Understanding the Contrast between Horse and Human Psychology

Horses have evolved as prey animals (i.e. hunted animals), and even though they have been domesticated for thousands of years, they still have the instincts of their wild counterparts.

Horses' brains are thus hard wired to be on the 'look out' for predators. The horse's survival policy is if in doubt, get out. Run first then ask questions. The horse's primary defense is to run away. If cornered he may resort to kicking, biting, bucking. This is defensive, not aggressive behavior. If a horse is uncertain of his safety, he will very quickly become defensive.

Humans in contrast have evolved as predators (i.e. hunting and eating animals like horses); even though humans have been civilized for thousands of years, they still have the instincts of a predator hard wired into their brains. Thus when a horse gets frightened and defensive the predator (human) instinctively moves in for the kill, i.e. becomes aggressive and angry.

A confused predator becomes aggressive and angry. A confused prey animal becomes defensive. The more defensive the prey animal, the more aggressive and angry the predator. Each response builds from the other.

Horses are also social animals. In the wild they live in bands in which each horse has a defined social status, ranging from the most dominant to the most subordinate. The dominant horses have first pick of food, water, shelter, mares etc. Dominance is established between horses when one manages to drive another from its "body space." This may include some physical contact. This behavior is interpreted by humans as aggressive behavior but would be more accurately interpreted as assertive behavior, as no damage is intended. Only space is required to be yielded.

Horses living in bands are natural followers. They feel comfortable following the other horses.

Horses are not humans and are not:
  Aggressive,
  Cantankerous,
  Vicious,
  Bitchy,
  Sullen,
  Stupid,
  Lazy, or
  Dull

Instead reinterpret the horse's attitude "naturally". Replace the words aggressive, cantankerous, vicious, and bitchy with frightened and defensive if the horse is on the look out for predators or assertive and dominant if the horse doesn't respect your space and is trying to yield you. Replace the words sullen, stupid, lazy, and dull with confused or desensitized.

What motivates a horse?
Left to himself, well fed in a reasonably sized area with other horsy company, a domestic horse is perfectly happy. Spending days, weeks, and years mooching around, a little play, a run in the evening perhaps, no worries about predators and no aspirations for self improvement and greatness.

This is all a horse wants - "Comfort" that is:
  Extended periods of mooching,
  Food,
  Social interaction,
  Some play,
  Some exercise,
  No predators to worry about
  Comfort = Stability, Predictability

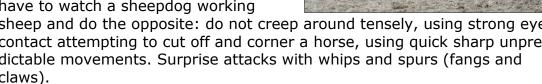It is amazing what a horse will learn to do to maintain his comfort.

Developing horse like body language
We need to develop a body language that communicates to the horse that we are
1) Non predatory
2) Horse like and worthy of the horse's respect and submission.

To be non-predatory in our actions we have to watch a sheepdog working sheep and do the opposite: do not creep around tensely, using strong eye contact attempting to cut off and corner a horse, using quick sharp unpredictable movements. Surprise attacks with whips and spurs (fangs and claws).

This body language upsets horses:
  Tenseness,
  Sharp un-rhythmical movements,
  Surprise attacks,

Strong eye contact,
Tentativeness,
Aggression

Horse like body language:
Relaxed,
Smooth rhythmical movements,
Fair warning before physical reinforcement,
Less eye contact,
Assertiveness

If we cannot yield the horse then the horse will be yielding us, which will signal to him that he must be the dominant partner and will have him feeling within his rights to reinforce his dominance perhaps with a nip or kick. On the other hand if we can yield the horse effectively, he will see us as dominant and will be happy to submit. In this state he would not dream of kicking or biting his dominant partner.

The horse has been playing yielding games all his life and is good at them. Humans have to learn them. This takes time and practice. The horse won't let us win the yielding game easily. We have to earn his respect and submission.

Changing a Horse's Behavior

A horse's behavior is the sum result of the "conditioning" he has received throughout his life from his environment.

Conditioning is a process where external environmental stimuli are linked or associated with certain behavior patterns. For example, a horse may snort and run a short distance every time a sprinkler is switched on, or may become nervous when he sees he is being lead to a trailer. In these cases the horse is associating the objects, the sprinkler and trailer, with danger, whether the threat is real or not (This is "classical conditioning"). Every time the behavior is repeated the conditioned response is reinforced.

A conditioned response is involuntary. It becomes a reflex reaction to an environmental cue. Horses can't help acting the way they do. It is not their choice but a result of instinct and usually of random associations.

A horse is trained when humans condition the horse to associate desired behaviors to certain artificial cues, e.g. to move when there is a pressure on the ribs and to slow when there is a pressure in the mouth. The reason there are so many imperfectly trained horses is that humans are ignorant of how con-

ditioning works. Any horse can be perfectly trained (i.e. conditioned) including horses with so-called serious behavioral problems.

A horse is in some respects like a computer. When a certain stimulus is given, he "remembers" what his response was last time he received that stimulus and does the same again (even if the last occurrence of stimulus and response happened 20 years ago). For example, the last time the farrier picked the horse's foot up in that particular manner, the horse lashed out; so chances are the behavior will be repeated if the foot is picked up in the same way. Thorough training includes re-conditioning the horse so that all its responses to human cues are "desirable."

We teach a horse by a process of "Trial and Error". Initially the horse has no idea what we are asking. By trial and error he hits upon whatever behavior stops us from asking him to do something. The horse learns to stop us "asking" by performing a certain movement. Conversely he learns that he regains his comfort by performing a certain movement.

To train a horse, we have to desensitize him to many things. He is, for example, instinctively sensitive to humans on his back, stock whips, and forceful hammering on his feet. We also have to sensitize him to things he normally wouldn't take any notice of, like subtle nudges to move forward or slow down. How on earth do we achieve this?

To DESENSITIZE a horse to an action-Stop the action before the horse reacts to it or stop the action as soon   as the horse stops reacting to it.

To SENSITIZE a horse to an action-Stop the action as soon as the horse reacts as desired.

The reason this works is that the horse is seeking the COMFORT of not being "asked"

"The horse can see, can feel, can compare and can remember.
Therefore he has judgment and memory. Thus he is intelligent!"
François Baucher
(1796 – 1873)

For more than 4000 years humans have been riding and using horses with the idea to go somewhere. But what looks so natural to us after all this time is not natural at all for the horse. After a 60,000 year evolution, the horse has become what it is today: an exquisite creature of Mother Nature.
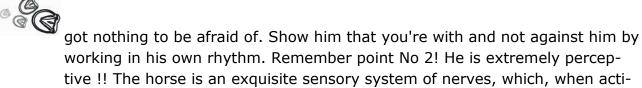
Horses:
- are intermittent, persistent grazers
- are active animals
- are socialized in herds
- are protective and territorial
- thrive in all weather
- relish fresh air

During his evolution the horse has also developed 10 qualities each "Horseman" has to know if he wants to understand why a horse is like a horse. These 10 qualities have given the horse the ability to survive for millions of years.

1.) He is an animal of flight. That means his best defense is to run away from danger. If this is not possible, he will fight for his life.

2.) He is extremely perceptive to everything that is going on around him. He knows, for example, what you are thinking, and what your motives are**.** Because he will act according to that, patience is the key to success in any training program. The horse has built-in motion sensors in his eyes and emotion sensors in his body/skin. Horses can "feel" negative thought patterns of carnivores like lions, wolves and also humans, or threatening movements if you become: angry, anxious, frustrated or in a hurry.

3.) If he senses a lack of patience and confidence, you create a horse that will not cooperate when you want him to, because he is getting nervous about what might be happening to him. In fact, horses don't care at all about how much you may know: they only want to know how much you care for them!

4.) A horse is a very fast learner. Most of the times "he's got it" after three to four repetitions as long as it is simple and easy to follow. Most of the times we actually ask too much in a too short time. But a horse learns good habits as fast as bad ones. And then we've got a problem because of his excellent memory. Horses never forget what they have learned once in their lives. That is one reason why punishment doesn't work at all with an animal like the horse. The only thing that he will learn and never forget is that we are really as bad as he thinks and that it is a good idea (for him) to avoid or to fight us. What they need is respect and discipline…like a child does, but no punishment…! So if we're going to be as kind as possible and as firm as necessary without getting mean or mad, we will start up building a relationship based on love and trust. Then we have a good base for the future and the next quality:

5.) The horse is easy to desensitize to frightening stimuli. But it is up to us to do the first step in this direction to reinforce his trust in us and to become his protector. Let's take a plastic bag, for example. Your horse is afraid of it and you've got two possibilities: Wish him **"**Good Luck" and let him find it out on his own or, much better, help him through by explaining that he's

got nothing to be afraid of. Show him that you're with and not against him by working in his own rhythm. Remember point No 2! He is extremely perceptive !! The horse is an exquisite sensory system of nerves, which, when activated, releases an explosion of energy channeled into an instantaneous flight or fight for survival. For millions of years the horse

had every reason to be fearful, so it is absolutely natural to him!

6.) The horse has a very short reaction time and is one of the fastest living beings. Living in groups gives more security. Since group life asks for certain rules, horses have developed three other qualities to make it possible:

7.) They understand and use body language to communicate

8.) They accept leadership, and are easy to control

9.) They understand respect and create a social order. This gives us the chance to use body language for communication and to become not only "a member of the herd**,"** but also his leader and protector.

10.) The horse is a precocious species. It means that right after birth the horse has got all his senses and qualities completely developed and is able to act like an adult horse.

We expect the horse to go from infant school to junior school, from secondary school to high school without giving him enough time and training nor caring for his thoughts and feelings, we don't even wait until he feels relaxed and confident.

  - Donald U. Newe

http://www.equinebehaviour.com/en/accueil_en.html

If you'd like to read more on the subject, here is a rather good website to consider:

http://users.telenet.be/huertecilla/Eng%20Frameset%20Welkom.htm

Pictures in this lecture courtesy of Donald Newve, Lydia Nevzorov, Sheri Fischer, Dwayne Snyder, and HoofCareUnLtd.

Text in large part by Donald Newe