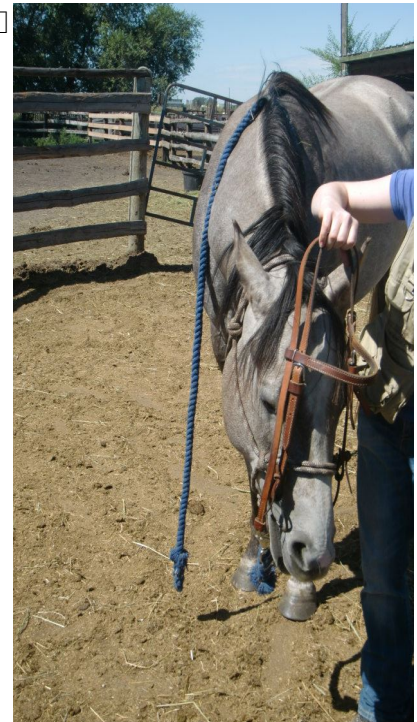


By Dr. Jamie Rothenburger

The World Organization for Animal Health defines animal welfare as *“how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in good welfare if it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, and able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear and distress.”* □



This definition provides for the basic husbandry that horse owners strive to achieve. Some horse training techniques used today result in pain, fear and distress in horses, which negatively impacts welfare.

We have all seen the frustrated competitor punish their horse after a failed pattern long after the mistake was made. Most horse people I know want the alternative, a positive relationship with their horse, no matter if they are recreational riders or Olympic competitors. An enthusiastic horse that is easy to catch and willingly performs the desired behaviours in a graceful, free manner is the aspiration.

There is very interesting research into horse behaviour and learning that supports the notion that horses are sentient beings, capable of thought, learning, and long-term memory. These developments call into question some traditional punishment-based training and instead foster interest in humane training techniques.

Just how intelligent are horses? According to one type of learning measurement, where animals learn to discriminate between cues (for example, the verbal cue red means touch the stop sign while yellow means touch the yield sign), horses were found to be just as capable as elephants, an animal species often cited as one of the most intelligent.

There is evidence to suggest that horses kept in groups that provide social contact have improved learning ability. This benefit is most likely related to decreased overall stress and enhanced welfare, although learning can also occur from observation.

The type of training method chosen has a long-term impact on how horses interact with people. The study that worked out this connection trained two groups of ponies to back up using either food rewards (positive reinforcement) or the wave of a whip (negative reinforcement). Changes in heart rate were measured. While all ponies learned to back up, the negative reinforcement group pinned their ears, tossed or turned their heads. Ponies trained with positive reinforcement had lower heart rates and no stress head movements.

The ponies were individually turned loose in the arena with a stationary person and their interaction evaluated. The positive reinforcement ponies were significantly faster to approach the person and spent more time close by. Interestingly, this was repeated five months after the initial training sessions and the same trend was found. The use of aversive training methods in ponies affects their attitudes towards people in both the short and long-term.



[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9j8k1m1m1m1](#)



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