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Dealing with fear; Horse & Human

By TIM HAYES

PART ONE - "HORSE FEAR"

A leading North American sports psychologist recently called to tell me something he thought I would enjoy. He said in studying the importance of psychology in the performance of the human athlete for the past thirty years, he had discovered something totally unique in the sport of horseback riding. In over twenty-five different sports from football to hockey, horseback riding was the only sport where the athlete's "equipment" could become nervous and therefore affect the athlete's performance. Clever, yes. True, painfully.

In being humorous my psychologist friend nevertheless brought up a reality that is experienced by all of us who interact with horses. It is a subject the knowledge of which (or lack of) can mean the difference between life and death for both human and horse. This subject is *FEAR*.

Fear is one of the most common factors when humans and horses get together and the most dangerously misunderstood for the following reason - *what frightens horses does not frighten humans and what frightens humans does not frighten horses*. Unfortunately neither species knows this and cannot understand why the other is so afraid of such "harmless" objects or behaviors.

As a prey animal (food for predators) horses live their entire lives on alert. They must be ready to flee predators, or any sign that might indicate the presence of a predator, at any second in order to survive. However if they ran away every time they sensed something that might be a predator, something they'd never seen before (i.e. a dumpster), they would exhaust themselves, waste their strength and energy and become more vulnerable to a real threat. What saves them from this fatal vulnerability is their uncanny ability to remember and store information.

The nature of horses is such that not only are they hyper-vigilant; they have the greatest memories (save the elephant), of all animals. Their superior memory enables them to continually identify, remember, store and classify everything they see, hear, taste, and smell. All of this information is turned into a list with two categories they remember for their entire life. Simply put everything a horse encounters becomes either: "something that could eat me or something that could not eat me."

For horses' living in the wild this list becomes fairly complete in the first few years of life. Trees, grass, rocks...no worries - mountain lions, wolves, bears...run!

For any domestic horse living in the world of humans, hundreds of additional unfamiliar man-made things must be added to the list. To be in the "things that won't eat me" category, they must be repeatedly investigated and tested before they first become tolerated, then accepted and eventually proven safe and forever ignored. This list not only includes saddles, horse trailers, bicycles and plastic bags but every conceivable unnatural manmade item imaginable. Helping a horse overcome his many fears and become more confident requires us to understand this evolutionary survival mechanism. It also takes time, patience and leadership.

The secret in helping our horse become "bomb proof" is either recognizing or being able to predict anything that might trigger an unnecessary fear of being eaten. Equally important is keeping ourselves calm and relaxed the moment he becomes bothered and anxious. Next we need to comfort, reassure and allow him time to personally investigate the situation until he is satisfied he is safe. Though we never force him to move toward the object of his fear we must nevertheless keep him facing it and not allow him to turn away. The moment a horse decides to turn away from something scary, he will usually run and often become dangerously difficult to stop. Following these steps reinforces our leadership position by gaining his trust and respect. We also keep both our horse and ourselves from getting hurt.

Being a good leader and helping our horse when he becomes afraid is similar to being a good parent and helping a fearful child. The following two scenarios are good examples.

In the first scenario a father tells his four-year-old child to go to his room and go to bed. The child says he doesn't want to go alone because he's afraid of the dark. The father says don't be silly there's nothing to be afraid of and stop wasting time. This makes the child even more fearful and he pleads with his father not to make him go to his dark room alone. His father raises his voice and yells if the child doesn't go to his room, he will be punished. The child goes crying to his room and goes to bed not only afraid of the dark but of his father as well.

In the second scenario when the child tells his father he is afraid of the dark, his father tells him he understands because he knows other kids (and even adults) who are also afraid of the dark. He picks up the child, holds him tight and walks to the bedroom

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A horse has only one fear — being eaten.

as he comforts and reassures him. In the bedroom, he asks the child to help him turn on the light together. He stays in the room until the child tells him he feels safe and it's okay to go.

Both scenarios end with the same result, the father gets his child to go to bed. The method used in the second scenario not only creates a deeper bond of love and respect between father and child, it instills powerful knowledge in the child that will help him in the future. The next time he is frightened, he can look to his father as a trusted source of wisdom, protection and safety. This is the same principal upon which a herd of horses choose their leader. This method is the same whether it's a herd of 100 or a herd of 2 - you and your horse.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us to always see our manmade world through the eyes of our horse. It is our responsibility to read our horses' behavior and know when he is bothered or frightened. The key to helping fearful horses and becoming highly confident riders is knowing and remembering there is only one major fear that will cause our horse to react in a way that can cause serious injury to him and us - The fear of being eaten by a predator. Think for a moment about where you ride. Unless you ride where there are mountain lions, wolves or bears, you never need to become anxious or afraid when your horse acts spooky!

A helpful way to become more confident is to remember 5 things: PEOPLE – PLACES – THINGS – MOVEMENT – CHANGES. These are the 5 primary stimuli that could indicate the presence of a predator and trigger fear to emerge in our horse. Knowing and remembering them will allow us to comfort, reassure and help him look to us as his leader. We can help him to feel safe and protected the moment one of them triggers his fear.

The 5 Fear Triggers

Examples:

- New or unfamiliar people (predators) - other adult's, children, dogs
- New or unfamiliar places - going to a show, going on a trail ride
- New or unfamiliar things - raincoats, backpacks, clippers
- New or unfamiliar movement - a sheet flapping in the wind, a door opening
- New or unfamiliar changes - the pile of sand that was 2 feet high yesterday is 3 feet high today

When any one of these stimuli occurs we must understand that our horse is genetically programmed to go on alert. In his mind any one of them could indicate the unseen presence of something that could eat him. It is at this moment that we must be there for him as his leader by using our horsemanship skills. We don't have the physical power to control an out of control horse but we do have the knowledge to influence his thoughts. It is by controlling a horse's mind that we are able to control his body.

Whether we're on the ground or on his back one of the simplest and most effective ways to engage our horse's mind is by giving him a job to do and directing him to move his feet. Horses, like humans, have brains with left and right sides that manage different functions. The right side manages instinct. Horses survive by instinctually fleeing when they sense danger. They don't need to think in order to run. A frightened horse that takes off is operating with the right side of his brain.

The left side of the brain manages reason or thinking. Horses need to think to cross their hind legs in front of each other (disengage their hindquarters). When our horse becomes afraid we can immediately ask him to repeatedly move his hip over with our leg. This will disengage his hindquarters requiring him to use the left side of his brain to think. After he has directed his attention at us (his leader) we can help him investigate the scary stimuli and overcome his fear. Important - it is imperative to build his trust for us as his leader before we find ourselves in this situation. If not, he will feel safer relying on himself and his natural instincts. In that case he will run first and investigate later.

Another way to say that horses are hyper-vigilant is to say they are masters of - knowing what happens before what happens happens (read this a few times slowly to have it sink in). This ability has enabled them to survive in a world filled with predators for millions of years. When we see our horses' ears and eyes quickly change their direction, their neck and head go up or feel their muscles tighten and brace they are telling us something important they want us to know. They have been alerted by something they truthfully believe might eat them.

Unless we're riding in extremely rural areas that contain natural predators, like mountain lions or wolves, knowing the truth about our horse's fear and it's five triggers enables us to stay calm, relaxed and confident. We truly know we are both 100% safe. Then we are able to take the necessary time to reassure him and help him move his attention back to us. Becoming his leader enables him to trust us when we tell him he doesn't need to run for his life. Understanding the nature of horse fear is what prevents humans and horses from getting hurt. If we expect our partner to change and become more confident, first we need to become more confident. Then we will both feel safe and truly have fun.

Although human fear is similar to horse fear in its end result (we're afraid we could die or be seriously injured) it differs in two distinct ways. First, we fear death and injury will be caused by our actual partner - our horse - not some other predator. Second, the 5 stimuli that trigger our fear do not come from people, places, things, movement or changes. Our fear is triggered by our horse's reaction to these five fear stimuli. In next month's issue we will examine human fear, how it differs from horse fear and what we need to do to overcome it.

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