

Horse Body Language

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Have you ever wondered how to tell what your horse was thinking? All horses communicate with vocal and body language. They use vocal language for distant communication and for emphasis while using body language in close communication. Mares will nicker comforting sounds to their foals while nuzzling the foal's withers. A new horse in a group may squeal when he strikes with a front leg stating that he is not submissive to the horse with whom he is blowing nostrils. Stallions use a mating call with very expressive body language that tells the mare of his intent.

You will find in established groups of horses that they use very little vocal communication. Yet, they have an order of dominance, with one horse as leader, on down to the most submissive and bottom of the pecking order. Horses use body language for the majority of their close communication. Horses "speak" by pinning their ears to tell another to move away; a swish of a tail tells another to keep its distance, or a gentle scratch on the withers of another horse tells that horse, "I have an itch on my withers, please scratch me there".

Horses communicate what they are thinking and how they feel toward us through their body language. It is our job to learn what they are saying. Learning your horse's body language will help you understand your horse better and enable you to train him more effectively, knowing when he is understanding what you are teaching him.

All horses have a basic body language with each horse using his in a little different way. This is like having a southern or northern accent in the English language.

When reading your horse's body language, you will also have to consider the circumstances. For example, a high and fast tail swish could be a horse trying to get rid of a biting fly on his loin or strongly telling another horse to keep his distance. The tail swish tells you he is very irritated. It is up to us to learn why.

The most expressive parts of a horse's body language are his lips and mouth, eyes, ears, nostrils, chin, and tail. The position of his head and neck along with what he does with his legs will tell you more.

A key concept to keep in mind as you read your horse's body language is his basic instincts of flight, fight, freeze, and faint. A horse's first choice is flight--to flee from perceived danger. If the horse feels he can not flee, he will fight. If he feels fighting is not working, he will freeze, becoming motionless, and no amount of spanking or bribes will make him move. After freezing, he will either fight again harder or faint, where he collapses on the ground, if the perceived danger is still present.

The flight instinct is engaged when your horse has his head above his withers. His eyes are wide open. His mouth and lips are tight. His ears are erect. His whole body will be tight especially his neck.

The fight instinct will cause the horse to use his teeth, legs, hoofs, and body to cause the perceived danger to go away. You may notice that he will pin his ears back along his neck. The flatter he pins them, the more threatened he feels. His mouth will be tight. His eyes may lose the wide-open, scared look and take on a more determined expression. Fight instinct in a mild form is when a horse is tied and unable to flee, he kicks at the brush that is irritating him, where he doesn't wish to be brushed.

When a horse freezes he becomes very still with a tight mouth and chin. His eyes will have a sleepy, half-closed look to them. He will not move his feet. When he decides to move, he may explode, fighting again -- only harder. If not restrained in any way and the perceived danger is removed, the horse may relax and move again without a fuss.

After a horse freezes he may faint. There are two conditions I know of that will cause a horse to faint. One example is where he is totally confused and after freezing gives up and faints. He may throw himself on the ground or just collapse. On the ground he will blink and breathe but will not get up or move. Removing all restraints and allowing him to get up on his own can help stop him from getting up in a panic state and exploding.

Another time a horse may faint is when the girth is tightened too tight. He cannot flee the discomfort because he is tied or held. He knows not to fight; he freezes but the discomfort is still there, so he faints. The horse will slowly buckle his knees

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and collapse to the ground. If you loosen up the girth, he will stand right up and be fine. If you do not, he may get up off the ground bucking to rid himself of the girth that is causing discomfort or he may feel it is restricting his breathing.

Horses are all different in how fast they go through each step. Some will go to freeze very easily, while others never seem to get to the fight instinct and keep trying to flee. By being aware of the stages, you can tell if your horse is understanding, confused or feels threatened by what you are doing with him. You want to work with your horse in his thinking state before he goes into the instinct of flight. When you first start working with a horse, you have to work with the horse's instincts because he knows nothing else. For example, one horse may want to run as fast as he can when first learning to lunge. While another horse may feel he cannot flee the whip because you have a lunge line on him and will choose instead to kick at the signals given by the whip. Both will learn how to lunge, but the methods of training should be different. Reassure the first horse that it is okay to travel slowly on the lunge line, and show the second horse that he can flee the whip by moving forward on the lunge line. Your body's positioning will aid a great deal in communicating with the horse. Once this communication is established, the horse will no longer be in his instinctive state and will be in a thinking state of mind.

Communication is the key to training your horse to think instead of react instinctively.

A horse's body expressions will tell you if he is secure and content or fearful. He will look and act very different in each state of mind. Content horses have a soft look in their eyes, with no wrinkles above their eyes, and their ears are loose and floppy, hanging toward the side. How far they hang depends on how the horse's ears are set on his head. His lips are loose, and his chin may be hanging down away from his lower teeth and top lip.

Concerned horses will have a tight chin and mouth, and one or both ears are turned toward the object of concern. His eyes will look normal with a few worry wrinkles above them. His neck may be slightly tense.

Mild fear in a horse is shown by a tense neck, head raised, chin and mouth tight. His eyes are a little wider than normal with worry wrinkles above them. His ears will be more erect than normal and pricked toward the fearful object. His attention can be distracted from the object. He will chew if you put your fingers in the corner of his mouth or offer him something to eat.

A very frightened horse will have his flight instinct fully engaged. He will have his head above his withers, eyes very wide, and ears pricked toward the object, even if you turn his head away. His neck will be very tense, and he will hold his chin and mouth very tight. He will not be able to focus on you and your signals. He will not chew if you put your fingers in the corner of his mouth. He may take food in his mouth but will not chew it.

Your horse may show all or only part of the body language signals described. Each horse is different; some show more expressive body language than others.

A key body language to watch for when working with a horse is when he chews or licks his lips. When a horse is upset in any way he will tighten his mouth. When he does chew he has accepted the training you are doing with him. When he will not chew, he is not ready to learn the next step in his training.

Under saddle, watch for times when the horse will chew. If he is chewing hard and fast on the bit, it tells you that he is unsure of what you are doing with him and is mildly upset. The horse will suck on the bit or chew slowly when he is accepting what you are doing with him. If he has been tense he will chew slowly and/or lick his lips once he relaxes and understands.

Watch a horse's eyes, they are one of the first indicators of what he is thinking. If he has worry wrinkles above them, he is concerned. Also, note if your horse looks at you with one or both eyes when handling him from the ground. A horse will look at you with both eyes when he is paying attention and has confidence in you. If he looks at you with only one eye, he is looking with the other for an escape route and is unsure. When riding your horse, he will look at you when you turn his head to circle if he trusts and is looking for directions. If he is unsure, he will turn his eye away as much as he can when you turn his head so he does not have to look at you. Many trusting horses will turn their heads so they can see the rider out of one eye, when they are waiting for their rider's next instruction. The horse is usually standing or walking at the time. A horse cannot see the rider's upper body well with his head straight ahead unless it is held very high. Horses will also blink quickly when they are thinking about something recently learned. When they are blinking--they are thinking.

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The next section is about where and what it means when a horse turns his ears. In this body language, the horse's ears are erect but the open area is facing to where I say he has his ears turned.

A horse's attention is focused on where his ears are turned. Pricked forward is looking straight ahead with his attention focused there. Some very tense horses have their ears pricked forward most of the time. This is because they are on the edge of the flight reflex and are looking for an escape route. With one ear turned toward the rider and the other pointing ahead tells you he is looking ahead and is listening to the rider's or handler's signals. If he has both ears turned back, this tells the rider he is totally focused on his signals. If he keeps his ears always turned back that tells you he is worried about the rider or something on his back. When riding a green horse, you know he has accepted the rider on his back when he can move his ears and attention away, between the signals given by the rider. When he can move his attention away from the rider, tells us that he is not as worried and has developed some trust that the rider will not harm him. His ears should come back when he is given a signal, thus telling the rider that the green horse is paying attention and acknowledges the signal given. When riding with contact and the horse's ears become loose and floppy, not looking in any direction, this tells the rider he is confident and in total concentration of the rider's signals.

Signals given on a particular side of the horse will cause that ear to turn back. A horse can not learn something new unless he is paying attention. By watching his ears you can tell if you have his attention. Some horses respond to signals without turning an ear back which means they are not thinking about what they are being asked to do. They are responding on an instinctive level, not a thinking level.

A horse pinning his ears is a very different body language than just swiveling them where his attention goes. A horse will first make his ears narrower, and more erect. Then he will lay them back along his neck. They may be laid back, just above the surface of the neck or down to so flat against the neck, the ears almost disappear.

When a horse pins his ears, this means he wants something to go away. In the barn he may be telling the horses stalled around him to stay away from his food. The flatter his ears are on his neck, the stronger the language he is using. When riding and another horse comes by, your horse may pin his ears for the same reason telling the other horse to stay away. This is not good behavior and the horse should be retrained. If a horse is allowed to pin his ears at another horse, he may follow up with a bite or a kick, and that is unsafe. Ear pinning is a warning that is often backed up if the other horse does not respond by moving away. By understanding that your horse feels threatened and feels the need to pin his ears to keep the other horses away, can give you a direction to retrain that behavior out.

By stopping the ear pinning and understanding why, will make your horse both safer and happier. If you notice your horse's ear is hanging at an odd angle, it usually means that something is pinching him on that side of his head.

By paying attention to what movements your horse's body makes, you will learn more about him, and you may find he cooperates more with you. Any body language, that your horse, shows that is a danger to you should be noted and discouraged. Horses have reasons for what they do; they want physical and mental comfort. Horses are usually dangerous only when confused and/or frightened. Look for the body language signals your horse gives BEFORE the dangerous behavior occurs. Change his mind at the first sign of that behavior, and then figure out what your horse was trying to tell you. Go to your barn and be a detective. Figure out if your horse is trying to tell you something is wrong or if he is happy.

One example of this is one of my riding students asked me about a behavior her horse at home was doing. She said that when her horse felt weight in the stirrup as she mounted, the mare took off running. After asking several questions, I received this information. They had to tie the mare very short to saddle her or she would reach around to bite them. The horse would pin her ears when they brought the saddle near her. If tied, the horse would stand when mounted, but would pin her ears the whole time.

Once mounted, she would ride forward quickly but under control. If you pressed your fingers around her withers, she would toss her head and pin her ears. When not around tack, this mare was pleasant to be around. This information led me to believe that the saddle may be too narrow for her withers, and her withers were sore. A horse can lessen the pinching pressure of a saddle by moving. I suggested changing the saddle to one with a wider tree. The next week my student said that she had

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changed the saddle and her horse was much better and would stand when mounted off a bale of hay. (Using a mounting block to mount when possible will help your saddle and horse last longer by lessening the side way pull.) Her horse would still try to walk off if someone heavier tried to mount from the ground. Also her horse quit trying to bite her when saddled. I suggested that she try an orthopedic pad, because the mare's withers may still have been sore. The next week my student said that her horse was no longer a problem to saddle or mount. I am sure her horse was happier, and I know the owner was.