



HORSE TRAINING: FAMILIARIZATION WITH SCARING OBJECTS

HORSE CONDITIONING

Description:

Operating conditioning: this includes all the responses which are actively made, independently of stronger or weaker stimuli from the environment.

Reinforcing stimulus

The consequences of the behaviour can increase or decrease the probability of a certain behaviour coming up reinforcement. Behavioural reinforcement can be divided in positive and negative. Positive reinforcement is when an appreciated consequence is obtained. Negative reinforcement induces consequences like the exclusion of pleasant stimuli.

Negative reinforcement is not a punishment. Punishment is when a behaviour produces an unpleasant event and the loss of a pleasant one. Reinforcement and punishment are not the same thing.



Equipment:

- Well fitting halter
- A rope, not too short so in case the horse should pull the trainer will not hurt his hands
- Objects (Balls, hoops, reins, tissue etc.)

Verbal commands and cues

Voice and body language should always be calm and controlled

Horses feel your stress and anger and get even more nervous. It is therefore important that you stay relaxed and keep your movements relaxed and controlled. Speak quietly but authoritatively. Don't shout or raise your voice.



General conditions:

A helper (if not available, be sure to create a safe situation for both horse and trainer)

Choose an ideal location

If the horse is very lively and scared by sounds or objects and situations, it would be better to start the training inside so as to avoid too many distracting stimuli. As soon as the horse improves you can start to work outside in a more «real» situation.

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Position beside the horse

Horses are more easily frightened by an approach from behind or in front. The best position is on the side, not too far from the horse, near the head so he can see you. Start from at least 1,5 mt.

Show the object

Safety consideration

- **HORSE:** space for action, in case you are by yourself the horse needs space to react to stimuli, safe surrounding in general, safety knot or other safe solution
- **TRAINER** and **HELPER:** they have to be well prepared, space for action and to escape in difficult situations, clothing and gloves,



Training Programme

The aim of this training is to gradually increase the level of «stress» of the horse and to go onto the following phase only when the horse is comfortable with the level achieved. Start by just showing the object that scares the horse, without moving it or anything. At first keep the level of stress low by keeping the object under the level of the horse's head.

Reading of the body language of the horse

At this point the horse could pull his head up in alarm and try to escape.

The age of the horse is important: a young horse is likely to learn quicker than an old horse. But at the same time a young horse could react more violently.

Leave some minutes to the horse to calm down

Continue to show the object to the horse, talk to him calmly and assure him until he lowers his head, breathes deeply and starts chewing. These are signs that the horse has calmed down and maybe recognises that the object is not a danger. Always reward the horse for his behaviour.

Slight increase of the stress level

Continue by increasing the stress level of the situation slightly by moving the object delicately or by producing some noise. Observe the horse, if he goes back to the alarm situation, and reward him for his behaviour.

If the horse does not get too nervous in presence of the object, try to move the object towards the horse so he can smell it.

End the session in a positive way

This could be enough for the first approach, especially if the horse needed more time to calm down. Conclude the session immediately after a positive behaviour, that is to say when he has calmed down. Remove the object that has caused the nervousness and reward the horse verbally and with something to eat. When you reward verbally use a calm and positive tone of voice. Pat or massage the horse instead of «slapping» him.

Repeat this training once or twice a day

A maximum of two short training sessions per day are recommended. The final phase usually corresponds with placing the object on the horse's body, starting from the hind quarters, and increasing the stress level from one session to the other proceeding with the legs, feet, neck and head.

Reward the horse every time he calms down.

Reward the horse every time he stays calm or is calmer than usual in presence of the object that scares him.





Evidence : theoretical foundations and bibliography

- Studies on animal learning and conditioning (Skinner and Thorndike and followers)