

EQUUS EXTRA

VOLUME 33



GETTY IMAGES/IMAGINEGOLF

BROUGHT TO YOU BY:



NATURAL CALMING

- What makes horses anxious
- Techniques for reducing stress
- Calming without medication

Calming without MEDICATION



By Heather Smith Thomas

*Here are **10 ways** to reduce a horse's anxiety without resorting to sedatives or tranquilizers.*

Your horse isn't bad or aggressive. He's just ... well, he isn't the placid guy who rolls sedately with every new request and stands like a rock for the veterinarian and farrier. No, your horse is the one who jumps first and asks questions later.

"I've found that horses, for the most part, are trusting animals; they are pretty open to most things," says Jenny Johnson, VMD, of Oakhill Shockwave and Veterinary Chiropractic in Calabasas, California. "But some are defensive right off the bat, and these are not necessarily horses that have been abused. They are just naturally suspicious or cautious because they are wired a little differently, like some people."

And that can be a problem when the horse needs to stand still. A horse who frets and starts at every minor disturbance poses a danger to himself and anyone nearby. That means that sometimes it's simply necessary to administer a sedative or tranquilizer to help a horse through a veterinary or farriery procedure. But in the vast majority of instances, administering medications can also seem like bringing out the "heavy artillery" when, in fact, a lighter approach might be preferable.

Indeed, there are a variety of ways to ease a horse's anxieties without using sedatives or tranquilizers. What works best depends on the particular horse and situation, and many techniques require some planning and preparation. What's more, over the long term, the best approach boils down to simply treating your horse gently, firmly and consistently over time so that he learns

he can trust and respect your leadership when he confronts something new. Chances are you'll find that one or more of the following techniques, products or approaches can help soothe your horse's anxieties and curb his more extreme behaviors.



CHRISTINA HANDLEY

1. GROUND MANNERS REVIEW

The foundation of ground manners is a relationship of respect and trust between horse and handler. If a horse has learned to consistently pay attention to you and respond to your direction, he'll look to you for leadership in stressful situations, which will help keep him calm.

"Keeping a horse relaxed comes from training and consistent, calm handling, and your own confidence in yourself and in the horse," says Tia Nelson, DVM, a veterinarian and farrier from Helena, Montana.

If you are unsure of your horse's ground manners, have an experienced friend watch you perform basic tasks and offer pointers. You'll also find numerous books, videos and other resources, some from natural horsemanship trainers, describing how to

PAIN *is a stressor*

As with just about any behavioral issue, the first step in dealing with a persistently anxious horse is to rule out physical causes.

A horse does not need to be obviously lame to be experiencing significant pain in some part of his body, and the discomfort may cause unruliness or resistance. "If a

establish good basic manners. If you need more help, seek the services of a reputable professional trainer.

2. DESENSITIZATION TECHNIQUES

If your horse is generally well mannered but gets upset about certain specific activities, such as loading into a trailer or receiving injections, you'll want to tackle desensitization training, which means gradually exposing him to the situation that he fears, gently pushing the limits of his comfort zone. Over time, with patient repetition, the horse will become less reactive to the situation that bothers him.

"If a horse is flighty and nervous for the farrier or for

horse is in pain or experiencing discomfort in some area of his body he may be more flighty than if he was completely comfortable," says Jenny Johnson, VMD, of Oakhill Shockwave and Veterinary Chiropractic in Calabasas, California.

"Most of my career has been sports medicine for the equine athlete, and I've found that if you can help horses be more comfortable in their body they are usually better able to do their job in a more relaxed way." If your horse is frequently agitated and/or resistant, explain the situation to your veterinarian and schedule a complete examination that includes a dental checkup. Also, check your horse's saddle fit and make sure his tack isn't binding or chafing him.

veterinary procedures, one of the best ways to approach this problem is to work with the horse in advance, to prepare and desensitize him to what is going to happen," says Johnson. "If it's a young horse, the more you can expose him to a variety of circumstances, the better."

The techniques for desensitization training vary with the specific issues being addressed, but most rely on some form of advance and retreat: If a horse resents having his ears handled, for example, you might start by scratching him at the closest point he will permit contact before reacting, such as the shoulder. When he accepts that, you retreat—then next time move your hand further forward up his neck, and retreat again just before he reacts. These sessions may need to be repeated, but over time your horse ought to become more comfortable with the previously feared actions. "Once those horses become



DUSTY PERIN

ARND BRONKHORST

EQUIMAX[®]

GET THE MAX



EZE-dose™ Syringe



Apple Flavor



Gets Tapeworms Too



Visit EquimaxHorse.com for more information.

EQUIMAX[®] (ivermectin/praziquantel) Paste: FOR ORAL USE IN HORSES 4 WEEKS OF AGE AND OLDER. Not to be used in other animal species as severe adverse reactions, including fatalities in dogs, may result. Do not use in horses intended for human consumption. Swelling and itching reactions after treatment with ivermectin paste have occurred in horses carrying heavy infections of neck threadworm (*Onchocerca* sp. microfilariae), most likely due to microfilariae dying in large numbers. Not for use in humans. Ivermectin and ivermectin residues may adversely affect aquatic organisms, therefore dispose of product appropriately to avoid environmental contamination. For complete prescribing information, contact Bimeda at 1-888-524-6332, or EquimaxHorse.com. © 2020 Bimeda, Inc. All trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

acclimated to a specific procedure or event, they realize it's not so bad and they don't panic," says Johnson.

3. SOOTHING SOUNDS—OR SILENCE

"Growing up, people told me to talk all the time when working around horses, so they know where you are and you never startle them," says Johnson. "Then I worked at a big breeding farm after I finished vet school. One of the farm managers was an older Kentucky horseman, and he told me, 'Stop talking! The horse knows you are there. If you are talking all the time, the horse gets nervous.' I realized there was some truth to that."

Try some different vocalizations with your horse and read his reaction. If your horse remains edgy as you continue to talk, hum or whisper, try keeping quiet a while to see how he responds. "See what works but keep in mind that there needs to be a balance," says Johnson. "If you are talking non-stop it can be too much sensory overload for some horses."

4. LOW-STRESS ENVIRONMENT

When planning for a procedure or situation that will be stressful to your horse, choose a setting that won't add to his anxiety. "If the farrier is coming, is it in a place where the horse feels comfortable?" says Johnson. "If the horse will be in cross-ties, make sure the horse is at ease with being cross-tied and used to going to that particular place. Don't have him going somewhere new."

Avoid making obvious changes to the scene before the visit. For example, wait

until later to hang the blanket to dry within your horse's line of sight, and choose a time when there will be less movement and activity around the barn. "Also pay attention to weather conditions when working on the horse," says Johnson. If the forecast will be windy, for example, consider rescheduling for a calmer day.

5. TURNOUT AND/OR EXERCISE

A high-strung horse who spends too much of his time confined to a stall is going to have energy to burn, which of course can fuel anxious behavior. "If horses can have plenty of turnout, this is a big help," Johnson says. "If horses don't get out much, when they do they are more apt to run and buck and possibly hurt themselves."

If more turnout is not an option in your situation, then it may help to increase the amount of exercise your horse gets. "In our region in California we don't have much availability for large areas of turnout," Johnson says. "Our horses might get their exercise via hand walking or a European style walker or by being ridden. Those things are important if your horse lives in a confined space."

If your horse needs more exercise than you can provide, consider enlisting a friend or two to ride him once or twice a week or look for someone to enter a half lease agreement. Ensure the pairing is compatible—in terms of

A high-strung horse who spends too much of his time confined to a stall is going to have energy to burn, which of course can fuel anxious behavior.



experience and personality—to keep everyone safe and ultimately reduce your horse's stress.

6. MASSAGE

Massage therapy—manually rubbing or manipulating the muscles—has become popular at many racing and sport horse barns. Massage is mainly used to relax muscle spasms, improve circulation and increase range of motion, says Johnson, but “anything that makes a horse more comfortable may help him relax and relieve tension.”

Talk to your veterinarian if you're interested in pursuing massage therapy with your horse. It may not be a good idea in horses with certain injuries or conditions such as skin

tumors. You'll also want to ask for recommendations to find a qualified massage therapist in your area who has undergone appropriate training.

7. ACUPRESSURE

Another therapeutic option is acupressure, which makes use of the same target points on the body as acupuncture, but instead of piercing the skin with needles, the process involves gently pressing or rubbing the spots with the pads of the fingers. Chinese traditionalists will say that the goal of the treatment is to improve the flow of “life force” (“qi” or “chi”) along “meridians.” Westerners are more likely to ascribe the effects of acupressure to reduced muscle tension and/or the release of endorphins, hormones that block pain and make the patient relax and feel good.

When Johnson begins work on a chiropractic patient, she says, “I start at

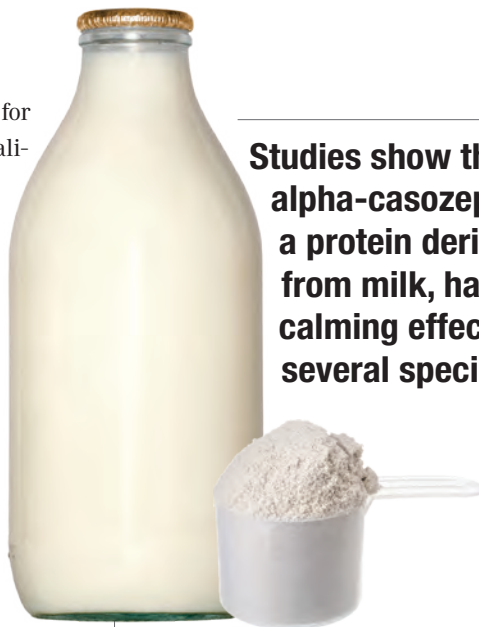
the head and TMJ [temporomandibular joint], along various lines of the face and different trigger points—and the horse simply relaxes. It makes the rest of what I need to do go much smoother.” For more information on acupressure, go to the National Board of Certification for Animal Acupressure and Massage (www.nbcaam.org).

8. CALMING SUPPLEMENTS

Browse the supplements section of any well-stocked retailer, and you'll find dozens of products intended to help calm fractious horses. None are classified as drugs, which means their manufacturers have to prove only that they are safe for your horse, not that they are effective. Nevertheless, many have been on the market for years, and customers have reported good results.

Ingredients in calming supplements vary. Many contain magnesium, which plays a role in muscle and nerve function; chromium, a mineral that helps regulate blood sugar; and thiamine (vitamin B1), which supports the nervous system. “People usually use [these products] for horses with metabolic

Studies show that alpha-casozepine, a protein derived from milk, has calming effects in several species.



SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Westerners are likely to ascribe the effects of acupressure to reduced muscle tension and/or the release of endorphins, hormones that block pain and make the patient relax and feel good.

DUSTY PERIN

ConfidenceEQ®

INSTILL CONFIDENCE.

*Naturally reduce or
prevent equine stress.*

Try it
FREE
on your horse.



Help ease a stressful situation on your horse. Request your free sample online at mybimeda.com/hr10.

Why choose ConfidenceEQ®?

ConfidenceEQ® is an equine appeasing pheromone 1% gel that has been clinically proven to reduce stress in horses facing new and challenging environments.

- **Fast & long-lasting** – Takes effect in 30 minutes, lasts 2.5 hours, and can be reapplied as needed.
- **Easy to administer** – No syringes, food, pills or other uncomfortable methods that can add stress to the horse. Applied on the nostrils.
- **Training tool** – Can be combined with behavioral and desensitization therapy.
- **Safe for competition** – Not listed on the FEI prohibited substance list.
- **Single-use packets** – Ensure accurate dose every time.

Visit ConfidenceEQ.com for more information.

ConfidenceEQ® is a registered trademark of IRSEA.

Calm yourself



Your horse is highly attuned to your state of mind. If you are nervous or afraid while handling him, he will likely become fretful. “The horse is a herd animal, continually aware of what the other animals in the herd are doing. If any animal in the herd is afraid, the others get this signal and are immediately aware of possible danger,” says Tia Nelson, DVM, a veterinarian and farrier from Helena, Montana. In contrast, a handler who is relaxed is more likely to convey that sense of trust and calm into the horse.

Nelson says she often used to see horses become anxious when the owner was worried about potentially bad news. “Over the years a lot of horses have been brought to me for shoeing, as their last resort, with a soundness problem. If I wasn’t able to fix the horse it was going to be put down,” she says. “Often the worried owner stands between me and the horse and doesn’t even realize it. I found that if I tried to walk past the owner and get to the horse, the owner became more anxious and worried and then the horse would freak out, expecting something bad was going to happen. It took me a while to figure this out, but I came to the conclusion that the person was afraid of what was going to happen next and was

subconsciously protecting the horse.”

Then Nelson realized she could calm the horse by first reducing the owner’s anxiety. The next time an owner stood between her and the horse, she says, “I stepped away and gave them a lot of space. Then the owner relaxed and you could see the change in her attitude. She started breathing better, and I began asking her questions, and telling her what might be possible. She then actually stepped away from the horse, out of my way, so I could approach. There was now a trust that we had gained, on a subconscious level. When the owner stepped out of the way, the horse relaxed, and I worked on the horse and everything went fine.”

If you suspect your own nerves may be contributing to your horse’s issues, try turning the lead rope over to an experienced or less emotionally involved friend. If your horse calms down quickly, you probably need to examine your own behaviors. Online, you’ll find hundreds of suggestions and exercises for reducing your stress and anxieties, but simply pausing to draw a few deep breaths and consciously ease tensions in your arms and shoulders is a good start when dealing with practically any situation.

syndrome, but they also help horses that are high-strung and skittish, to settle them down,” says Nelson.

You’ll also find supplements that contain herbal ingredients, such as chamomile, valerian root and raspberry leaf, all of which are traditional calming agents. “These might help some horses and not others,” says Johnson. “There are many herbal products available and some are probably helpful, but it depends on the horse and the situation, and what you are trying to accomplish.”

One of the newest products on the market contains alpha-casozepine, a protein derived from milk that is believed to calm nursing youngsters. Studies have shown that alpha-casozepine has calming effects in several species. In a 2012 study from the University of Pennsylvania, three semi-feral ponies were given an oral alpha-casozepine supplement once daily beginning five days prior to being brought into a barn for two weeks of basic training for tasks such as haltering, stabling, leading, tethering and grooming. The three ponies treated with alpha-casozepine, along with three nontreated control ponies, were then ranked on a scale from 1 to 6 for calmness, compliance and their ability to learn new skills. All three of the treated ponies performed better than the untreated controls, and six weeks after the initial training period, the treated ponies had also retained the most training.

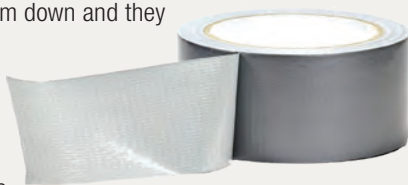
Talk to your veterinarian or an equine nutritionist before adding new products to your horse’s feed regimen. They may be able to suggest specific brands or formulations that might be more appropriate for your horse. If you take your horse to shows, you also need to be careful of ingredients that might appear on drug screenings.

Can you fix it with DUCT TAPE?

If you've spent much time on the Internet of late, you may have seen a novel solution for calming a horse: "There's a video showing someone trying to shoe a mare, and she doesn't want to be shod," says Tia Nelson, DVM, of Helena, Montana. "Then the farrier puts this piece of duct tape lengthwise down the front of her face and the mare settles down. This seems to distract a horse. I've used various things like that on occasion, and they generally work."

Still, you'll also find a number of videos and blogs where people report that applying duct tape to their horses' noses does not "settle" them. Some horses get downright antsy until the tape is removed. One possibility is that, at least in some fidgety horses, the tape provides a distraction that keeps their minds occupied while the farrier works on their feet. But a piece of tape probably won't help much to overcome the anxieties of a truly fearful horse.

Nonetheless, simple distraction can be useful, and it can be achieved in different ways. "My husband often comes with me when I shoe horses, and he's the best person I've ever been around for holding horses for the farrier. He just calms them down and they stand," says Nelson. "I've asked him how he does that, and he says he just puts his hands under their face, on the mandible, with one finger on each side of the mandible—gently stroking. As he does this, he lifts the head a little bit, maybe just a centimeter, and if the horse moves, he lifts the head up just a little more. He says this works to redirect the horse's attention, and it is amazing. This works even on horses that were freaking out like kites on the ends of strings when their owners were holding them, completely unmanageable."



"If the horse owner is competing in shows I would caution against giving the horse something that does not have a full list of ingredients. Some herbs may be on the forbidden substance list, not so much because they are a problem but because they are masking agents," Johnson says. "Just because a substance is natural or organic does not mean that it will not test or even that it is good for your horse. Both the United States Equestrian Federation and the Fédération Equestre Internationale have lists of forbidden substances on their websites, along with medication guidelines, that every owner should consult prior to administering any type of supplement to their horse."

9. PHEROMONES

Chemicals released by animals to affect the behavior of others in the environment, pheromones play many roles, signaling everything from alarm to sexual receptivity. For several years, products based on pheromones secreted by females to comfort and reassure their offspring have been available to help





123RF.COM

calm anxious dogs and cats. Recently, similar products for horses have been introduced. One product contains a synthetic version of “equine appeasing hormone,” which nursing mares produce to calm their foals. The product is a gel that is applied inside the horse’s nostrils at least 30 minutes prior to a stressful event or situation.

10. AROMATHERAPY

Since ancient times, people have used essential oils extracted from flowers, roots, bark other plant parts for aromatherapy to enhance physical and mental well-being. Nowadays, aromatherapy is also available for horses. Treatments may

be performed by aromatherapists, but several direct-to-consumer products are also on the market.

Aromatherapy with essential oils is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for any specific treatments, but studies in human medicine have suggested that lavender oil can reduce pain and ease anxieties in patients with cancer and other serious medical issues.

One 2013 study, conducted at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, measured the effects of lavender essential oil on seven horses. Each horse’s heart rate was documented before and after an air horn was set off in an adjoining stall. All of

the horses underwent the test twice: once while breathing pure humidified air, and once while exposed to an 80/20 percent mix of humidified air with aerosolized lavender essential oil. When exposed to the lavender, the horses’ heart rates were significantly lower, an indication that they were less stressed by the noise.

High-strung behavior may be encoded in your horse’s genes, but it doesn’t have to rule his life. By taking steps to calm him, distract him and teach him that he need not be fearful, you can go a long way toward keeping him safe and happy, and maybe even a joy to work with. 🐾



Winning in their blood. **POLYGLYCAN®** in their joints.

- Veterinarian trusted with over a million doses administered since 2006
- High viscosity solution of Hyaluronic Acid + Chondroitin + Glucosamine
- Post-Surgical Lavage / Synovial Fluid Replacement / Viscosupplement
- Patented formulation



For more information, visit
Polyglycan.com or call
1-888-524-6332.

Bimeda®

Veterinary Use Only. Patent Nos.: 6,979,679 / 7,485,629 / 8,455,458. CAUTION: This device is restricted to use by or on the order of a licensed veterinarian. WARNING: Do not administer to animals that are to be slaughtered for use in food. Keep out of reach of children. Polyglycan® is a registered trademark of Bimeda, Inc. All rights reserved. © 2019 Bimeda, Inc.