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SPOOKY HORSE

Why does your horse spook and shy routinely at objects it has seen several times? Spooking is a constant battle for many riders, so in this issue we have teamed up with Equitation Science consultant and coach Lisa Ashton to explain and demonstrate how you can delete these behaviours. We sent our own Emma Bayliss and her spooky veteran, Blaze, to investigate

to temporarily release the aids because the rider momentarily loses contact and position. Horses who frequently shy have learnt the behaviour because it was reinforced by the release of pressure and therefore more likely to be repeated. Horses that are already tense due to the conflict and confusion of overlapping aids will shy far more readily than calm, obedient horses.

Escape and avoidance behaviour

Spooning and shying are hyper-reactive behaviours that evolved to avoid predators. The rewards of spooking are highly gratifying for your horse, quickly becoming habitual. Avoiding vision of something potentially aversive, moving at speed, creating distance and removal of pressure are highly motivational, forming habits which are very rewarding!

One key component of shying is it diverts your horse's vision. For a horse, out of sight is literally, out of mind. This is because horses have very little pre-frontal cortical tissue – the part of the brain humans use to reason, reflect backwards and forwards in time and formulate abstract concepts – horses have evolved effectively by living in the 'here and now', exhibiting very efficient flight mechanisms.

Of all the domestic animals horses have the biggest amygdale (flight response modulator) giving us insight into the importance of the flight response in the horse. There is also evidence of fear responses being resistant to extinction. Your horse will judge how frightening a stimulus is by how much distance he can put between himself and the stimulus, and how fast he can get away.

Even a small increase in distance can be highly rewarding to the horse and therefore lead to habit-formation. The spooky horse will always look away first, then turn away and finally run away from an aversive object or place, which in itself will reinforce his fear.

Danish behavioural scientist, Dr Janne Winther-Christensen wanted to find out if teaching a horse not to be afraid of five

different objects would make it easier or quicker not to be afraid of a sixth object. The answer is – it doesn't. Horses don't generalise spooky objects. Every new object is viewed with the same suspicion, there could be a predator lurking behind every rock!

So why do some horses shy more than others?

Unfortunately, even well-intentioned, caring riders can create a world which at times is blurry and confusing due to inconsistencies in training or lack of knowledge. A horse living in a world that does not have clear answers can lead to confusion and conflict, manifesting in a range of behaviours in an attempt to make his world predictable and controllable again. Some horses look for active ways to escape conflict, including shying and spooking.

Riders who maintain constant rein and leg contact, ie holding the horse together between hand and leg, can result in horses battling to gain a release of pressure by learning to shy. Spooking is an attempt

Symptom or cause?

Spooking and shying put simply is when a rider has lost stimulus control over the horses legs. The environment, instead of the rider, cues a turn of the front feet and can easily become a habit. So how do you set about regaining control of your horse's legs? Some riders are told to bend the horse's head away from whatever he is scared of and send him forward past it with driving aids of the leg and whip. Others are told to hit the horse whenever he shies in an attempt to punish him for his behaviour and nearly all riders will use leg aids to send the horse forward and past the object as quickly as possible. Unfortunately all of these techniques focus on the symptoms, for some deepening the fear response.

Turning his head away is inherently rewarding. Pushing him past the scary object or place allows the horse to speed away, which strongly reinforces the fear response. These techniques do not address the cause, training your horse not to shy. Shying is about the horse running and turning away from something he is scared of, therefore it makes far more sense to decelerate him from the reins and then turn him towards the object from one rein. You will then gain control of his front legs, instead of attempting to accelerate him with leg and, or whip aids.

Re-installing the 'go' response

Start the re-training process by assessing your horses 'go' response in a neutral area. If he is heavy or delayed from squeezing both legs, you can improve his response by reinforcing your leg pressure with tap-tap-tapping until he goes and the instant he does stop tapping. This is referred to in behavioural science as negative or removal reinforcement.

The horse learns to get rid of whip tapping by stepping forwards. When your horse spooks and shies at dressage boards, or when you want to go over a jump or through water, don't punish your horse with the whip or use it randomly, instead apply consistent whip-taps as a

* About Lisa

Lisa is a qualified instructor and holds: BA (Hons), PGCE, MBA, Ass. Dip ES, BHS II and Pony Club A Test





Fast facts...

Too shy shy...

Horses have very little pre-frontal cortical tissue, (the part of the brain humans use to reason) horses have evolved effectively by living in the 'here and now', exhibiting very efficient flight mechanisms...

tool of negative reinforcement, training your horse to step closer or through the obstacle.

If your horse stops dead and backs away from the object, don't panic, just aim to deliver increasing motivational pressure so he takes one step forwards. Once your horse stands calmly facing the object, it is time to reapply the 'go' aid and ask him to take another step closer, this process is known as shaping, training your horse to take multiple steps forwards until you signal otherwise. As soon as he knows looking and turning away are not an option, and you correctly apply negative reinforcement, your horse will learn to step forwards to all manner of scary objects from a light leg aid.

Remember, if your horse backs away from something scary it is not nearly as rewarding as being able to look away, then spin and run away. In the wild a horse does not use backing up as a form of escape; he may reverse a couple of strides but will then spin and run away, which is much more effective!

The rein response

To completely diminish the flight response it is critical you also correctly install or train the turn aids, both from a direct rein and an indirect rein. So your horse's front legs can be put accurately back on to the line they were on

whenever he attempted to deviate from that line. Typically shying horses have considerably more difficulty with this than non-shying horses.

Only one response per signal

Many riders have been taught to believe that turns and steering comes from the use of leg, not rein signals, but remember

one of the golden rules of good animal training (see ISES 8 Training Principles) is that each signal must only have one response. Use your reins to decelerate the front feet, ie slow, shorten, step back and stop. If you use your legs to motivate the horse to accelerate, you can't also use the leg to get the horse to decelerate, which is what the inside front foot needs to do in a turn.

Run away!
Spooking and shying are hyper-reactive behaviours that horses evolved to avoid predators

Training the turn response

Try this simple exercise: From the halt, check you have the ability to pressure one rein (direct turn aid) and get the leg on that side to open (abduct) and step to the side lightly and obediently. You should be able to do this without getting any neck bend or forward movement.

Signs that your turns are not installed well enough to prevent shying are: getting only neck bend; heaviness or a slow response to the rein cue; the horse turns his hind quarters in response to the rein signal; the horse adducts first from a direct rein, ie starts the turn closing the opposite front leg.

If you get any one of these responses, your horse is not clear on 'turn' and you will have little ability

to reduce the shying. The behaviour will continue to be rewarded and therefore repeated.

It is also useful to train the indirect turn aid, because later it will help you to straighten the horse if he bulges on one side. Again, these indirect turns can first be practised from halt. Simply place the right rein against the neck to motivate the horse to step across or adduct the right front leg to the left, and vice versa.

Once again you should be able to cue single turn steps with a straight neck and no forward steps.

Once both direct and indirect turn are installed (the horse responds immediately to a light rein aid), you will be ready to train your horse not to shy.



Re-gaining stimulus control

Start on the outside track of the arena, attempting to walk the horse past all the things he may be scared of along each side. You need to be ultra critical of where he puts his front feet. Every time you feel the horse push off your line, replace the offending front foot with a turn aid. This will bring his front foot closer to whatever was motivating the shy. Be very particular about exactly where you want the horse to place the front feet.

Then reapply the 'go' aid with your legs and continue down the arena. Be sure to get him closer than he would like to be to any object he is scared of. After a couple of laps past each scary place the horse will no longer feel the need to shy. You can then train him to walk past all manner of objects that may cause him to shy. Whenever you are hacking for instance and your horse decides he 'doesn't do' puddles or rubbish bins, take it as an opportunity to train him to not be scared. Keep placing the offending front leg closer to the object than the horse would like as you walk a straight line past it.

The brain is not wired to the back legs

Despite widespread belief that: "Everything starts with the hind legs of the horse" and that he must be ridden "from the back to the front", the horse's brain is not wired to his back legs. Horses are acutely aware of where their front feet are because the wiring of the brain goes almost exclusively to their front legs. The hind legs are *actually* told what to do via their diagonally linked front foot, ie slow the right front and the left hind slows too.

Another clue as to why you should focus on the front legs is that horses never shy with their hind legs, it is always the front feet that cue the turn away to push his shoulders away from whatever he is scared of. So it is only the front feet you need to be concerned about.

Keep at the top of your mind that the horse is a blameless participant in the

Fast facts... Negative reinforcement

When your horse spooks and shies at dressage boards, or when you want to go over a jump or through water, don't punish your horse with the whip or use it randomly, instead apply consistent whip-taps as a tool of negative reinforcement, training your horse to step closer or through the obstacle



Re-installing the 'go' response

1) Blaze working in a relaxed manner in the school before introducing any scary object

2) Riding the outside of the arena by using the direct turn response



3) On spotting the chair, Blaze's instant reaction was to turn and run

4) Once Blaze stood calmly looking at the chair I then had to reinforce my 'go' aid followed by turning her front leg to the track



training process. Look to improve your training skills before resorting to blaming him. It doesn't matter whether you think he should be scared of an object or not, as a flight animal he has every right to prepare himself for survival.

Progress results in relaxation

A horse that lacks confidence and security will be intermittently heavy to your pressures to go, stop, turn and yield and may give you the opposing response, running backwards to the go aid. Keep in mind the clarity of your aids and remember the best riders use learning theory correctly, even if they might not realise what they are doing. They are providing mental security through clear learnt responses. If your horse is distracted and tense at the start of training, as he begins to learn how to remove pressures and go from the lightest cue at the speed and line of your choice, he will start to show you signs of relaxation. These may include snorting, licking his lips, and lowering his head. This is a sign you are making progress by becoming predictable and controllable for your horse. ●



5) Once my 'go' and turn responses improved, Blaze calmly walked past the chair

Read Emma's full story p22



Case Study Emma & Blaze



I was quite sceptical when I was asked to take part in a spooking feature with my 23 year-old mare, Blaze.

In the 11 years that I have had her she has always spooked, and due to her age I'd presumed that it was too late to make any changes.

Her spooking can be at obvious things such as banners, flowerpots and then at random things, such as a certain letter around a dressage arena when it is exactly the same as all the others! Needless to say, it can be very frustrating.

And relax...

Our final challenge was an open umbrella. This initially took Blaze completely by surprise and she spun away from it leaving me hanging out of the side door. We repeated the exercise several times until Blaze was close enough to touch the umbrella

Lisa started our lesson by assessing Blaze's 'go' response. I discovered that I had added to our problems by giving her leg aids to move forward past an object but at the same time I had constant rein contact and was 'holding' her. This resulted in Blaze battling to gain a release of pressure when presented with a scary object.

Lisa encouraged me to use the 'whip tap' response and not to let her turn away as this was considered a reward. Before we introduced any spooky objects we worked on staying close to the edge of the school, keeping Blaze focused on the aids by turning her outside leg to the edge of the arena so that if she deviated away I used the rein to place the outside front leg back on my line. Once Blaze relaxed and I knew how to deal with a spook we introduced a plastic chair to the arena.

Blaze's instant reaction was to turn and run. I concentrated on not letting

1) Blazes attempts to turn and run from the umbrella

2) Calmly facing the object

3) Confidently chasing the umbrella

4) Finally her curiosity outweighed any fear

her turn completely around and edged her forward bit by bit, rewarding her with a stroke each time she got closer to the chair. We then practised walking past it on both reins.

By using the methods Lisa had taught me, keeping Blaze as close to the chair as possible and rewarding her when she relaxed, we soon went past it without any issues.

We then used the same methods with a banner.

Normally Blaze would spot something that she didn't like from the other end of the school but as Lisa had me working close to the edges we were nearly upon the banner before she noticed it was there. This is a really useful technique for us to learn as it hopefully means we can get through a dressage test with only an odd spook rather than a whole test with Blazes eyes out on stalks!



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Our final challenge was an open umbrella. This initially took Blaze completely by surprise and she spun away from it leaving me hanging out of the side door. We repeated the exercise several times until Blaze was close enough to touch the umbrella, and using the same technique as earlier, Blaze relaxed.

Lisa then picked the umbrella up and ran backwards with it asking me to chase her, to my complete surprise

Blaze was happy to do this as her curiosity had completely outweighed her fear. The exact response we were aiming for.

The session was a massive step forward for both of us, as I had really just accepted spooking as an unchangeable part of her character. I now have a new way of thinking when I ride and have been putting everything that Lisa taught us into practise. Bring on the 2013 show season! ●



4



Does your horse get tense and spooky?

- ✓ Understand why your horse is tense and spooky.
- ✓ Reduce the effect of the environment and atmosphere on your horse's performance at shows.
- ✓ Learn how your horse can be totally relaxed and confident in his work with total focus on you in any environment

"By applying learning theory and the horse-training techniques of the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre I was able to produce a relaxed, obedient and expressive PB at the London Olympics – the rest is History!"

**Joann Formosa Paralympic Dressage 1B
2012 Gold Medalist**

"Today my horse was truly amazing, I came first with 70 percent and second and fourth in my other two novice tests with 67 percent in both. Thank you Lisa, I truly appreciate what you have done to help us achieve such relaxation and obedience in our training."

Kay Scott-Jarvis, August 2012

"You will discover a paradigm shift in your understanding of horse training like never before."

**Dr Andrew McLean, AEBC Director,
Australia**

If your horse spooks, or shies at dressage boards, flags, clapping, prize-givings, banners or anything new (or has seen a hundred times before!), you are not alone. Lisa Ashton clinics apply learning theory to teach you how to change your horse's perception (and therefore behaviour) so his world becomes more predictable and controllable in every environment. Come along to a clinic or book a lecture or demonstration for your Riding Club and learn safe, evidence-based, and ethical horse training techniques at www.equitation-science.co.uk

Lisa's mentor, Dr Andrew McLean is the world's leading equine clinical ethologist and author of the international best-seller "The Truth About Horses" and "Academic Horse Training". Andrew has been a guest presenter on two occasions at the Global Dressage Forum and presented at the BHS convention 2011.

Equitation Science:
The Future of Horse Training
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