

Horses – happy, brave athletes or stressed and lonely?

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SUZANNE ROGERS representing the Equine Behaviour and Training Association discusses how certain welfare and training methods can affect a horse's demeanour, the behaviourist's role in treating the problem, and then asks vets for help

THE science of equine behaviour and training is well understood by those who have studied animal behaviour and welfare, but it is not reaching horse owners – and sometimes – not equine vets.

Living the dream?

Horse riding is often portrayed with idyllic images, such as riding through the British countryside, or being “at one” with the horse as it performs complex dressage movements, as well as human and horse bravely tackling steep slopes and water jumps in event courses and achieving gymnastic feats when showjumping.

Increasingly, there are television programmes about training horses using new methods that, on the face of it, do not seem to be as harsh as more traditional methods. However, is equestrianism as enjoyable for the horse as it is for the rider? Is the increased understanding we now have about the way animals learn and behave resulting in kinder methods of handling?

Sadly, the answer to these questions is a firm “usually not”. Although apparently benign, the way horses and ponies are managed and trained is, all too often, the cause of significant fear and distress, resulting in sometimes severely compromised welfare.

PDSA studies the welfare of dogs, cats and rabbits in the UK. Its 2011 and 2012 reports summed up the situation in the UK as follows: “Ten million cats, dogs and rabbits across the UK are missing out on key health and welfare needs. Our pets are stressed, lonely, overweight, aggressive and misunderstood... but loved.” We believe if this report were to include horses and ponies, the summary would be very similar.

Most horse owners would be horrified to learn their horse that “weaves” is comparable to the pacing polar bears in zoos, or that the signs they take to mean their horse is relaxed are, in fact, behavioural signs of stress and anxiety.

The horse has a special place in our hearts, but the feeling may not be mutual.

Considering confinement

Often, horses are prescribed periods of box rest for various illnesses, injuries and disease. However, confinement goes against the horse’s behavioural needs and can result in frustration and stress, which, in some cases, can lead to further complications.

Behaviourists can work with vets to consider the level of confinement each individual case requires and suggest innovative ways we can try to meet the physical and behavioural needs of an animal undergoing treatment or during recovery.

In some cases, a small pen can be constructed outside the stable or, sometimes, horses can be grazed in-hand (although this might require training, which the behaviourist can help with too) and nearly always, a programme for stable enrichment is relevant, taking into consideration the restrictions for each case. Behavioural input into such cases can make the period of box rest a lot less stressful for both horse and owner.

Case study

I was once called to see a horse that kept jumping out of its stable. This was proving dangerous as, often, it would get stuck and panic. The owners were beside themselves and the vet didn’t know what to suggest, so I was called in.

The owners had assumed the horse didn’t like the stable or being shut inside, so tried to make the stable more appealing, but this approach did not work. They had been advised to shut the stable door (top and bottom) to get the horse used to being shut in, a trainer had suggested groundwork with the horse might help and the yard manager wanted to keep the horse tied up in the stable.

The owners – after trying to follow these pieces of advice unsuccessfully – were struggling to know what to try next and the horse was becoming increasingly anxious with each new approach.

At the behaviour consultation it became clear the reason for the horse's behaviour wasn't a fear or dislike of the stable as such, but separation anxiety – anxiety associated with being away from other horses. The management routine had changed and now the horse was brought in on its own a few hours before the other horses.

The tailor-made behaviour modification programme, created with the owners, involved a step-by-step training process working with the horse to get it comfortable with occasionally being away from other horses. The outcome was successful – the horse no longer jumped out of its stable to reach other horses as the cause had been addressed, rather than the behaviour being prevented.

Not all horses are as lucky because owners often take poorly informed advice. The advice to shut the horse in the stable did not address the cause of the problem and, although the behaviour of trying to escape would prove futile and it might eventually stop trying, it would be likely to form negative associations with the stable and the jumping out behaviour might escalate to refusing to enter the stable after being brought in from the field.

The lessons with the trainer who wanted to focus on groundwork perhaps increased the horse's confidence around humans to alleviate its need to be with other horses, but was ineffective in solving this particular problem. It can be seen how the approach of a qualified behaviourist is needed to determine the cause of the behaviour and how to address it.

Getting back on track

The pressure on owners to follow various “methods” of horsemanship, the ability to buy an ever-increasing variety of equine products that horses have not previously “needed” and a misunderstanding of key elements of horse behaviour often leads owners further and further away from their dream. Understanding more about why our horses do what they do can lead to an improved relationship between horse and owner, based on realistic expectations.

Two key messages about behaviour everyone should keep at the forefront of their minds are:

- Give horses the benefit of doubt – horses do not “act up” without reason and the vast majority of unwanted behaviour is rooted in fear or pain. When an owner is experiencing a problem with his or her horse, it is vital he or she seeks veterinary advice. Also, when a vet sees a horse with an issue and does not think it is caused by pain, he or she should refer the owner to a properly qualified behaviourist.
- Horses have physiological and behavioural needs to graze for approximately 16 hours a day and their digestive systems are perfectly equipped for doing so. If management restrictions do not allow for turnout with grazing for this amount of time, the requirement can probably be met in other ways – a behaviourist can help with creating a tailored management regime that balances the needs of the horse with the restrictions of limited space.

Concluding thoughts

It can be seen that behaviour is a field that needs to be taken into account for owners and vets alike. The newly launched Equine Behaviour and Training Association (www.ebta.co.uk) aims to improve the way equines are managed and trained in the UK, to protect their emotional and physical welfare. We are a group of behaviourists, trainers and horse owners committed to merging the science of behaviour with its practical application in typical “horse owner” settings.

We would love to engage with vets as a key part of our activities and welcome responses (email info@ebta.co.uk) to questions such as:

- What are the most common behavioural problems your clients encounter?
- What management issues do you think owners need more advice about?
- What makes you refer, or not refer, clients to a behaviourist?

Together, we can work towards improving the lives of the up to 1.2 million (Defra, 2010) horses, ponies and donkeys kept in the UK.

Reference

- Defra (2010). *Archive: Veterinary Surveillance: Horses*, <http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/farmanimal/diseases/vetsurveillance/species/horses.htm>



The idyllic image of horse riding, as it is often portrayed.



The science of equine behaviour and training is not always well understood by horse owners and equine vets.



The natural equine diet consists of 10 per cent forage (bushes and trees).



