

Have a question about your horse's health, care or training? Our experts offer solutions for a range of equine-management problems. Write to EQUUS Consultants, 656 Quince Orchard Road, #600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878; E-mail: EQLetters@EquiNetwork.com. Send photos when helpful.



DESTINY?
"Mouthy" foals are more likely to grow up to be cribbers, as are the offspring of dominant mares.

TRAINING

Help for an "outsider"

Q *I recently moved my horse to a new barn where he has his own paddock and run-in stall. There are more horses and activities here than at our previous barn, and since arriving my horse has developed head shyness. The front of his stall has no bars, and several times now he has hung his head out into the aisle then thrown it up and struck his poll. He is now afraid to go into his stall and stays outside even in the pouring rain.*

There is an empty stall between my horse and the others, but he still seems to be a little afraid of them. At our old place, he had been kept on his own but shared a fence line with a couple of ponies. I now feed him outside because he is not comfortable in his stall. I usually leave some hay inside for him but he does not touch it.

I have put up some webbed stall guards so he can no longer put his head into the aisle, and I have a head bumper I could use to protect his poll. What else can I do to get him to relax and use his stall again to get out of inclement weather?

Name withheld by request

A My ability to answer this question without having actually seen your horse and the situation you have described is limited, but I will share some thoughts based on what you have written.

I don't know how comfortable your horse was at his previous barn. However, the most common cause of head shyness—an aversion to having anyone approach or handle the head—is some sort of improper handling or abuse from people. It is highly unlikely that just being around other horses and activity would cause head shyness. But if your horse has accidentally hit his head on the front part of his stall, he may have made a fear-based association between pain and his stall that needs to be addressed.

Horses are first and foremost motivated by self-preservation. Once they feel safe, they do whatever will bring them the most physical and/or emotional comfort. If your horse is choosing to remain outside, he is saying that he is more comfortable there than he is in

his stall. (Another possible scenario is that the other horses are more dominant and pick on him when he comes into his stall. In that case, he must be separated from them until they have learned to get along.)

To help your horse feel safe in his stall, you need to employ the same desensitization process you would use to help him relax about going into and

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remaining in a trailer or any other unusual or unnatural environment. The technique, often called "advance and retreat," entails slowly increasing the limits of what the horse will tolerate and then quickly removing them.

Start by standing with your horse outside while he is relaxed and calm, then gently lead him toward his stall. He may stop before entering. If he does, do not force him to go further. Instead, stand and pet him until he relaxes again. Then take him away and repeat, this time asking him to go just a little bit further (even if it's just one inch). When he stops, pet him.

When he's ready, direct your horse into his stall and gently pet him while he remains standing there. Allow him to remain as long as he can, but the moment he wants to leave, let him go. Continue the exercise and help him to remain in the stall a little bit longer each time. You want to make being in the stall safer and more comfortable than not being in it.

Do not try to accomplish all of this in one session. Expect to keep doing a little bit every day for a couple of weeks or for however long it takes for your horse to feel comfortable in the stall. Desensitization often takes a long time for a horse who has made a fear-based association between your desired activity and pain.

In the meantime, remember that horses are designed to live outside 24-7, year-round. There are no stalls, blankets or run-in sheds in their natural environment. If they have some place to go (under some trees or into a run-in shed, for example) to get out of harsh weather, sometimes they will use it and sometimes they won't. If you are concerned about weight loss, continue to feed your horse outside while you are desensitizing him as described above. Once he's comfortable entering his stall again, resume feeding him there.

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THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS



Tim Hayes

is a natural horsemanship clinician based in East Hampton, New York, with affiliates in

New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. He conducts clinics, classes and private sessions for all levels of both English and Western riders throughout the United States and Canada. Hayes is currently a visiting instructor at The University of Connecticut and The University of Vermont departments of animal science. His website is www.hayesisforhorses.com.