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Equine Behavior: Prey vs. Predator, Horse vs. Human

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The horse evolved to graze the vast plains, with survival traits that have served it well. Even with domestication it continues to exhibit these traits. As a result, humans need to understand horses' natural behavior or reactions in order to make our interactions with them safer and more rewarding.

First, we need to realize that the horse evolved as a prey animal and its first response to anything scary is flight. Horses understand that their safety relies on their ability to put distance between themselves and something they perceive as dangerous. What is dangerous to a horse? Almost everything! Their well-being relies on their perception that everything that moves or is new could eat them. So when we lead or ride a horse up to or past something it has not seen before, the horse can become wary and nervous.

While horses are prey animals, humans are classified as predators, and as such, we approach life in a very different manner than the horse. A lot of things we naturally do can be counter-productive when it comes to working horses.

What predator-like things do humans do around horses?

1. As predators, our eyes are on the front of our face and we get tunnel vision when we are focused on something. We approach the horse looking intensely at it and usually look it in the eye. This is how the predator in the wild approaches its prey as well, with great intensity and focus. This manner of approach can cause the horse great distress if it is not comfortable with people.

2. As predators we sometimes want to trap the horse to capture it. If we have a horse that is hard to catch, what do we normally do? We use a corner of the fence line to trap the horse and prevent it from running

away. In the wild, a predator would like to have the horse in a situation where it could not escape. When we trap a horse we can trigger its flight or fight response. With flight, the horse may try to run through or over a fence or person to escape. If flight is not possible, the horse may resort to the fight response by charging or kicking.

Equine vision also plays a role in how the horse reacts to events. An understanding of the horse's vision will give us a clearer picture of its world and help us to remain safer. But a more in-depth discussion of vision will be left for a future publication.

What can humans do to work with the horse on its own terms?

When approaching a horse that is not comfortable with being caught, we need to avoid our predator instincts and behave more like a prey animal. Do not look the horse in the eye and do not march up to the horse's head. Rather, walk in a relaxed manner in the direction of the horse but not directly at the horse. If there is more than one horse in the lot, walk up to one of the other more accepting horses and begin rubbing on that one, ignoring the one you want. Many times, this gets the best of the horse you want and it will come over to investigate. When it comes over DO NOT turn and jump at the horse in an attempt to capture him. Instead, ignore him for a little while. When you do reach to rub him, do not look at him- just reach out and rub him. It is best if you take time when you do not need to catch the horse to go out and just rub him. If you are carrying a halter, put it over your shoulder to keep it out of the way and less visible. Carrying a halter even when you do not want to catch a horse is also a good practice.

If the horse still does not want to be caught, catch the other horses and hold them together in a group. Do not allow the horse you want to stand with them. Horses want to be in their herd and if you take that away, they will usually allow themselves to be caught. It may take several times of repetition before you can walk out and catch the horse, but be patient and consistent in the process. Some proper round pen work will usually help the horse gain additional trust.

Round penning, used correctly, is a wonderful tool to help a horse gain trust and confidence. Move the horse around the pen at a trot by standing in the middle of the pen and moving toward the horse's hip. Then step more forward toward the horse's shoulder to ask him to stop. When he stops have him turn towards you and face you. If he does not face you or turns away, continue to make him move around the pen and after a few times around, ask him to stop again. Allow him to stop and rest only when he is facing you. After he has gotten the idea of facing you, walk up to the horse in a relaxed manner and rub him. If he will not let you approach him, send him off again and continue this training. It usually does not take very long before the horse will let you walk up to him. Once it has been established in the round pen this method can be used when trying to catch the horse in a paddock or pasture as well

Your energy level has an important influence on the horse. If you are working with a horse that is very excitable and nervous, keep your body energy very low. Do this by taking deep slow breathes and by slowing your movements. Try to walk up to the horse in a slow, relaxed manner and ask the horse to move around the round pen, using only the energy needed to get movement. If the horse is moving faster than you would like, stop your movement and stand in the center until the horse slows its movement down. If, on the other hand, the horse is lazy, you need to exhibit a high energy level to gain movement from him.

When working around horses, remember that as a prey animal the horse is always very perceptive. They are very aware of their surroundings and will see movement and hear sounds that you do not. You can help make the horse more comfortable with situations it may not like by using a technique called "desensitization." With this technique, slowly introduce "scary" situations or substances to the horse, in a controlled environment, to help him gain confidence. For example, if you want a horse to be comfortable with noisy trash bags blowing around, you could begin by using a towel. With a halter and lead rope on, rub the towel all over the horse until it does not care or resist. Then wave it around the horse and finally let it contact the horse as you wave it around. The idea is not to force

the horse to stand still or punish the horse for moving but instead allow the horse to

move around you in a circle until it stops, then take the object away and rub the horse with your hand. Once the horse is comfortable with this, throw the towel toward the horse and let it hit the ground, not the horse, until the horse becomes comfortable.

Next you can introduce a trash bag. At first keep it balled up and compact in your hand. Let the horse see and sniff it and rub it on the horse. Begin making the bag bigger and continue to rub the horse and wave the bag until you can throw it around and at the horse.

The main concept with this process is that if the horse moves away from the towel or bag when you rub it on him, you must continue to rub it on the horse until its feet stop moving. If the horse moves and you take the object away, you have taught the horse that he can get away from the situation. But if done correctly this method will help the horse gain confidence in noisy and scary situations. A variety of objects can be used for this desensitization process including raincoats, umbrellas, tarps, etc.

It is very natural for us to exhibit predator behaviors that get in the way of helping the horse understand what we want it to do. If we can control our predator ways, we will be able to more easily work with the horse. Focusing on the use of natural herd behavior in our interactions will give us great benefits as we work with the horse.

Reference

Miller, R. 1991. Imprint Training: A Swift, Effective Method for Permanently Shaping a Horse's Behavior. Colorado Springs, CO: Western Horseman.

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