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Dealing with Fear Horse & Human

By TIM HAYES

PART TWO- "HORSE FEAR"

In last month's article, *Dealing With Fear: Part One*, we learned that what frightens horses does not frighten humans and what frightens humans does not frighten horses. A horse's one and only fear that will cause him to react in a way that can cause serious injury to himself and to us is the fear of being eaten by a predator. We also learned the 5 predictable stimuli that will trigger this fear in



One human horse fear

all horses are new or unfamiliar people (predators), places, things, movement and changes.

Humans are similarly afraid of death or serious injury. The difference is that we're afraid that our horse will be the cause of our injury – fatal or otherwise. Therefore our fear can arise whether we're on their back or on the ground. Our horse will always sense this immediately and our fear will always make his fear worse.

There are two primary responses we must learn and master when our horse's behavior frightens us. The first is: Allow what is acceptable. The second is: Cause him to change what is dangerous. We must handle both passively without fear, anger or frustration. We must understand that punishment as a means of behavior modification is not only ineffective, it will often create a more dangerous outcome. And finally we must know and recognize the difference in whether our horse's resistant behavior is being caused by fear, pain, confusion or disrespect because each one requires us to respond differently.

ON THE GROUND

Natural Horsemanship teaches us how to see the world as if we were a horse. We learn what they consider acceptable behavior for themselves and other horses. We watch them interact and play with each other. We see them bite, kick, run, rear, buck and chase each other. This is all carried out by them without any fear.

Physical contact is part of the language horses use to communicate with each other. It tells them who is stronger, faster, and braver. Who is the better horse and therefore who has earned the right to be the leader.

This is true whether it is a herd of 100 horses or a herd of 2. Once the pecking order of the herd is established and accepted,



Human fear increases horse fear

physical contact is reduced primarily to play, affection, friendship and mutual grooming. However, if the herd of 2 is you and your horse, allowing him to treat you as he would another horse can be dangerous. In order to stay safe, you must cause him to change this behavior. This must be accomplished with communication and not force.

The nature of horses is such that even a number two horse will always return at some point in the future to re-challenge the number one. If your horse could speak he might say something to you like: "Are you sure you want to be the leader?" When this happens with one of my students I'll often hear something like: "My horse is perfect but today when I was leading him out of his paddock, he stopped for no reason, looked at me and wouldn't budge".

Horses, unlike humans, will always warn each other with a gesture like pinning their ears or lifting a leg before they make physical contact. Then if their warning goes unheeded, they will make powerful physical contact. However because they are of equal size and weight, there is rarely serious injury and death is certainly never a result.

Humans are not of equal size and weight and therefore all physical contact unless safely initiated by us (i.e. we invite our horse to come in close to rub his nose) should be considered unacceptable, potentially dangerous and immediately eliminated. As the leader we must make all decisions for both ourselves and our horse in order for us both to be safe either riding or on the ground.

As a training tool and a means of communication, Groundwork establishes safe physical boundaries and gives us the opportunity to either passively allow our horse to continue his acceptable behavior (act like a horse as long as long he is not close enough to cause us injury) or initiate a change that eliminates his dangerous behavior. We learn groundwork techniques that cause his desirable behavior to be comfortable and his undesirable behavior to be uncomfortable.

When we're on the ground with our horse and he runs, kicks, bucks or rears, as long as it's not directed at us and we have established a safe physical boundary, we allow him to continue to be

Tim Hayes continued from previously page

himself; a horse. This can either be at the end of a long line or at liberty in a corral. Keeping a safe distance and realizing he is just a horse acting naturally helps us to relax and become comfortable in his world. This in turn helps to eliminate our fear, build our confidence and improve our horsemanship.

When our horse kicks, bites or rears up at us, this too is natural and appropriate equine behavior, however he is inappropriately treating us like another horse. Because we are human and not of equal size and weight, it is very dangerous. If we become afraid we will often react aggressively. We will use force instead of communication. Our horse won't understand why his partner has become aggressive and turned on him. We will lose his trust and respect. We will cause him to become fearful, even more reactive, damage our relationship and thus make the situation extremely dangerous for both. As his leader we must learn to be ASSERTIVE not AGGRESSIVE.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us how to use our superior human intelligence to be a better horse. We know that in horsemanship the horse that causes the other horse to move its feet is the better horse and therefore becomes the leader. We know that we can control horses by administering comfort and discomfort. Therefore we take the energy our horse has been using for his idea of fun (kicking, bucking, rearing) and redirect it into something that is our idea of fun (moving his hip over, backing up etc.) and will also eliminate the danger of injury. We use groundwork to cause our idea to become his idea without force.

Understanding the nature of our horse, staying calm and relaxed, demonstrating our leadership by causing our ideas to become their ideas without force or pain is the key to keeping everyone safe by working through our fears both on the ground and on their back.

ON THEIR BACK

Human fear that develops when we're on our horses back is caused by the thought of falling off or being thrown off. Part of learning to ride includes how to stay on the horse while we ask them to execute a multitude of different athletic maneuvers.

Unless you've elected to get involved in racing or rodeo, sitting on your horse and allowing him to rear, buck or run away is not advisable. Hopefully, by the time we get on their back to ride, we have already created a partnership with our horse on the ground which has established us as his leader. We have taught him that even if he feels like rearing and bucking because he is happy (and sometimes that is what happy horses do) he is not allowed to do it when we, his leader, are sitting on his back.

Unfortunately there are some riders who have not worked out their herd pecking order on the ground prior to getting on their horses back. If our horse is being disrespectful (not acknowledging us as the leader) or playful (starting to buck), we must remember the instant we feel anxious or fearful...OUR HORSE IS NOT TRYING TO HURT US, HE IS JUST BEHAVING LIKE A HORSE. This will help to eliminate our fear, stay relaxed and respond with confidence. To be our horse's leader and remain in control we can utilize the same principles when riding that have already worked successfully for us on the ground. We need to be the better horse.

We need to redirect his disrespectful or playful energy. We calmly give him a job to do without expressing anger, frustration or fear i.e. we have him turn circles to the right or disengage his hindquarters to the left. We turn his attention away from what he wants to do and back on to us. We cause him to move his feet. We reestablish our leadership and regain his respect. We continue this until we are both calm and relaxed.

As we discussed last month in Part One -"Horse Fear", horses live their entire lives on alert. They must always be ready to flee or else be eaten by a predator. The one and only reason our domestic horses "spook" is because something has triggered their genetic sense of survival. Knowing this and knowing there are no wolves or mountain lions where we are riding, allows us to remain confident, calm and relaxed. In turn we can continue to be our horse's leader, reassure him and if we like, allow him to investigate whatever he needs in order to feel safe. Human fear that is caused by horse fear, which is caused by non-existent predators, is one of the most common and most dangerous situations in horseback riding. Our horse "spooks" (senses something that could be a predator). We become afraid. Our body tightens, our legs and hands grip our horse. Our horse feels us becoming afraid which convinces him that he is correct in being afraid. He is genetically programmed to run for his life and he knows he can run faster and further without us on his back. We get thrown off and our horse runs back to the safety of the barn. It is only by understanding the true nature of our horse that we see it was not his fear but our fear and lack of leadership that was responsible for making the above situation as bad as it was.

If we expect our horse to learn how to live confidently in our world we must not only take the time to "sack" him out with clippers, horse trailers, raincoats, and bicycles, we must in turn "sack" ourselves out. We must take the time and use our superior intelligence to thoroughly understand the horse's mind and use that knowledge in conquering our horse fears.

There is nothing more important than safety. If I'm not comfortable at the canter, I'll drop to the trot. If that doesn't work, then to the walk. If I still don't feel like I'm in control, I'll ask my horse to stop. If he won't stay stopped, I'll pick my moment, get off and do some more ground work. If it stops being fun, I'll quit and start my day over tomorrow.

Fear in humans and horses come from different places. Some are real, some are imagined.

Natural Horsemanship is about knowing and understanding the difference. It is about using this understanding to create a true partnership between horse and human based on love, trust and respect. It is how we are able to turn fear into confidence.

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Contact Tim at: tim@hayesisforhorses.com or 800-959-3101