

Effective Horse Handling

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Animals and people: we belong together! We spent a great deal of time evolving together and are meant to be partners.

Of some 4,000 mammal species alive in the past 10,000 years, the horse is one of only a dozen that has been domesticated successfully. The horse is an incredibly astute animal that thrives on Natural Horsemanship, a training process that rests on mutual communication, the sharing and understanding of an idea, and psychology. Often we think that Horsemanship or “Natural Horsemanship”, is mystical or has some sort of secret involved. The “secret” or “mysticism” behind Effective Horse Handling or Horsemanship is the ability to control the movement of the horse. It is that simple! There are two ways to earn a horse’s respect: the ability to move the feet and reward the slightest try.

Effective or Natural Horsemanship is like a handshake. It is where we feel of, feel for, and feel together. Think about when we shake hands with one another. At no time do we need to verbally communicate the different steps of when to connect, and



Figure 1 Effective Horsemanship creates confidence and a willing partner.

when to release in a hand shake. Rather, we do this by reading one another’s body language. We also want to learn and develop the ability to effectively read a horse’s body language to communicate, creating a partner rather than a beast of burden.

Avoid “muscling” a horse. A horse on the average is approximately 1200 lbs, and more in draft horses. That is a lot of pounds of opinion! No matter how strong you are or how sturdy you are built, you cannot muscle a horse. You want to build mind, and the body will automatically follow. Focus on building to responses, rather than to reactions, and acceptance rather than tolerance. Remember the horse is a flight animal, but if pushed too far will fight.

Be conversational with horses. When introducing equipment, or even yourself to a horse, introduce yourself by letting the horse smell you or what you have in your hand. I refer to this as a “handshake”. When offering my hand I do not have my hand in the form of a claw, but rather palm down so the horse can smell the top of my hand rather than the palm of my hand. Try not to be in a hurry. I understand that veterinary procedures at times must be performed quickly. But if you have the choice, slow down: it will take less time. Even when you are in a hurry, try to have a relaxed, quiet, conversation in your mind. Your hands will reflect what your mind is saying. You can move efficiently without being abrupt to the horse. Be sure to rub rather than pat a horse.

Be aware of your body language. Are you tense? If so take a deep breath, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. You will notice that when you do

this exercise, your core muscles will relax. If you are brace, the horse will be brace. Avoid too much direct eye contact and be sure to take all the pressure off and get out of their space to allow the horse to “soak” information. Pressure for a horse can be something as simple as your hand or arm still pointing in their direction, or holding the lead shank up higher with your hand than having your arm down and relaxed. You may even need to turn away from them rather than facing directly, or take a step away and stand quietly. Doing nothing is doing something: it is allowing the horse time to process some information.

Be assertive rather than aggressive. When we are assertive, we have emotional fitness, based on principles of safety and fairness for both you and the horse. When you are



Figure 2 A horse accepting rather than tolerating and responding rather than reacting.

aggressive, there is no emotional fitness, nor are there any considerations for safety and fairness. Being assertive does not mean that we are a pushover with horses. Do as little as possible, but as much as necessary to be effective. If I am in doubt, I always give the horse the benefit of the doubt first, unless my life or the horse’s life is in danger and I am left with no other option. Have your heart in your hands. “Horse’s don’t care how much you know till they know how much you care.” This saying originates from President Theodore Roosevelt who said: “People don’t care how much you know till they know how much you care.” Consider this when working with your human clients as well.

Keep human emotions out of horsemanship. Animals operate from a very simplistic, primal base of emotions. They do not have the ability to have more complex emo-



Nettie Barr - Canadian Natural Horsemanship Inc. has been developed to effectively reach the needs of equine enthusiasts. Its goals are to reach all levels of horsemen or horsewomen to develop safer, affordable, informative, step by step, user-friendly techniques that apply for all disciplines of horsemanship.

The personal approach of Nettie Barr takes into consideration the confidence and dignity of both horse and handler, creating a relaxed and positive atmosphere for learning. Setting people and horses up for success with lasting results has been the focal point and strength of her approach.

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tions as we do since they do not possess a higher cognitive brain that allows them to reason.

The horse is the fastest learner of all domestic animals. Undesirable behaviours are learned as quickly as desirable behaviours. Generally if a horse has done something three times with an understanding, they will remember this for the rest of their lives. So, remember when you are teaching or handling a horse, you are “programming”



Figure 3 A horse accepting rather than tolerating and responding rather than reacting.

the horse. Horses are a lot like computers: they don't do what we tell them to do, they do what we have programmed them to do. You can never delete a file, but you can help a horse close a file.

The horse MUST respect your personal space. Have them get into position for you rather than you getting into position for them. If a horse invades your personal



Figure 4 Introduce yourself to the horse in the form of a “handshake”, allowing the horse to smell the top of your hand.

space, have them move back out of your space rather than you taking that step back. Horses play dominance games with one another by who moves whose feet for whom first. A good example of how large your personal space should be is by drawing a circle with the horseman stick around you. You want to establish that you are the lead horse rather than the dominant horse. In a herd, there is a dominant horse. This horse is generally on his or her own. They tend to be the “bully” in the herd. There is also the lead horse. This is the horse that everyone follows to the water, or back out to the field. You can relate this to your own life. You would not wish to be called the dominant Veterinary Technician. This has quite a negative connotation to it. Rather, if I refer to you as a lead Veterinary Technician, or a leader in your workplace, it suddenly takes on a more positive meaning.

Effective Horse Handling and training is broken into two categories: desensitizing and sensitizing. When we desensitize a horse, we apply pressure; when the horse relaxes we take off the pressure. When we sensitize a horse, we apply pressure; when the horse responds we take off the pressure. Evaluate success on a scale of 0 - 10. We



Figure 5 Let the horse smell your “tools” or equipment.



Figure 6 Rub a horse rather than pat.

want the horse to score a 5, which is an understanding, before moving on to another task or step. Over time, the 5's soon become 6, 7, or even 8's, bringing the horse to a higher level of understanding, acceptance, and responses.

Horses are sensitized to either rhythmic or fingertip/leg pressure, with the intention being phase one, i.e. slowly increasing fingertip pressure. Rhythmic pressure can be applied with a rope, horseman stick/string, hand, etc. Fingertip pressure is applied with either your fingertips or can also be applied with the horseman stick or leg if under saddle. Rhythmic pressure is applied with pulsating, steady, even pressure. Slowly increase the pressure. Both rhythmic and fingertip pressure teach the horse to respond, yielding to pressure. Always begin very soft and light. Have slow hands to ask, and quick to release.

Keep it simple. The principles of horsemanship are always the same no matter the task at hand. The formula for teaching is first to reach an understanding; quality, then quantity. Training is a series of introduction, followed by bringing the horse to a state of relaxation. Take the time it takes, and reward the slightest try. 🐾

Puzzle

(Source: North American Companion Animal Formulary, 9th edition, 2010)

Match up the drug type with the drug's generic names (e.g. cetirizine - antihistamine)

Human Trade Name	Veterinary Trade Name
1. gabapentin	a. aminoglycoside antibiotic
2. tramadol	b. opioid
3. hydroxyzine	c. potassium-sparing diuretic
4. vancomycin	d. anticonvulsant
5. prednisone	e. abortifacient
6. morphine	f. antihistamine
7. spironolactone	g. positive inotropic agent
8. mifepristone	h. narcotic analgesic
9. methscopolamine bromide	i. anticholinergic
10. milrinone lactate	j. glucocorticoid

Answers: 1 (d), 2 (h), 3 (f), 4 (a), 5 (j), 6 (b), 7 (c), 8 (e), 9 (i), 10 (g)