

ESI NEWS

*Monthly
Newsletter*

November | 2023



Training the horse with separation anxiety

By Manuela McLean



In October's newsletter, Sophie wrote about the importance of group housing, and tips to help with successful group housing. One of challenges with group housing can be problems with separation anxiety, so I wanted to address this problem, because with training, it can be resolved.

Whilst not all horses suffer from separation anxiety, some horses seem to more than others. Generally sensitive types and horses with insecurities or confusions display this anxiety, but regardless of the reason, you can be sure the horse who suffers from separation anxiety it is not completely responsive to the handler or a rider – they are more focussed on their mates.



The question we need to ask ourselves, is what does the horse with separation anxiety actually do with his legs? How does the body posture change? What can the eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth tell you?

These characteristics can change slowly or dramatically and can look quite different depending on the situation, whether that be leaving the paddock, returning to the paddock, tying up on his own or in a group. Sometimes the horse with separation anxiety is manageable and 'works out of it' but it can be quite frustrating and challenging. Clear training of the basic responses of stop and go (up and down a gait), tempo and length of stride changes can help immensely. Steering control also helps, as well as our favourite, 'Park'.



Teaching your horse to park is a really great way to get his focus and also encourage relaxation.

The following paragraphs talk about the characteristics of a horse with separation anxiety and explains what to do in your training to get your horse to lead calmly beside you in a relaxed fashion rather than displaying tension, running, barging or generally lacking control. Whilst separation anxiety is most noticed when the horse is away from his mates, if you start to look closely you will notice early signs when leading towards and away from his mates. This is the moment to start training. If you fix the leading to/from his mates, you will have a calm horse for the rest. Generally, the behaviours the horse displays will change based on when he is lead towards his mates, and when he is lead away from his mates.

HEAD CHANGES IN A HORSE WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

- **EARS**

The horse who is keen to get home or closer to company usually has very pricked ears and is looking in the distance and in this situation is more aware of the surroundings rather than the handler/rider.



Chances are you may get trodden on because they are likely to be trying to run home and may barge into you or even spin in circles around you as you try to hold them.

The one that does not want to leave home or company has either dull ears that lack movement or ears back. They tend to be the ones you drag along or will on some occasions just veer off and eat grass!

The horse should have attentive but mobile ears that acknowledge an aid and respond correctly to signals with a little flick of the ear back when doing so.

EYES

A wide-open eye with a bit of white showing is a sign of tension or a horse looking elsewhere, ready to flee. This is the 'going home fast' horse or one that finds it difficult to relax in company. This is often associated with the horse looking around, and it will show more white in the left eye if looking to the right.

In contrast, a horse with eyes that are not reactive to the external environment, may have a tendency to slow down.



Ideally, the horse should lead or be ridden expressing a soft eye, and the wrinkles around it relaxed.

NOSE

The nostrils of a horse will flare if it is puffed from exercise or if smelling his environment. This latter behaviour should be encouraged by gradually approaching any novel object or situation. The sniffing a horse does when inhaling a particular smell is long and slow and is generally associated with

a lengthening and lowering of the neck as the horse reaches forward to sniff.

Watch for the odd time when they sniff something and get a shock and jump back or sideways because it moves or is unfamiliar. Waiting a moment and reapproaching gradually is the best way to go.



The nostrils of the horse should puff gently in the rhythm of the gait it is in, be relaxed and natural in shape.

MOUTH

The horse who displays anxiety in the mouth varies from pursed lips to lips retracting and the mouth opening and there may also be a tendency to bite, bare its teeth or chew the lead or reins.

These behaviours are associated with poor leading responses in-hand and are generally an alternative behaviour to a response. For example, the horse may chew on the lead instead of going forward or it may open its mouth instead of slowing or stopping. These behaviours are also associated with changes in head position.



The lips of the horse should be closed and still. Watch for persistent licking, chewing or yawning as the horse will then need a rest to assimilate learnt behaviours.

POSTURAL CHANGES

The horse that shows separation anxiety will often have a raised head carriage associated with a raised level of alertness and adrenalin, tense body or one that is constantly on the move, crowding the handler and generally being inattentive. This is also associated with some of the above behaviours, such as wide eyes, alert ears, tense nostrils or mouth changes. He will also have a tendency to shorten the neck rather than slowing down and in so doing will often curl it around the handler.

Conversely, a horse that lags behind will tend to lengthen its neck rather than speeding up.

The posture of the head lowers and lengthens when the horse is relaxed and maintaining the same speed and line.



Left: A relaxed horse with his head lowered and lengthened

SPEED CHANGES

A horse that displays separation anxiety will move with quick legs and heavy sounding hooves and this is in association with a raised head position, and alert eyes and ears will be displayed more when heading back to his paddock, home or friends.

The same horse may also display slowed leg speed when leaving its mates, the ears may face backwards while he may turn his head and eyes to look back too.

Changes in leg speed can be through lengthening or shortening the stride or by quickening or slowing the tempo or speed of the legs as well as just stopping.

Training a horse to respond to the aids of up and down a gait, lengthen and shorten the stride and change the tempo are important in training the horse to relax and become less aware of his 'need' for company as he becomes under the stimulus control of its handler/rider.

And of course, **'Park'** is always so important. Train the horse to Park everywhere, firstly where he is most relaxed and eventually Parking when other horses leave or approach and in different situations, especially to and from the paddock.

Start to read your horses facial expressions, watch the level of alertness in his eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth as these are always related to a change in stride length or tempo and crowding you (pushing in front of you or to the side), or lagging behind.

The level of alertness or anxiety of the horse and how he moves his legs will tell you what exercise is best to train your horse to lead at your side. So rather than waiting or allowing tense behaviour to occur (which is often too late) start training an exercise to help achieve the goal of calm leading. Begin in the area where the horse is most calm, as relaxation helps learning.

Assess the responses of stop and go and use an exercise that will improve it. Gradually move further away always checking the horse's facial expressions. the moment of increased alertness is the moment to re-assess (train an exercise) to re-establish relaxation.

EXERCISES TO IMPROVE LEADING RESPONSES

'Park' is often best trained in the saddling up area. Please read the article to find out how to train Park. The outcome of Park is that the horse will stand still while being groomed, saddled and bridled and mounted. As a result, the horse will begin to relax, keep his legs still, lower his head and change to calm facial expressions.

'Step-back' helps to improve the stop response especially if the horse feels strong in-hand. Pressure applied to the nose via the headcollar or from the bit should always mean change down gait or slow down. Beginning with

changing gait makes it clearer to reward with a release of pressure. Aim for one to two steps back from a light touch of the lead or reins without a change in the position of the head and neck. A raising of the head or shortening of the neck is associated with a delayed response to backing.

Image right: Step Back



‘Walk/halt/walk’ transitions establish rhythm and relaxation. It is important to do these frequently, every 6 steps (each foreleg is a step) to improve obedience and control. The horse should stop from the lead aid, not when the handler’s feet stop. The horse should go from a lead aid (forward pressure from the lead which puts pressure on the jaw and poll and with a bridle at the poll) just before the handler walks. Keep your horse in a ‘heel’ position so that you lead at his head and can watch his expressions. When the horse anticipates stopping and is light to the aid (the ear will flick back) then the number of steps between halts can be increased and rhythm will develop. The horse will maintain its speed without you applying any nose or bit pressure. In the beginning, aim for a short distance and gradually develop self-carriage to be able to lead on a longer lead or rein.

‘Walk/halt/step-back/walk’ transitions are useful for the horse that is particularly strong, fast or barging. Again, repeat these frequently (every 4-6 steps) to achieve a good result, the horse should transition from one movement to the other seamlessly.

‘Longer walk/shorter steps’ or **‘quicker/slower steps’** can be added once rhythm has been established. It is useful in all situations. Begin with a few steps of each until the horse begins to match the handler’s feet speed and tempo.

‘Halt/trot/halt’ transitions are particularly useful for a few reasons. They improve the stop response (useful for the horse that runs) as well as the go response which is useful for the horse that lags behind and looks around when leading away from mates, the herd or home.

'Head down' is associated with relaxation and is a useful addition to the above exercises but only when the horse's legs are in a rhythm. Aim for the head to stay in the same position while leading and training all responses where the horse's poll is level with its wither.

By practising all of these exercises the horse will become more attentive to the handlers signals and in doing so will become less stressed and interested in mates or environment. He will look relaxed with soft eyes and attentive mobile ears and will become a pleasure to lead. Above all, this is very good for his wellbeing.

The aim in all leading is that the horse remains in the same frame with soft attentive eyes and ears and keeps its distance from the handler.

Good luck everyone and let us know how you go.

Manu x





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