

# Psychology of the Horse

## The Nature of the Horse

The more we understand the nature of horses (the way they think, how they act and react to different situations, what pleases them, what scares them) the easier it will be to ride and train them.

Horses are herd animals. In large herds, they will develop smaller sub-herds, each with its own leader and followers. Life in a herd is a very comfortable and safe place once the herd has established its pecking order. Each member is either more dominant or more submissive to other members of the herd. Leadership of the herd usually falls to an older stallion or older mare. Authority, once established, is rarely questioned.

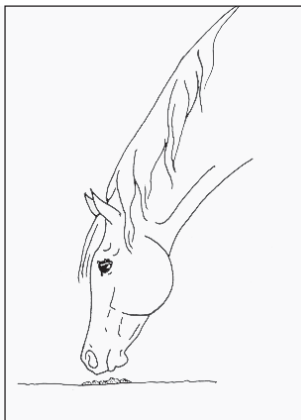
## Hearing

The hearing ability of the horse has made them popular with hunters. The horse is able to hear game animals before they can be seen.

Each of the horse's ears are able to rotate to about 180° and act as rotary antennas - rotating to the source of the sound that interests them. The hearing ability is not a problem. Sudden noises are more likely to upset a horse than a steady sound. However, if the horse hears sudden or loud noises often enough, it will learn to get used to them.

Trainers use their voices when they are schooling horses. The horse responds to the tone and forcefulness of the voice. Horses will not always understand the words, but they do learn to recognize ones which are often repeated. This is why clucking and whistling work well as cues. The same command should always be used to get a certain response.

## Smell



Smell is well developed in the horse. The horse uses smell as much as sight to identify another horse, a person or an object. Let the horse smell anything that is strange to it.

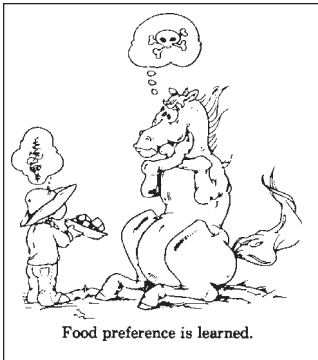
Generally, smell does not cause a major reaction and the horse will move on once it is satisfied. If the horse dislikes a smell it may blow hard through the nostrils or snort. A horse will often snort just before it shies from an unacceptable smelling object.

# 4 - H H o r s e P r o j e c t M a n u a l - P s y c h o l o g y

Horses establish their territory and make statements with their feces and urine. When horses are first introduced to other horses and they blow into each other's nostrils, they are sharing information about each other. When new horses are turned out to a new pasture, a great deal of sniffing goes on! When you meet a horse, let it smell you.

## Taste

Horses have individual preferences when it comes to tastes. Some horses will refuse to eat grain when medication is mixed in, some will graze on plants that are poisonous, some will reject food by its taste or smell.



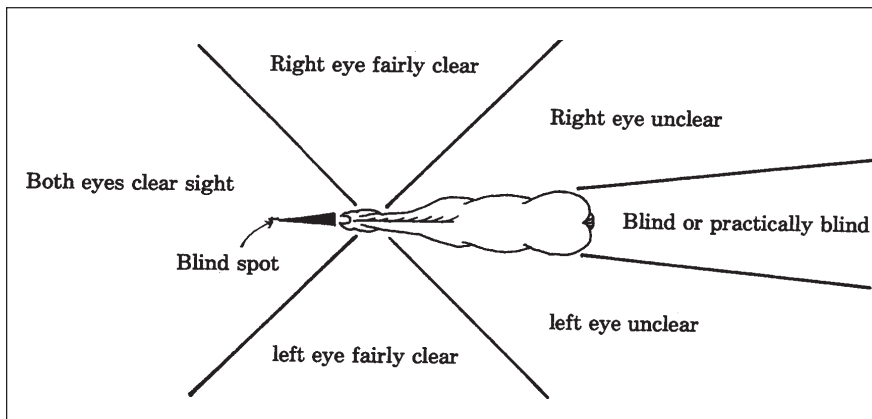
Food preferences are learned. The horse is sensitive to flavour, but develops a liking for certain food because they have had it before. A horse may dislike another food because they did not feel well after eating it.

Horses eat the forage they like first. Palatability of forages is related to the texture of the feed. Horses eat grasses like bluegrass, brome grass and fescue before wheat grass and slough grasses. Most horses like alfalfa and clover, which are legumes.

## Sight

Horses have very keen eyesight (especially sensitive to movement). Their vision is very well suited to life in a herd. When grazing they can see about 320° of the horizon, making it easy to sight a predator. Their eyes are on each side of their head and they see two distinctly different pictures simultaneously. Each eye can see almost 180° on its respective side (monocular vision). A fleeing horse can see if a predator is catching up to it. Binocular vision (seeing only one picture) is weak and is only experienced by a horse when it looks straight ahead. The horse has poor depth perception. They see flat and probably poor detail.

Horses have three main blind spots. They cannot see things that are very close to the centre of their face.



This is why a horse will back up or shift its head when approached from directly in front. Another blind spot is directly behind the horse. Never approach a horse from directly behind. If you startle the horse it may kick out in fear. Horses also have difficulty seeing anyone who is under their neck.



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**Touch** As horse owners, we apply pressure on different areas of the horse's body in order to teach a correct response as necessary for training. The eyes and ears are the most sensitive parts of the horse's body. Many areas of the horse's body are sensitive to pressure, some more than others. The amount of pressure that needs to be used will depend upon the horse.

It is affected by the thickness of the skin, the sensitivity of the nerve endings in the skin, and the experience of the horse.

Touch affects the whole body. Unlike the other senses, it can get tired. When this happens, the horse may not react to cues it knows. This can be caused by the rider. For example, a rider that fidgets will confuse the horse. The touch sense will get tired and the horse will not respond when a cue is given.

The body has other touch receptors. The hair of the horse is sensitive to touch. If you run your hand lightly across the tips of the hair, most horses will flinch (eg. watch what your horse does when a fly lands on it). The horse also has long, coarse guard hairs on its jaw, muzzle and around the eyes. They warn the horse about the distance they are from an object. This is important in poor light.

**Sounds of Horses** Horses can produce a range of sounds to express different emotions.

- 🐾 Nickers are usually friendly, soft and most submissive.
- 🐾 Neighs are stronger and are more assertive.
- 🐾 A horse will call out very loudly when panicking.
- 🐾 Squeals are most often made when a horse first meets another horse.
- 🐾 Mares and their foals can identify each other by the sounds they make.
- 🐾 Snorts show apprehension or dislike often followed by a bolting (flight).

**Body Language of Horses** Horses communicate a lot by their body language. A horse's expressions and the way it moves the different parts of its body will tell other horses and people (who know how to read this body language), exactly how it feels or what it wants. After spending time around horses, you will start to be able to read their body language. When starting to interpret a horse's body language start by looking at the position of the head and look of the eye, followed by how tensed the muscles are and the tail position.

## 4 - H H o r s e P r o j e c t M a n u a l - P s y c h o l o g y

### The Nature of the Horse (continued)

Body language is one of the fastest methods of finding out that a horse is sick. The behavior of the horse will change. A horse that normally comes to you may not come to you at all. A horse with stomach pains may look at its side, roll, stretch or lie down and refuse to stand. Horses that stand with a dropped head and/or exhibit a dull eye may be sick. By recognizing that the horse is sick you will be able to treat it more quickly.

**Ears** The ears are one of the best and most quickly visible signs of a horse's mood. When the ears are pressed flat back the horse is usually quite angry or stubborn and a kick may soon follow. Sometimes ears laid back will mean extreme concentration, as in a racehorse, cow horse or show jumper making extreme efforts. If a horse is apprehensive or uncomfortable, it may also lay its ears back.

If a horse has its ears pricked forward it is probably curious or completely alert. A horse that flicks its ears around when being ridden is usually very attentive to what its rider is asking of it. When a horse has its ears relaxed and lop-sided it is resting. A horse's ears that are droopy and hanging to the side and respond slowly to sound usually indicate that there is sickness in the animal.

**Head** An outstretched head and neck, with ears forward, denotes curiosity. When on the defensive or on alert, the horse lifts and arches its head and neck. Repeated nodding of the head may mean that the horse is impatient. Often a horse will nod its head while you are grooming, or if it has made a correct response while you are riding. A well trained horse that enjoys being ridden will look pleased with itself. It is more enjoyable for the horse to do a skill correctly.

**Mouth** When a horse is extremely relaxed its lower lip may be droopy. Stubborn or alert horses will have their lips drawn tight. A horse with bared teeth means business and will likely attack.



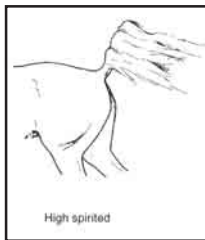
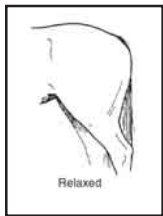
**Eyes** Curiosity or alarm is expressed through a wide eye. Wrinkles above the eye often indicate worry. A horse that is resting will have relaxed droopy eyelids. Squinting is a signal of a horse getting ready to attack or react aggressively to something. Some squinting can also be a sign that the horse is in pain.



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**Back** Before a horse bucks or shies away from something, it will tense and round its back. A horse that flinches or drops its back under pressure may have a sore back.

**Hooves and Legs** A horse rarely kicks out without warning. As a threat and warning, a horse will lift its hoof off the ground and pin its ears back. Horses often rest a foot by standing on just three feet. The front feet are usually used offensively (a horse pawing on the ground may be a sign of impatience) and the hind feet are used defensively (kicking), although front hooves may also be used for striking.



**Tail** The tail is also a useful measure of a horse's mood.

- U When it is firmly clamped down, the horse is settling in to be stubborn or is about to attack.
- U When it is relaxed and swinging from side to side the horse is relaxed and happy.
- U When carried up and somewhat away from his body, the horse is alert and/or curious,
- U When held straight up in the air the horse is usually very high spirited and showing off, or he is frightened.
- U When swishing from side to side can simply mean that the flies are being bothersome or he may be slightly annoyed.
- U When the horse's tail lashes violently at his sides he is usually very angry or he is in a state of extreme distress - either physical or mental.

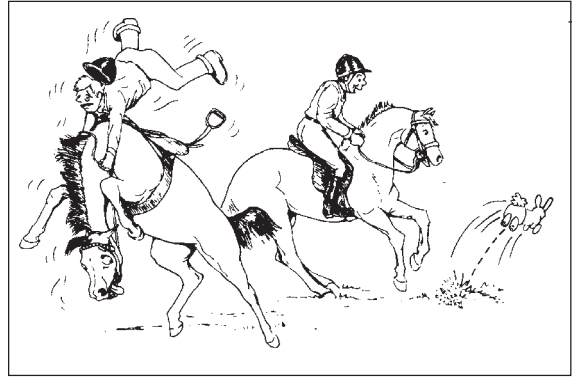
**Fears** Horses are naturally curious, yet quite suspicious. Everything is potentially dangerous until proven otherwise. They have a natural instinct to flee from danger. With their keen eyesight and very long legs, they are well equipped to flee. By educating and training horses, we diminish their flight instinct as they learn to trust certain movements and objects. However, in a panic situation even well-trained horses will revert to their flight instinct as a solution to the fear.



Some horses are afraid of cars, motorcycles, bicycles, etc. If you know that these vehicles scare your horse, don't take your horse onto a busy roadway until it has learned to trust vehicles. It is not necessarily the object (car, flag pole etc.) that the horse is afraid of, it is sudden movement or sound that triggers the flight instinct. Exposure in a safe environment is the best way to reduce a horse's fear.

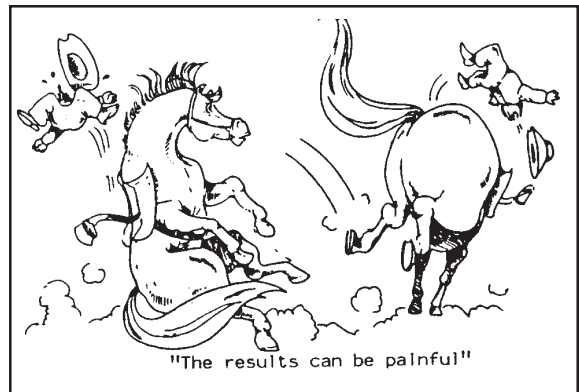
## 4 - H H o r s e P r o j e c t M a n u a l - P s y c h o l o g y

Because of horse's natural instinct to flee from danger, they lie down only when they feel completely safe. In a herd members will usually take turns lying down so that a couple are always on their feet to act as look-outs. However young horses do not always follow this pattern.



**Biting** Biting is an annoying habit that can catch some people and horses unaware. Biting and nipping can be encouraged by overfeeding tidbits to the horse. This is the only time you should actually hit a horse in the head area. When a horse, young or old, attempts to bite you, you must “bite” it back with an immediate sharp jab to the underside of the jaw, not the face. If done immediately and properly, it should not take more than one or two times to realize that biting is undesirable.

**Learning** Every time you handle a horse you are teaching it something, good or bad. Horses learn with consistent repetition and consistent use of aids. Horses respond to pressure and release. We know a horse has a brain but we know it can not reason. If you know your horse does not like going by the flapping tarp on the hay shed, unless you are trying to teach it to go by, use another route. They will respect you much more if you show them where their boundaries are and let them know they can trust you. Do not put your horse in any type of confinement or danger or he will lose trust in you and will not work willingly with you. Your goal is to have a willing partner that wants to please.



## 4 - H H o r s e P r o j e c t M a n u a l - P s y c h o l o g y

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Learning takes place for both the horse and rider. The longer you work with a horse, the easier it is to predict how your horse will respond. This will help you decide how to use your horse to the best of its ability.

**Teacher** Obedience to a leader is quite natural to horses. Handlers that are able to have their horse regard him or her as leader of the herd are at an advantage.

**Learning Environment** The environment of the horse is important to learning. This includes the level of nutrition, health care and handling the horse has had. A horse that has been well kept and properly handled learns more quickly than a horse that has had little care or handling.

Horses are usually reluctant to attempt anything that they suspect might cause them physical harm. Not stepping into water or not walking up the ramp of a trailer makes a lot of sense to a horse concerned for its survival.

**Schedule** In order to teach a horse, the trainer needs to plan ahead. Teach simple skills first. Teach more difficult skills based on the simple ones. For example, the horse can do a sliding stop with some speed after it has learned to do a balanced stop at a walk and trot. Before you are able to open and close a gate from your horse you must teach the horse to move away from the pressure of your leg.

**Routine** Like most animals, horses are creatures of habit and find comfort in routine.

**Rewards** Give rewards when you are training a horse. The rewards are in the form of releasing pressure once a horse has made the correct response (i.e. horse stops - release rein pressure). After a horse has worked hard for some time, stopping and resting may be the reward. If the horse has been worked on the bit, riding with loose reins is rewarding. These rewards are good for all horses.

## 4 - H H o r s e P r o j e c t M a n u a l - P s y c h o l o g y

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The reward system affects the learning of the horse. The handler must give the same response every time the horse responds. If the horse gives an incorrect response the pressure must be released and given more clearly. The reward must be given immediately after a horse gives an attempt to give the correct response. Hand fed rewards can often result in the horse invading the human's personal space. Then it becomes a "group hierarchy" issue.

- Attention Span** The length of time a horse is worked will depend upon the age of the horse, its fitness level and the amount of hard intense work you are doing. A young horse has a shorter attention span, therefore it should be taught in short consistent lessons. Always end your lesson for any horse on a positive note.
- Repetition** To teach a horse a skill, it must be repeated. Although the horse learns slowly, it has a good memory. The horse will remember what you have taught him for a long period of time. This makes proper handling of your horse important. Poor behaviour is also learned.
- Physical Ability** What is your horse physically capable of? A horse may be unable to perform certain skills. Not every horse has the athletic ability to jump, rein or do games, even if they have the learning ability.
- Boredom** Prevent boredom in your horse by turning it out daily, providing a companion or change in routine of riding and offering new learning experiences for your horse. This will also increase the value of your horse.

