

Compassion not Compulsion



That is our motto at Bond with Horses. It is a thread that weaves itself through every endeavor. Compassion is more about empathy than about sympathy. While the two seem synonymous, they have distinct differences. We can feel both toward a horse who has been starved, injured or abused, but it is the empathy that feeds compassion. Being able to imagine oneself in the “shoes” of another is the first step toward true compassion.

And life experiences give us that empathetic ability. Experiences are gathered through life like points on a scale from mild to extreme and we all have our own unique set of them. If we have never stubbed our toe, we do not cringe and gasp when someone describes ramming their foot into a cabinet in the dark. We can say that we “feel sorry” for them (sympathy), but we don’t relate on a comparative level. We have no empathy with them.

Compassion comes from awareness. With horses, we need to “think like a horse” to understand their perspective as prey animals designed to move across vast distances as part of a herd. Any life with us requires that they adapt to being confined on some level and dependent upon us for all their needs.

We need to become aware of how our lifestyles can impact the animals’ lives. They certainly learn to adapt to us, but that can sometimes mean that they acquire strange (to us) behaviors as coping skills. At the Sanctuary, we have a young horse who was starved nearly to death twice before she was three years old! Food triggers unusual behaviors in her (understandably) that include kicking the pipe bars of her fence as if to say “Don’t forget me!” as we start feeding a meal. We see these adaptations and adjustments in all the species we bring into our lives.

If a dog runs to the closet at 3:00 AM and starts digging in the corner (don't yell "bad dog!" – I always say, "Good dog doing a bad thing") we must try to understand why this is happening and give him something else to do.

Most predators, like our dogs and cats, re-act to stimulus. Their instincts are intact, even if the most hunting action they get is trying to locate the piece of popcorn that shot under the refrigerator last week. So the best trained dog and the sweetest cat in the world will both re-act without thinking when a bird flops down from the rafters to grab a grasshopper.

As you become aware of the instincts and qualities that your animal shares with his species, you can prepare his surroundings to enhance the things you want and to discourage the things you don't want from him. Socializing a dog with people and other animals is of supreme importance because those very instincts that ensured his species' survival in the past are the deep seated stimulus that could spark an attack under certain circumstances.

And teaching a horse to lead and tie and stand for the hoof trimmer or Veterinarian and to load into a trailer, etc. can ensure that his future life, should it turn out in another person's care, will be free of the brutality someone might resort to in an effort to accomplish their goals. A horse with a broad education and exposure to many stimuli is less likely to panic when facing something new. He builds confidence in his connections to people and circumstances.



Compassion encompasses the training and treatment of horses if we wish to communicate on the deepest level. This also extrapolates to our interactions with all animals and even each other. Especially with children and young animals, our first feeling might be that they are deliberately challenging us when, in all likelihood, they are simply confused or uncertain. By taking a moment to breathe and “put ourselves in their place”, we can draw upon compassion to solve problems.

A horse living 22 hours in a box stall is very much like one of us living in a large closet. When the door is opened and we walk out into the fresh air, we might very likely need to kick up our heels or squeal for joy. A dog living at the end of a chain would likely become overwhelmed with enthusiasm upon seeing anyone who might spend some time with him. Feeling sympathy, we could feel sorry for them and say, “Oh poor creature”. Feeling empathy, we can imagine ourselves in similar circumstances and look for a way to help. By discussing the animal’s situation with the owner, we might find a way to help them build a proper fence to allow more freedom... some compassion based, creative thinking might help everyone involved. Empathy for an owner who has a horse or a dog he cannot handle could lead us into brainstorming solutions. Criticism, anger and blaming will certainly not help an animal, an owner, the situation or our own blood pressure (except in cases of abuse, when intervention through the authorities is needed). To begin with compassion, with empathy, has at least the possibility of improving a situation.

And holding our own actions up to the light of compassionate care, we can see when rushing a horse through a needed lesson or skipping over the foundation building experiences needed, especially for the young horse, will actually take longer than deliberate, consistent communication.

Putting ourselves “in his shoes”, we can see how the horse who is afraid to make a mistake becomes robotic and stingy with his responses to our requests.

We see how people who connect with the hurt and hurting horses can find healing for themselves as well. We are all in this together.