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Dealing with a horse-shy horse

By Manuela McLean

Even though horses are social animals, some develop horse-shyness. This strange behaviour may be because they have had a fright with a horse advancing towards them in flight, or because of general insecurities due to management problems or confusion in their training.

Horse shyness is displayed when ridden as a deviation away from another horse and an associated change in speed either on the approach to the other horse or as he is ridden away.

It is an extremely annoying habit that can escalate and even effect other horses and riders making a competition warm up arena or group setting an unpleasant place to be. The scenario begins when the horse bends his neck away

therefore looking at the other horse that scares him before the rest of his body deviates or changes speed.



LEFT: The Palomino is drifting away to the right. Her left hind and right front are moving to the right while running.

It is tempting to yield in this scenario but the position of the hindlegs makes this very difficult.

What do the legs do?

From a point of view of the horse's biomechanics, the legs deviate sideways; the forelegs will turn away before the hindlegs.

Because the horse's legs work in diagonal pairs if the horse's right foreleg goes right so does the horse's left hindleg go right. This can be seen in the photo, the palomino's right foreleg and left hindleg are both going to the right as he shies away. The opposite pair of legs could also shy on the same rein or other rein where the

horse's left foreleg goes to the right and his right hind leg goes to the right too.

This pattern of movement tells the rider he needs to control the line of the forelegs first rather than yielding the hindlegs. The temptation as a rider is to yield the horse to control the hindlegs but it is nigh on impossible for the horse to do this because the other hindleg is in front of the hindleg that he wishes to yield, and the horse is unable to respond in the correct way.

Many horses will change speed on the approach or when passed. The rider may feel a stall, a slowing or shortening of the legs prior to the drift of the forelegs or a quickening and lengthening of the stride prior to the drift. In this case the rider will need to control the speed of the horse. The right hindleg and left foreleg of the palomino are taking shorter steps than the other pair as he slows on the approach before the major loss of line. Rhythm or speed may need to be addressed before the control of line.

Some horses will be more horse shy on one rein than the other and this will depend partly on his laterality, the rider's ability to control his legs may be better on one rein than the other and his ability to maintain his position. Horses very quickly learn to displace a rider's position, and this renders the rider ineffective in controlling the situation.

When a horse is in self-carriage in speed and line then horse shying rarely occurs, but a lack thereof means the rider is holding the horse by means of the reins and his legs in the aim of preventing the shy but unfortunately

these holding aids desensitize the horse to the aids and will confuse him.

How is horse shyness often dealt with?

Flexing the horse

This prevents the horse from looking at the other horse however it does not tell him to turn his forelegs toward the other horse as he can flex and turn away even if only a little. A better solution is to improve the indirect turn toward the other horse where the indirect rein (rein toward the neck) flexes the horse and turns him toward the other. This is so that in the photo above the rider would flex the horse to the right by using the right rein toward the neck and moving the horse's shoulders to the left, the horse's right hindleg should also go to the left if the horse responds correctly.

Yielding the horse

When a horse is not straight in that his shoulders and hindlegs are not on the same two tracks then leg yielding will be less effective. The horse when horse shy bends his body away from the other and crosses the hindleg nearest the other horse away from it. At this point it is very difficult for him to uncross that hindleg and yield the other, he would have to plait his hindlegs! The feeling of a horse bulging his ribcage away from the other is best treated by riding the horse more forward, a longer or quicker stride, as the bulge is associated with a loss of forward generally on the approach to the other.

An indirect turn toward the horse should place the shoulders closer to him and the corresponding hindleg should also go toward the horse but not from a leg aid but because the foreleg and diagonal hindleg should go in the same direction because of a correct indirect or direct turn aid.

Bullying the horse

The horse shy horse is likely to be adrenalized due to fear and confusion, so bullying the horse by sending him more forward with whips or spurs and using the reins all at the same time will cause further anxiety or tension. Not only is this unethical and does not resolve the incorrect response but horses cannot respond to two opposing aids.

Shoulder in past

This can be an effective technique if the horse is well educated as it deals with flexion and bend away from the other horse however it does not deal so well with the problem of the shoulders turning away. It is for the more advanced horse and rider.

I've just had a pony in for this problem and when assessing his basic responses under saddle found that he had a delayed response to the forward aid and poor turns in that he would bend his neck rather than turn. I needed to go up a gait every time he slowed down and was either pushing on my leg or making me use my seat more while travelling within the gait. Improving the go and turn responses made training him in a horse shy situation much easier.

This pony would decelerate on the approach, then turn away and would also decelerate after passing the other horse, interestingly he also would not leave a group of horses immediately. For whatever reason he would also try to bolt away at times, so some work on his brakes was also necessary.

Once I had assessed this pattern of behaviours, I could then work on improving his responses amongst other horses and the horse shyness disappeared but of course it's a work in progress and consistent work will need to be done to maintain his new behaviour.

Slow and steady wins the race, some strategies

Always start slowly in a safe environment and check your responses of stop, go and turn before tackling the problem of horse shyness. Losses of speed and line become predictable and occur in the same place, so it pays to become aware of what the horse shy horse does, where or when.

Going past a horse that is standing still

Have the horse shy horse in walk and the other standing still. You will see problems here whether approaching the other horse head on or from behind and in both directions, passing on the right side or the left side. Depending on the severity of the behaviour it is best to start by walking past 5-10 meters away before going closer. This way losses of speed and line are easier to control, because they are less extreme.

You may find the horse shy horse loses line first (he is likely to turn away) and speed (he is likely to slow down approaching and maybe departing) second or vice versa. Dealing with a loss of line is controlled with a turn aid toward the horse standing still while a loss of speed is controlled with an acceleration aid of either a longer stride or an upward transition depending on the amount of leg necessary to produce the response. Remember to use one aid at a time and that the turn aid does not involve the lower leg but is primarily with the reins and thighs, the leg aid can be applied after the turn.

Aim for 5 repetitions going past on the left rein head-to-head before doing the right rein in the same way and then change directions and pass the horse standing still from behind. These exercises can also be done leading if preferred or the behaviour is unmanageable when ridden. Aim to keep the horse in walk and correct any flight response of major shies as quickly as possible with a downward transition, the speed and distance the horse covers during a shy is rewarding if allowed.

Positive reinforcement, scratching or treating is extremely useful in these situations as well as spending time standing for the horse to assimilate the new responses. If the anxiety is too high your horse will not learn, and you need to go slower and further away.

When this is established, you could ride between two horses or ride between the fence and the horse and once the walk is established then the horse shy horse can trot and canter past the horse standing still.

Standing and having a horse walk past

This is where the response of parking is essential and extremely beneficial. The aim is that the horse shy horse will park and maintain immobility regardless of the movement of the other. Giving a wide berth when passing is important to avoid any kicking from either horse.

Aim that the moving horse can also pass in trot and canter.

Passing while moving

Ride a circle on the right rein where the horse shy horse is on the inside and the other horse is in the opposite direction always beginning in walk first and establishing speed and line in self-carriage.

Then change directions so that your horse is on the left rein and his right eye is now closer to the other horse. Horses tend to be more wary from their right eye than their left and are likely to shy more when seeing the other horse from the right eye, however this is not always the case so ride on the rein you have most control.

When you can ride on the inside then swap to the outside and be able to ride past with the arena fence on the horse shy horse on the outside.

The speed can then be changed so that one horse is trotting and the other walking until both horses will pass in trot and eventually in canter in both directions and on both sides of each other.

Controlling speed and line

If the horse pushes on your calves (one or the other in general the one furthest from the other horse) then either go up a gait or longer in the stride and use the downward transition to control the line. Since the reins are used for a downward transition then they can be used to turn toward the other horse in the transition.

A loss of line is felt through the seat bones; they become uneven and 'unplugged', and a rider will feel their thigh being pushed away during the turn away. An indirect turn toward the other horse puts the shoulders back on the desired line and has the effect of flexing the horse away as well.

Keep the anxiety levels low

Anxiety levels can escalate if the horse shy horse is too fast at shying away so gradual desensitisation is a must. Undesirable behaviour such as leaping, bucking or pigrooting should be stopped as soon as possible with a downward transition. Rearing is a more difficult problem as it is associated with a slowing and turn away, for safety it is best to deal with this on the ground.

When riding at a clinic or in a competition arena choose an area that is a little less busy and go through the same exercises. One horse at a time is easier to deal with than many horses.


Final thoughts

Horse shyness results from problems with the stop aid which includes slowing and shortening, with the go aid including quickening and lengthening and the turn aid. If any response is either delayed or heavy or there are changes in the length or height of the neck or need constant maintenance, then attention needs to be paid to improve these responses. Paying careful attention to these responses and the clarity of the aids where each aid is different and therefore discernible is fundamental to achieving self-carriage. When a horse stays at the speed you require and on the desired line without the need of constant aids then self-carriage can be achieved.

When you know you have a problem, then make sure to practise the responses that are required so that your horse does not displace your position. Being stable through your seat, keeping the seat bones, thighs, lower legs even and elbows by your side then your horse is less likely to benefit from the loss of security and as a rider you will feel those tiny shifts of position leading to a loss of line or speed.

Happy riding!

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