horse knows what you think
- Get your own head around it – if you have a phobia about something, you need to talk yourself around or get someone else to help your horse
- Be practical
- Your aim is to get the horse to think for himself
- It's your role to give him a sense of responsibility
- Allow the horse to make little mistakes so, in his mind, he can eliminate certain behaviours



Stop, Listen, Think!

To desensitise your horse to certain 'potentially threatening' stimuli, at home, you need to do things that cause him some scepticism - for example put something new by the entrance to your arena. It is important to know where your horse is at 'now' to determine what level of stimulus you can expose him to and then, build up slowly - for example, begin with a plastic water bucket, and maybe build up to a wheelie bin and then a flapping plastic bag on a post.

Here are some ways you can control your behaviour to encourage and reassure your horse when he's unsure:

- Only expose him to something that you feel he will cope with
- Get him looking at the object
- Loosen up and allow him to move
- If he hesitates, apply just enough pressure to get him to consider it but not too much that makes him feel restricted/trapped because remember if he feels trapped, his "help, I've got to get out of here" flight response may kick in
- Be clear that he needs to go up to it - keep the focus on it, but give him the sense that the 'good news' is that he has as much time as he likes.
- You can reassure him once you get the desired response and it's important to reward any effort, only keeping the pressure on when the horse stops trying
- Make sure he starts to take notice and consider approaching the object, reassure him with your voice and use big pats on the neck
- Make sure that you're horse is genuinely trying for you (not bluffing) before giving a reward
- What you are aiming for is for your horse to **STOP, LISTEN & THINK** rather than take flight.



If you have a phobia about, or believe your horse will spook at, something, then you are not in the right frame of mind to try this exercise; you can't fake it with horses. So, either do some work on yourself to overcome your fears and improve your ability to relax and loosen up or get someone else to do these exercises for you. However as it is about building trust between your horse and you, realising that your own thoughts play a role in this is vital.

Train yourself to be the adult

Despite the fact that you will have done all you can to encourage your horse to understand that his flight instinct is no good when he's working with you in the 'human world', horrible situations do occur, although far less often. When they do, you need to train yourself to provide necessary reassurance for your horse.

All this is most likely to work if you have prepped your horse at home to stop, listen, think.

Accidents can still happen

No matter how well prepared we are or how trustworthy and genuine our horses are, they are still sentient beings and we are still human, which means illness and accidents can and will occur. The way in which we handle our horses and ourselves in these circumstances will determine whether we escalate or mitigate the problem.

In the case of a Road Traffic Accident or other trauma, horses can become surprisingly calm thanks to a surge of endorphins, so call the vet and emergency services, stem any bleeding and make the horse as comfortable as possible.

If your horse has a 'panic attack' and is throwing himself about, whether due to trauma, illness or other stimulus, in the first instance ensure you're wearing a hat and he is as safe as possible and keep a safe distance away - then call the vet alerting them to the urgency of the situation.

In the event of your horse sees something to spook at or take fright while you are out hacking, try to remain 'the adult' in the relationship by doing the following:

- train yourself to loosen up in scary situations,
- reassure your horse with big pats on the neck,
- be quick enough to redirect the stride that wants to whip around. So, for example, if he goes to whip around to the left, lift up your left hand to put the horse's left shoulder back in line.



Petplan Equine always advises that when handling horses it is important to wear an approved riding hat, as safety should be the number one priority. If you are unsure of your horse's condition then call the vet.