



Why does my horse do that? The theory behind 'bad' behaviours and how to deal with them

The horse's enduring ability to learn and adapt has ensured its survival. The gradual realization by man that horses can provide much more than just a food source brought this species back from the brink of extinction. The progressive transition from food source to workhorse to source of leisure has kept us in close contact with these animals throughout the centuries.

However, despite having such a pronounced history with the species, our general understanding of their behaviour and cognitive processes is limited at best.

A general lack of knowledge around learning theory is indeed the cause of many behavioural issues in the modern day horse. A survey of problem behaviour in the leisure horse conducted by Jo Hockenull at Bristol university found that out of 1326 owner responses, 91% reported a behavioural problem in their horse during the week prior to the survey.

'Problem' behaviours, on the ground and under saddle, are either responses to pain, the result of inadequate training or lack of understanding on the trainer/handler's part.

It is common for people to attribute 'bad' behaviour to the horse being 'mischievous' or 'disrespectful' when really these behaviours are often a manifestation of a deeper underlying issues such as pain, emotional state or poor horse-human relationship. More often than not, a complex combination of all three can be the stem



Pain related issues

If a behavioural issue presents itself, it is first essential to rule out pain as a cause. Pain can include: muscular pain or tension

Joint pain

Gastric ulcers

Painful heats in mares

Low grade lameness

Ill-fitting tack or equipment

Dental issues/mouth ulcers

Horses are genetically programmed to avoid pain or discomfort and, when it is encountered, will exhibit avoidance or defensive behaviour. Pain, confusion or frustration on the horse's part can lead to unwanted behaviours.

These behaviours are often misinterpreted by handlers and can lead to un-due punishment

Non pain related issues

In ridden horses, many behavioural issues arise due to conflicting signals given by the rider or by lack of reward from the rider such as not releasing pressure when desired response is given. This can cause conflict behaviour or learned helplessness. An example would be a beginner rider who uses the reins to balance themselves. They would inadvertently be pulling on the reins whilst cueing the horse to go forward with their legs.

Another example would be a 'nappy' horse that is constantly kicked or whipped with no release/reward when the horse 'tries' or if the pressure is released at the wrong moment.

This can confuse the horse and heighten their state of arousal, encouraging flight or fight behaviour, which, when confined by tack, equipment and fences can manifest into 'bad behaviour' such as bucking, rearing and bolting.



So how do problem behaviours develop?

Response to pain

In regards to pain, let's use the example of a horse that is aggressive when saddled. This response is often caused by an ill-fitting saddle causing pain. The horse will soon associate the saddle with pain or discomfort so that even the sight of the saddle can draw out defensive behaviours.

Because the flight response is usually suppressed in the domestic horse with methods of restraint, the horses 'fight' or defensive response is elicited. The horse would engage threatening behaviour and perhaps even 'attack' to avoid the painful stimulus in order to protect himself.

Learned behaviour

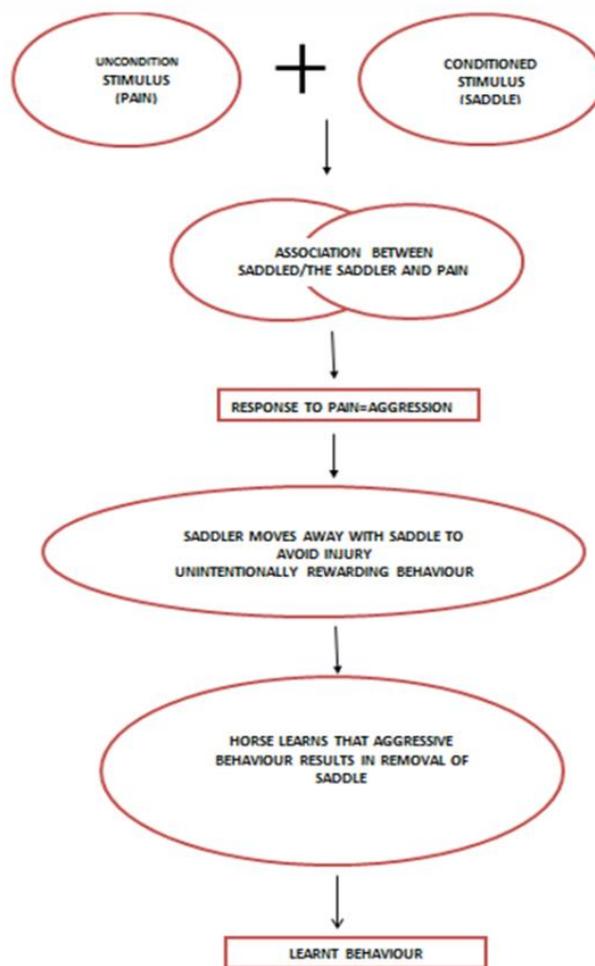
A general misunderstanding of how horses learn can lead to people inadvertently teaching 'bad' behaviours. Handlers will often unintentionally reward unwanted behaviours. For example, if a horse will not load into a trailer, the handler will often turn and lead them away to 'start over' and try again. Rather than helping the situation this is actually rewarding the horse's refusal. By not realising that escape from or avoiding the stimulus (trailer) is what the horse is seeking, the handler is inadvertently helping to reinforce the unwanted behaviour.

Pain response transgression to learned behaviour.

A behaviour that is a response to pain may still continue after the cause has been addressed. This is because the response has become a learned behaviour which in the past has proven effective for the horse.

Let's look back to the example a horse that is aggressive during saddling. Even if the saddle fit is rectified the behaviour will most likely continue because it has become a conditioned response, most likely due to association and also possible inadvertent reward from the handler perhaps backing off when the behaviour is exhibited.

Below is a flow chart demonstrating the links in development of this behaviour.





How are these behaviours 'cured'?

To eradicate an unwanted **LEARNED** behaviour pattern, it is necessary to commit to consistent behaviour modification sessions WITH the horse. Equine behaviourist and veterinarian Dr. Robert Miller identifies three main techniques to deal with undesired behaviour:

- 1) Ignore the behaviour
- 2) Counter conditioning
- 3) Punishment

Ignoring an unwanted behaviour is beneficial if the behaviour has not yet become a learned response as it eliminates any form of reinforcement that would gratify the behaviour exhibited.

Unfortunately, if the behaviour has already become an established learned response ignoring the behaviour would not be of any effect and would most likely endanger the handler.

Counter-conditioning is an extremely effective approach often used in behaviour modification in many species. It involves training a new response which is incompatible with the unwanted response. For example, a 'cinchy' horse could be trained to lower his head or touch a target when being saddled. This posture would make it extremely difficult to exhibit aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, if a horse is exhibiting aggressive behaviour, simply backing them up a few steps can have a profound effect. Aggressive behaviour is hard wired with forward motion; an aggressive horse is never a retreating horse, so asking him to back up is incompatible with the current behaviour.

This, with the addition of praise and reward when exhibiting desired behaviour, would eradicate previous unwanted learned behaviour.

Punishment is another approach, although less favoured by horsemen.

Punishment usually involves the use of a stimulus that suppresses behaviour and can be applied positively (for example, a slap) or negatively (with-holding a treat).



Punishment can range from mild to severe and has the most potential to be used incorrectly. If applied inappropriately it could be considered abuse. Furthermore it can elicit fear and can be detrimental to the relationship between horse and handler. Reward rather than punishment is more effective in modifying behaviours as it provides motivation and keeps the horse in a positive cognitive state.

It is highly advisable to seek the help of a professional if you are facing behavioural issues with your horse.