



# ESI NEWS

*Monthly  
Newsletter*

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## **'Help, my horse spooks!'**

*by Manuela McLean*

**At ESI, we love to hear from you, and our 'Ask ESI' segment always delivers interesting questions and issues. We do our best to help, and this month we heard from a lovely lady in Canada.**

*'There is a large sliding barn door at the end of the arena for the tractor to come in and harrow the arena. My horse 17 now, is spooking at the crack in the door more often now and more often when I ride him. He is an 18 hand warmblood. Some spooks are big and some smaller. When I come into the arena I walk him to the door and let him look out the crack, walk to it from both directions and then mount him. I'd love some advice on what else I can do to stop him spooking'*

***It is great to hear from you and I hope I can help you see through your problem.***

I think it is a good idea to lead him up to the door and as you lead up to it, watch what he does. This the scenario I expect;



He will raise his head as if to say 'there is that scary crack'. This is when you need to stop and stand. He will then look to the left and then right but must not turn away with his front legs. If he does, stay in that position and put his front legs back where you want them with a turn or forward aid and wait until he looks again both ways without moving sideways or backwards.

**It can take around 13 seconds for fear to transition into investigative behaviour.**

He will then extend his neck forward to sniff towards it and is likely to want to go toward the door. Try to ask him to walk as he wants to but then stop after 1-3 steps before he goes to stop himself, and again wait for him to do the same scenario. Anytime he stretches his neck forward praise him and scratch him at the wither lots so



that he lowers his heart rate. This can take 20 or so seconds or maybe more of scratching, so take your time and allow his arousal to lower.

When he is near the door, use your positive reinforcement of scratching or give him a treat (counter conditioning) to make the experience near the door a positive one. If he panics again and tries to flee, just ensure he remains facing the door (don't let him turn away) and follow the process again. Slow and steady.



You will then need to approach the door from the side (not too close that he runs away and manages to shy) and again stop before he begins to turn his forelegs away from the door side. This is again where he needs to “park” and then be allowed to look but not move sideways. Again wait until he investigates and lots of

praise and food when he is nearby and standing still. If necessary to achieve success, you may need to start as far back as 10-15m or so, achieving straightness on your line, before progressing closer.

Do both directions, I'm sure you know which direction is worse by now so choose the easiest way first. This is likely to be the right rein as horses are generally more wary out of their right eye so place him with his left eye on the door side. He is more likely to shy to the left on the left rein with either the right or left foreleg quickly going left. You need to be able to prevent this from happening by stopping and in this case maybe stepping back and then position his legs back on your line.

Imagine a line in front of his foreleg nearest the door, and work very slowly to maintain the footfalls on that line. The faster you go, the harder it is in initial training, so a very slow walk is all that is needed. Even one step at a time.

As he gets near the crack he will try to run forward and to the side. The common scenario for a shy is to: Look, then turn away, and then run away, so it is best to stop at the 'look' stage to prevent the turn away and run away. You will then need to do a turn toward the crack, from the halt is fine and just 2 steps is ok as long as he puts the leg nearest the

crack there first. A turn from the halt is a bit like a turn pirouette & is a useful thing to train. Once he has turned, ask him to walk forward a step or two then halt to prevent the run away. You can then either walk on the new line or choose to turn away asking him to stop before he begins to run.

This is all about leg control of speed and line so I think it would be a good idea to pre-train a very slow walk for better control. I wrote an article last year with some exercises for this, you can find it here. **[‘click here’](#)**

These exercises are perfect for the horse that is scared. At the time the horse I was working with was scared of the goats next door and now he barely looks at them!

Under-saddle will be the same scenario. He will look and stall, then turn away and then run away - this sequence can happen quite quickly and we miss it. So, if he gets to the run away stage immediately stop his legs from running with a halt then turn a little toward the door and ask for a forward aid to approach the door and halt and scratch when he does. Ideally, you are working from the 'look ' stage, the same as in-hand.

Careful you are not using your lower leg to turn. The turn should come from the reins to avoid

clashing of signals and confusion. Practise turning your belly button to the direction. You can use your right thigh toward the saddle to go left, but your reins make the turn happen, and then accelerate from your lower leg. If your reins don't work and he just bends his neck instead of turning, use your outside rein (indirect turn) to straighten the neck and move the shoulders. A tap on the outside shoulder can help bring them over. Ride squares and triangles to improve the turn from the indirect outside rein, it will then be easier for you to turn him out with the same aid.

Train turning on and off the wall (wiggly line), slowing the gait going away from the wall and quickening the gait going toward the wall. Particularly towards the wall, ensure that turn is without neck bend (outside rein turn - rein toward the neck) because at the door he will be saying "I can't turn and I slow down near the scary crack!".

Do not think of yielding toward the wall as he won't be able to, since his outside hindleg is going in and he therefore cannot physically put his inside hindleg out. This is a very common thing to be told to do, but you will find you are pushing and shoving and not much is happening, and you are actually detraining your go response. Shying is a problem with the shoulders, so the remedy is turn, not yield.



*Claire Sandercock*, one of our ESI Diploma graduates, lives not too far from Calgary if you would like a hand, her details are here: **<https://esi-education.com/espractitionersint/#canada>**

Please feel free to contact me re any queries re your problem and what I have said, and I would love to know how you go.

Cheers,

***Manuela***

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Lengthening the stride, especially at walk in the natural outline, is the most profound and effective solution for eradicating tension. When the horse is tense, lengthen his stride until you achieve a large over-track and the horse lowers his head, maintains it low and shows longitudinal flexion.

Modern Horse Training: Equitation Science  
Principles & Practice, Volume 2  
Andrew McLean

