



The Unhappy Pony

Developing Trust & Connection

By Heidi J. Potter

Horse handlers of every aspect have a responsibility to understand the horse and the horse's language. Often times when a horse presents a specific behavior the human either misses the subtle signs that preceded the behavior, don't understand the behavior and therefore punish it, or just dismiss it and keep doing what they are doing. These situations often lead the horse and ourselves into some unsafe situations that get worse over time.

Here's an example of one such problem: ***“My therapy pony pins her ears, turns her backside to us and threatens to kick upon entering the stall. How can we solve this unsafe behavior and make it possible for our staff to safely catch her in her stall?”***

One thing to remember is that horses always have a reason for everything they do. Many times we humans try to anthropomorphize their behavior (judge it in human terms) and say that they are just irritable, mean, don't want to work, hate us, or are just plain grumpy. One of the most helpful things we can do is to put ourselves in our horses place. What would make us want to turn around and greet our handlers? Would it be a swat on the butt, being yelled at or someone just ignoring our body language and forcing their way into our space? Our answer would certainly be none of the above. Here's a technique I used for one such case. It is a good example of how which tools one might use to help a horse redevelop trust with her humans.

I observed “Stitchy” in her stall and witnessed the butt turned to me and ears back posture that I had been told about. My goal was to ask her to show interest in me and then reward her for it. I used both positive and negative reinforcement to engage this pony. I opened the stall door and stopped my approach as soon as she let me know that she didn't appreciate me in her space. That was the place to start. I then used a very slight shake of my flag to get her to glance at me. Once she looked at me with ears forward I backed away. This gave her time to process the fact that she was rewarded when she displayed a different expression. This is an example of negative reinforcement-pressure and release. I offered a release by stopping my advance and the action of my flag once she offered me a change.

After repeating this exercise a few times, I asked a little more. I wanted her to move her hindquarters away from me a bit. I had to up the action of the flag ever so slightly to get the response I was looking for. Once she offered a “try” I offered her a treat in a bucket. She tentatively took the treat. Now she really wanted to see what I was all about. The treat was an example of positive reinforcement. She was rewarded in both cases. However, the positive reinforcement really increased her desire to work with me. A horse will be much more inspired to try and work with you if there is something good in it for them. Wouldn't you feel the same way? Would you show up for work every day for free? If you did, what would your attitude be like? Would some type of reward change your attitude?

It only took about 30 minutes to begin to change this little pony's behavior in her stall. She was taught that she could not only trust the human but also that possibly they had something good to offer her. I encourage everyone to pay close attention to what their horse is “saying” and then try to open up a dialog that makes sense to the horse. If it feels right to you then you are probably on the right track.