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How to Keep You, Yo and Those

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You're headed down the trail, enjoying a pleasant chat with your riding buddy, when a grouse suddenly flushes from the brush. Your horse spooks and bolts as you grab the reins and try to bring him to a stop. While you're not happy with his reaction, you're not really surprised: He spooks all the time.

Granted, horses are prey animals, and by their very nature have a fight or flight response when facing novel or frightening stimuli. But your horse seems more anxious than most. He cries when left by his friends; startles at shadows; fusses in the crossties; and becomes a sweaty mess in the trailer. Why is he so anxious all the time, and can you do anything about his dramatic reactions?

To find out, we talked to veterinarians, researchers, and equine professionals, about causes of anxious behavior in horses and solutions to help keep you, your horse, and those around you safe. Here's what they have to say about the possibilities.

Cause: Your horse's vision is compromised.

Horses rely on their eyesight for survival, so it's no surprise that a horse with vision changes or loss might become anxious and easily frightened. "Vision loss can be associated with spooking, stopping, refusing jumps, bolting, bucking, and any other response horses make to fear," says Mary Lassaline, DVM, PhD, MA, Dipl. ACVO, an equine ophthalmology specialist at the University of California, Davis, Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

Lassaline describes two types of eye issues that can lead to vision changes: cloudiness that obstructs vision in an eye that could otherwise see (picture sitting in a car with a foggy windshield) and a functional issue that makes the eye unable

to do its job (the car with a clear windshield, but a dead engine). Both can impede or eliminate a horse's vision and cause behavioral changes, such as a horse becoming anxious in situations he used to handle without issue.

Solution

If you suspect your horse's vision is fading, Lassaline suggests contacting your veterinarian and scheduling an eye exam. Veterinarians can often diagnose the cause of vision loss there on the farm. However, "in some cases, more advanced testing might be necessary, and this may warrant referral to a veterinary ophthalmologist," she says.

Vision impairment doesn't mean retirement for all horses, Lassaline says, but you need to keep both human and horse safety at front of mind. She offers advice for helping relieve a seeing-impaired horse's anxiety: "Help the horse to use other senses," Lassaline says. "For example, talk to the horse in a calm voice, put a hand on (his) neck or shoulder when approaching him to let him know where you are. In addition to keeping his environment consistent and helping him navigate safely, taking the time to retrain a visually impaired horse can really improve the quality of life for both horse and owner. If the horse has one visual eye, let him turn his head to use that eye to see both sides. If the horse is completely blind, be his eyes and teach him that he can trust you. Take everything slowly and stay calm, and don't push the horse if he is afraid."

Cause: Your horse is in pain.

According to the Anxiety and Depression Society of America, anxious humans commonly have related pain disorders, such as arthritis, migraines, or back pain. We know from equitation

Anxious Horse

Prone-to-Worry Horse, and Him Safe

By Michelle Anderson



*Photography by Cally Matherly©,
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science research that horses feel and react to pain, too, says Carissa Wickens, PhD, equine Extension specialist and assistant professor in the University of Florida's Department of Animal Sciences, where she conducts research on horse behavior, welfare, and nutrition.

Anecdotally, Wickens says, it's no surprise that veterinarians, equine body workers, researchers, and equine behavior experts also find associations between anxious horses and chronic pain, such as that caused by navicular syndrome, arthritis, or gastric ulcers. "Just like with any species, if a horse is experiencing pain, it can disrupt their whole behavior repertoire," she explains.

Josh Zacharias, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACVS, ACVSMR, who treats Western and English sport horses in Fort Collins, Colorado, says he often sees performance anxiety—such as hesitation to go into the arena, acting up in the box (in roping horses), or simple head-tossing—in patients with chronic musculoskeletal pain.

Solution

Physical pain is where Wickens' help as an equine behavior expert ends and the need for a veterinarian begins, she says.

If you or your trainer suspects your anxious horse is in pain, Zacharias says a thorough physical exam is a must, including dental and lameness checks, to rule out lameness and body or back soreness or pinpoint and treat any pain issues possibly associated with the anxiety. "A general physical to detect internal medicine-related abnormalities may also be necessary," he adds.

Lastly, many anxious or stressed horses suffer from gastric ulcer syndrome, which is highly painful and can

exacerbate anxious behavior, Zacharias says. Pain management medications, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, also increase the possibility of ulcers.

"Chronic or severe pain will lead to elevated levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) in the blood, which may promote gastric ulceration," he adds. "If a horse has had previous episodes or history of ulcers, I believe it is necessary to administer preventive medications."

Cause: Your horse's tack doesn't fit.

Along the same lines as pain-associated anxiety, a horse wearing a saddle that's pinching or uncomfortable might become anxious, Wickens says. The same goes for a bit that's pinching his lips or a bridle that's too tight.

Solution

If you suspect your horse is getting amped up and anxious due to a poorly fitting saddle, look for areas where it might be pinching or galling your horse (on Western saddles, look under the cinch, and make sure your saddle pad isn't too tight over your horse's withers, for instance). For a closer look at how your saddle might be hurting your horse, consider hiring an independent saddle fitter to evaluate it, Wickens suggests.

Cause: His diet is out of whack.

The horse world is full of myths when it comes to "hot" horses, says independent equine nutritionist Nettie Liburt, MS, PhD, PAS, of Liburt Equine Nutritional Consulting, in Long Island, New York.

For example, people used to think high-protein diets, including forages such as alfalfa, gave horses extra energy.

Not true, says Liburt. However, “high-energy (calorie) diets combined with a lack of turnout or exercise can lead to restlessness, not to mention the risk of obesity, laminitis, and stable vices (stereotypies),” she says.

Sugar in a carbohydrate-rich diet can also play a role in anxious equine behavior. “Sugars are metabolized quickly, as a fast source of energy, which can be a very good thing—think bursting out of the starting gate or racing around a cloverleaf pattern,” Liburt says. “Ever skip lunch, then grab a candy bar in the middle of the afternoon for a quick snack? Perhaps you get that sugar rush, then the crash (that follows).”

Solution

First, says Liburt, consult your veterinarian to rule out other causes of fearful behavior, such as the pain or vision issues already mentioned. Then, work with your veterinarian or turn to an equine nutritionist to evaluate and modify your horse’s diet. He might benefit from a low-sugar, high-fat diet.

Compared to sugar, fat takes a long time to metabolize, and its energy release is slow and sustaining. “Therefore, you avoid the rush and crash from a high-starch, high-sugar diet,” Liburt says. “Horses that are spooky, nervous, or excitable often benefit from a higher-fat, lower-carb diet to help level out the overall release of energy from the diet.”

Additionally, some calming supplements might help relax the anxious horse, although research supporting their efficacy is limited, Liburt says. Some purported calming ingredients include St. John’s Wort, kava, passionflower, valerian root, B vitamins, and magnesium. However, many are on the United States Equestrian Federation’s banned substance list, Liburt cautions.

“A diet change isn’t necessarily a guaranteed behavior fix, but it’s definitely a good place to start,” she says.

Cause: He needs more training.

Horses that don’t know their jobs are more likely to become anxious when faced with new situations, says dressage trainer Natalie Perry of Bend, Oregon, who holds her United States Dressage Federation (USDF) gold medal for successfully competing through Grand Prix. In addition to coaching clients to their own USDF medals, Perry trains adult amateurs and young horses.

Solution

Hire the help of a professional. Sometimes an inexperienced and anxious horse will find confidence in training, Perry says. Trainers, especially those riding full-time, have refined their timing in the saddle when it comes to using their legs, seat, and hands. “I can apply the aids consistently and clearly teach the horse what the aids mean,” she explains. “Then I can teach the rider how to use those specific aids and help her communicate with the horse.”

A professional trainer can also give the horse a daily routine, which anxious-type horses thrive on, Perry says.

Wickens adds that anxious horses can also benefit from ground training and improved in-hand manners. She recommends creating, again, a routine—this time a set ground-handling

pattern that catches your horse’s attention, even when he’s anxious. This could include backing, turns on the haunches, turns on the forehands, going forward, and stopping, she says.

Cause: He misses his friends.

Horses are herd animals and, as such, feel safest when they’re with buddies. Insecure horses might get worried when taken away from friends or hauled to new locations alone. They can become anxious—and sometimes downright dangerous—in these scenarios.

Solution

Dealing with separation anxiety is tricky, says Wickens, who points out that there’s no straightforward solution. With time, experience, and training, an anxious horse can gain confidence when traveling to new places, she says. He might also benefit from and find comfort in that ground-handling routine you introduced to his training. But, for two tightly bonded horses traveling to a show together, she suggests stabling the horses apart—in separate barns, if possible. “It can help, so they aren’t getting re-separated every time one horse goes to the show ring,” she offers.

She also says she’s seen positive research results on calming pheromone gels (TheHorse.com/28332), which manufacturers claim mimic those released by mares to help comfort foals.



"Those can be rubbed in the nostril or stall (wall)," she says.

Cause: You're anxious.

Good horsemanship tells us that a nervous rider results in a nervous horse, and equitation science research supports that notion. "Studies show heart rate and cortisol levels in horses increase along with their riders," Wickens says. (See TheHorse.com/23697 or TheHorse.com/28267 to read about some of these studies).

Solution

Seek professional help, Perry says. Riders often unwittingly use incorrect or improperly timed aids or cues that are confusing to their horses. Perry says aligning the two—first teaching the horse correct aids for what the rider really wants, then teaching those aids to the rider—can help build both horse and rider confidence. Riding lessons and practice can also help build your skill set, so you're prepared to handle your horse's reaction to stressful stimuli in the future.

Cause: Your horse needs more exercise.

Horsemen and -women have long prescribed "wet saddle blankets" to help build a horse's confidence and create a seasoned saddle mount. That means getting a horse under saddle and exercising them to the point they get sweaty, often. Horses

are designed to move, Wickens explains, and sometimes their sedentary domesticated life, especially if it involves long hours in a stall and a carbohydrate diet, can set them up for anxiety. "Horses without a job sometimes find ways to entertain themselves that manifest in unwanted behaviors," Liburt points out.

Solution

Get your horse in a consistent exercise program, whether that means riding him yourself or hiring a pro, Wickens suggests. Try scheduling rides as unbreakable appointments. Also maximize your horse's turnout.

Cause: He's not getting to "live like a horse."

Besides lack of exercise, limited turnout and management practices that don't align with a horse's nature, such as highly concentrated feedings and lack of socialization, are common contributors to equine anxiety, says Wickens.

Solution

For these horses Wickens recommends ample turnout time, environment enrichments (such as toys), companionship—including allowing horses to live in herds—and continual forage options using slow feeders or nets.

Cause: Maybe he was born that way.

Certain breeds, such as Thoroughbreds and Arabians, are known for being "hotter" than other breeds, such as, say, Quarter Horses or draft horses. With that being said, variation can occur within breeds, Wickens says, adding that University of Florida researchers are investigating the possible relationship between genetics and temperament. "We definitely see individual horses that are more prone to anxious behavior," she says.

Solution

Wickens suggests taking a holistic approach to managing the horse that tends toward anxious behavior. That means looking at all possible influences on his anxiety and making management changes to support calmness and stress relief.

Take-Home Message

Managing an anxious horse can be challenging. Finding the root cause of your horse's anxiety and creating a plan to address it—from a veterinarian examination to a nutrition analysis to seeking professional help—can help improve the quality of time spent with your horse and keep everyone involved safe. **h**

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