

# Respect for Horses



I've been thinking about all the things that we need to provide for horses. There is the obvious – food, water, shelter, health care – and then there are the “intangibles” like love, education, and RESPECT.

A lot of people will talk about the horse having respect for humans. That respect for us can only come when a horse trusts us and he can only trust us when we are “trustworthy”.

We must show respect for each horse (and for the species in general) because they are gracious creatures allowing us into their lives when, simply considering their size, they do not have to! They try, on a daily basis, to make peace with us. The same cannot always be said about us humans.

One factor that inserts itself into the horse human bond is fear. And the fear can be expressed and felt by the horse, the person or both as the day to day contact occurs. Yet, every moment spent together is an opportunity to **build confidence** with the horse. We just have to explore that whole respectful attitude that helps everyone relax.

Years ago, we had a horse here who was violently food aggressive. This was focused toward the person who was feeding him. You could not take his hay into his paddock and drop it into his feed tub without risking injury. After just a few days here, I discovered old, small scars on his rump that were perfectly lined up as a pitch fork puncture wound. This was a gelding who was trained under saddle to the highest of levels. He could be happily turned out with other geldings. His only flaw was his aggression towards anyone carrying feed.

It became quite clear to me that, at some point in his past, some person had attacked him with a pitchfork to the bum. Whether he had pinned his ears or kicked at the fork wielding human or just crowded them in a stall will never be known.

But, something brutal happened to create such outrage in an otherwise gentle horse. That is an extreme example of disrespect of the horse.

More subtle forms of disrespect are manifested by ignoring signals from the horse of pain, confusion or exhaustion. The ridden horse might “act out” by bucking, bolting or rearing because a saddle is causing severe pain to his back or shoulders. He might seem disrespectful of us if he is confused by conflicting signals from the rider. Another way we lack respect for the horse is by pushing him beyond his limits of strength, stamina or patience.



Even more subtle, but distinctly detrimental to the horse are disrespectful actions that stress his body. Tying a saddled horse in isolation for multiple hours to just “get used to it” is no more effective than tying him for a good grooming and munch on a net full of hay. It can alienate him to be treated like a mere vehicle.

Stressing the equine emotions and mental state are truly lacking in respect! The technique of “flooding” the horse by overexposing him to aggressive stimuli will create a shut down automaton or a terrified, distrustful being unable to cope. Examples of flooding are tying a horse close to an unbreakable post and “sacking him out” (repeatedly slapping and hitting him) with tarps, plastic bags on the end of whips, bags of empty soda cans and the like until he finally stands still – meaning, he gave up and accepts death. Other flooding techniques include chasing the horse at the end of a line in circle after circle (using whips with or without

plastic bags or a second rope thrown over and over at him) until he stands still no matter what is happening. Disrespect is putting it mildly for these attacks.

Granted, after a horse has given up, essentially accepting his own death, he becomes remarkably tractable and easy to handle.

Other disrespectful actions that people use without thinking are gathering groups of squealing children around a quiet horse to “paint” him; covering him with colorful handprints and designs. While some horses might relish the attention, even seeming to enjoy being dressed up with ornaments and hats, the majority of horses tolerate it out of their great kindness. These things do not express respect for the animal.

Horses can be taught many things through marking desired behaviors, rewarding the things we want and creating calm, respectful conditions for learning. Horses really do come to us with curiosity, willingness and trust. We can support those traits by respecting them or we can destroy those characteristics with disrespect and aggression.

Pushing a horse beyond his patience is what often will get people injured. Elderly horses seem like good prospects for horse camp and beginner lessons because they often are too tired to stand up for themselves. If a happy older equine is brought to programs that honor his wisdom and specialness, he becomes a great teacher and partner. So we must remain cognizant of how each horse needs to be approached and handled as an individual.

Respect requires the ability to “put oneself in the shoes of another” and consider how the other feels. Are we going to see the horse as a tool, a partner, a slave or a friend? Simply pausing to consider if you would like to be treated in a certain manner can go a long way in improving a relationship with horses.