

Horse Sense



Horse sense is the ability to think like a horse and understand the horse's language. It is the ability to understand a horse's thoughts, feelings and intentions by reading his body language. This is not only the ability to read the horse's ears, but also what he is saying with his neck, tail and legs too.

Horses have an intense way of communicating with each other. They have a full language using their entire body to speak to one another. It's up to us to learn this language by watching our horses.

Facial expressions are the most common means to tell what a horse is thinking. If the horse's ears are pinned back against its neck that means it's angry and may bite or kick you! If the horse's ears are forward, it means that he's paying attention to something in front of him. If the horse's eyes are wide, that means it's fearful. There are exceptions to these rules. I have an appaloosa pony that always has wide eyes due to a sclera (white ring) around her eyes. So you must always stay in tune to the horse you are with. Horses are individuals too.

Horses are masters of silent communication. Horses are constantly communicating with their body language. We just need to pay attention and we can have a good relationship with our horses. Horses have even learned to read our body language. The moment you step out of the car, your horse is reading your body language. They know within one look what kind of mood you are in. They will reflect and enhance that mood too. If you are in a pleasant and confident mood, then you are bound to have a good ride.

What is the horse thinking when he sees that you're sad? They are not thinking, "Oh she's sad, I'll be good for her today." They are thinking, "Oh, she's in a weak mood, today I may try to eat grass instead of lead properly." We must always be aware of what we are saying to our horses through our body language. We must always try to look like a strong, competent leader to the horse. If you are having a bad day and you don't feel that you can be that leader, then it's probably not a good day to ride, instead use that day to groom or clean tack.

There is a natural hierarchy within a herd of horses. A group of horses turned out in a pasture for the first time will usually fight with one another to establish their dominance. There is a lot of noise and display but usually no one gets seriously hurt. This fighting is a form of communication and it is the natural way for horses to establish a leader. The leader is clearly the one who will make the decisions for the herd. The leader is the wisest, strongest and most competent horse of the herd. A herd will not follow a leader who shows weakness and indecision.

The hierarchy doesn't end with just a leader. A herd of horses will have a 2nd in command, and then a 3rd in command, and going down from there to the lowest horse in the herd. The hierarchy is always being tested and changed accordingly. No horse wants to be the lowest horse because they get picked on by the entire herd. How would you like to be managed by a group of people? The #2 horse is always testing to make sure that the #1 horse is still capable of leading. The #3 horse is always testing the #2 horse and you can bet your horse is testing your leadership every day!

When communicating with each other they may bite and kick one another. Horses who have spent any time around humans understand that it's not desirable to communicate with us in this way. When you factor in a human, a predator, the dynamics change. The herd now consists of two; the human and the horse. We assume the role of the leader without ever earning it in the horse's eyes. The herd dynamics stay the same; however, it is the human is always tested by the horse. The horse naturally wants to be the leader. In a herd of two, you either lead or you follow.

Some of the small things your horse will do to test your leadership.

- Rubs his head on you
- Putting his head higher than yours
- Pulls you around when leading
- Crowds your space
- Steps on your toes
- Refuses to be caught

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If you allow this behavior, eventually your horse will be difficult to handle and riding will no longer be a pleasure.

Natural Horsemanship uses this ability to read the horse's body language and influence the horse by using our body language and the horse's natural instinct to want to communicate with us. We need to think like a horse in order to get the horse to do what we want.

Horses are prey type animals. In the wild they are food for predators like Mountain Lions and Bears. Only the fastest, spookiest horses survive. Our domestic horses still have that instinct to keep away from predators. They still look for the boogie man in the bushes. That is why your horse may be spookier on a windy day, those scary bushes are moving like something is really in there. It can be very scary to ride a spook. Your horse will spook less if he sees you as a calm, confident herd leader. So try not to lose your head if your horse jumps to the side or tucks his butt and scoots forward. If you freeze up due to fear, you are not being a herd leader. Get active and put that horse to work. Do circles until you can get your horse under control.

The horse automatically respects you because you are a predator. A herd of horses will part for the smallest child just because we are predators and we can, if we wanted to, eat that horse. Isn't it amazing that a horse would be willing to partner up with us, the most successful predator on the planet?

We have to understand our predator behavior in order to better communicate with our equine friends. Here are some differences in predators and prey, or humans and horses.

Humans love to make eye contact. Horses only look directly at another horse when establishing mental dominance and leadership. If we are making eye contact with the horse we are putting mental stress on the horse. Just know you have your horse's attention, he does not have to stare at you. The only time I have ever had a horse stare at me is right before he charges me!

Humans growl when they are frustrated. "GRRR I just can't do that!!!!!" Horses are mostly quiet animals and only whinny to get someone's attention. They also snort. A snort can be a sneeze or it can be a sign of nervousness or excitement. If the snort is accompanied with perked ears and a raised tail, you're about to go for a ride if you don't put that horse to work!

Humans pat. Horses rub.

Humans grab and hold; we love to hug. Horses are claustrophobic! The more you hold onto your horse, the more he wants to get away. We can train this response out of a horse and older horses understand our crazy behavior but the young ones do not.

Once we understand our differences, we can then begin to change our behavior to establish trust. We begin to understand what the horse is telling us. By developing our horse sense, we create a better and safer relationship with our equine friends.



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Approaching a stalled horse

When you get to the barn, don't be in a rush. The horse should always be facing you in the stall. Never enter a stall with a horse inside whose head is in the corner and rear is toward you. **DANGER! DANGER!** You can't put a halter on the rear of a horse. A horse whose rear is facing you has its weapons pointed at you.

A normally happy horse with its head in the corner may be trying to tell you something.

1st Make sure he's not asleep. Lots of horses sleep like this. You are more likely to be kicked approaching a horse who's sleeping. Call to the horse to get his attention. The horse should perk his ears, look at you and come see you at the front of his stall.

2nd Check to make sure that he's not sick or in pain. A sick horse might not acknowledge you. A pained horse will be kicking at and looking at his belly.

If the horse's head is in the corner, attempt to turn horse around before haltering or have an experienced adult get the horse. Sometimes a bucket with a handful of grain will interest a horse enough for them to turn and face you. However, sometimes it's best for an experienced adult to evaluate the situation before proceeding.



Haltering a horse

Don't be in a rush! This is a common theme!

Be prepared by fixing your halter and lead rope before you enter the stall.

Hang the halter on your arm

Make sure the lead rope isn't knotted, dragging the ground or wrapped around your arm or body.

Lower the horse's head.

- * Use a lead rope over the neck, near the bridle path, to ask the horse to lower his head.

Use the pull, release method to reward horse for lowering his head. Pull down on the lead until the horse lowers his head and then release the pressure to reward the horse for lowering his head.

- * Stand to the left of the horse.

The horse's left! To find the horse's left, face the same direction as the horse is and find left.

- * Face forward by the side of the horse's face.

- * Slide Halter over nose.

- * Gently place the crown piece over his head.

Don't flip the crown piece!

It could hit you in the face and cause injury.

It could hit the horse in the eye and injure him.

If the crown piece is already buckled,

Slide it over the horse's ears by pushing your horse's ears forward one at a time.

- * Buckle it up or clip the throat latch.

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Leading your horse

Now that you have the horse haltered, you are ready to lead him from his stall. The first thing is to get prepared and do not be in a rush.

- * Hook the lead in the correct spot.
 - Clip the lead to the O ring under the horses chin.
- * Lead from the left, you will find that most things are done on the left side of the horse.
- * Stay in the sweet spot!
 - In front of his shoulder but behind his head.
- * Hold the lead 6" below the horses chin with your right hand.
 - Holding the halter is predator behavior and you don't have the control that you think you do!
- * Hold the excess lead with your left hand.
 - Fold or loop the lead in your hand.
 - Do not let the lead get tangled or it can tie you to the horse.
 - Do not let the lead drag the ground or you can trip.
- * Now that you've got the lead, TAKE THE LEAD.
 - Know where you are going, know how to get there and walk with purpose.
 - Eyes UP! Resist the urge to look back at the horse, just "expect" him to follow you!
 - Horse is to walk next to you, not behind you and definitely not ahead of you.
 - If horse is dragging you or not following, let an experienced adult know immediately. Call for HELP!
 - In the meantime you have to make a decision, hold on or let go!
 - If you are being dragged toward an object like a fence, or a car LET GO OF THE HORSE!
 - If not, you can put your elbow into the horses neck or pinch his girth area while pulling the lead to turn him around! If the horse's girth line passes you, you have lost the battle, let go and catch him later.
- * When turning your horse, push him away from you and your toes.
 - Pulling a horse toward you endangers your toes.

Tying and Cross Tying

- * Tie to a solid object
 - Ring attached to a wall
 - Fence Post (never the rail)
 - Hitching Post
 - Trailer tie
- * Tie horse at least wither height.
- * Give an arms length.
 - Tying to short (or tight) can cause a horse to panic and pulling back.
 - Tying to long (allowing grazing) can let the horse get tangled up, causing panic and injury.
- * Use a quick release knot or a daisy chain
- * Attach cross ties to the side rings closest to the horses muzzle.
 - Cross ties should be attached to a sturdy post or wall, higher than the horse is tall.
 - Cross ties should be long enough to give horse room to move head around but not too long.
 - Horse should not be able to put his nose lower than his chest.
 - Cross ties that are too short can cause panic and pulling back.

Remember, horses are large, prey type, animals. They are timid and easily frightened. Normally, a horse will flee first and only fight when they cannot flee. When you take away a horses ability to flee by tying it up, you take away the horse's first choice of self defense. Never ever run around a horse that is tied up.

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Working around a tied horse

- * Move slowly with clear intention. (again don't be in a rush!)
- * Stay alert and focused on your horse.
Don't daydream at the barn!
- * Don't surprise the blind spots!
There are 5 blind spots.
Number 1 is directly in front of the horse.
Number 2 is directly behind the horse.
Number 3 is where you sit on the horses back.
Number 4 is under the belly where the girth goes.
Number 5 is directly under the horse's muzzle and neck.
- * Never go under a horses neck.
It's the number 5 blind spot and bending down puts your head in strike range with the front legs.
- * Stay close to the horse.
The closer you are the harder it is to get kicked.
Try this exercise:
Stand right next to the wall, very closely, and now try to kick the wall with the bottom of your foot. You can't get a good hard kick in because you are too close. Now take two steps to the side and try the kick the wall. (don't put a hole in it!) You'll find that you can kick the wall with more force with the bottom of your foot!
- * Make physical and verbal contact often.
Sometimes grooming feels so good a horse will take a snooze. Touching and talking to the horse, keeps him aware of where you are. We never want to startle a tied up horse!
- * Keep a hand on the horse at all times. You can feel the horse move before you see the horse move!

Tacking up



Saddling the Horse

- * Be prepared ahead of time! Have your tack out, inspected and ready before you get your horse.
PUT ON YOUR HELMET NOW!
- * Place the clean saddle pad too far forward and slide it back to where it belongs.
Doing this will lay the hair flat under the pad and make the horse more comfortable.
- * Place the saddle on top of the pad, don't throw it.
- * Check the right side of the horse.
Make sure the saddle is on the pad.
Make sure the stirrups and latigos are laying flat and not bent underneath the saddle.
Make sure the girth is straight and smooth
- * Push the saddle pad up into the saddle's pommel area off the horse's withers.
- * Tighten Girth from the left side.
Standing on the left side of the horse, facing forward, reach under horse to get the girth.
Don't surprise the blind! Keep contact with the horses belly when reaching under.
Go only tight enough to keep the saddle on the horse.
Don't cut the horse in half right away! It's rude and there's plenty of time to tighten the girth again before mounting.

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Girth Check!

A loose girth can be devastating however you CAN tighten a girth too much!
A girth that's too tight can cause bucking, saddle sores and plain old ugly behavior.
A horse's body is not round, it's more like an oval.
The top of the horse and the bottom of the horse's belly can get really tight really fast.

Try this:

Put your fingers together and hold your hand sideways, where your thumb is on top and your pinky is on the bottom. Take a rubber band and loop it twice around your hand to where it's pretty tight. Notice something? Your thumb and your pinky are tighter than the back or palm of your hand. That's the same with a horse's back. Your thumb is the horse's withers and your pinky is the horse's belly! If you check your hand's girth on the palm side (or side of the horse) it will always be loose. If you check your hand's girth on the pinky side (or the belly of the horse) you'll have a more accurate feel for how tight that girth really is.

Check the girth before you mount, if you did it right at the cross ties, you should be able to tighten the girth some here.

Check the girth after riding for about 15 mins. Your weight in the saddle will push the pads and saddle down on the horse's back making the girth around the belly loose. The heavier the riders the more you should check your girth! Also check the girth if a lightweight rider (small child) gets on AFTER a heavy rider (older child or adult) as the girth may need to be released a bit for the horse's comfort.

Bridling the Horse

IF YOU FORGOT TO PUT YOUR HELMET ON BEFORE, DO IT NOW!

- * Be prepared with the bridle before you take the halter off the horse's head.
This means get your bridles straps and reins organized before letting your horse loose.
Most horses will try to walk off or eat grass after the halter is taken off.
- * Slide the halter back around the neck just behind the ears or use the reins of the bridle to keep the horse secure.
- * Stand to the left of the horse.
- * Hold the bit in your left hand and the rest of the bridle in your right hand.
Guide the bit to the horse's lips, don't bang the bit against your horse's teeth.
You may have to stick your finger in the corner of the horse's mouth to make him open up.
- * Raise the bridle with your right hand pulling the bit up in the horse's mouth.
DON'T push the bit up in the horse's mouth with your left hand. You could lose a finger that way!
- * Be gentle with your horse's head.
Don't poke his eye or ball up his ears.
- * Check the fit every time.
Sometimes a bridle will be used on a different horse and may have been adjusted to that horse. Always check to make sure the bit should lay in the corner of the horse's mouth with one wrinkle in the corner.
- * Make sure your bridle lays flat and your nose bands and throat latches are buckled up!

Mounting

I prefer to use a mounting block or step stool for my horses. This saves their back and my tack. So when available please use the mounting block.

- * Mount from the left side.
(Although, a well trained horse will allow mounting from either side, it's customary to mount from the left.)
- * Take up the reins in your left hand so that you can stop the horse if he begins to walk off while mounting.
- * Facing forward, place your left foot in the stirrup. This keeps your toe from digging in the horse's side.
- * Your right hand is used to grab the pommel of the saddle.
- * Take care not to kick the horse in the rear as you swing your right leg over the saddle.

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Get a LEG UP!

It's even safer and more horse friendly to get a leg up from a friend or a helper. There are two different techniques to do a leg up.

First is to allow your helper to stand at your horse's left shoulder, facing the horse. The helper can hold the reins to keep the horse still with his or her left hand and give a leg up with the right hand. The person mounting will face the horse by the saddle, hold the saddle with both hands and bend his/her left knee. The helper will grab the bent leg and on the count of three boost the person mounting straight up. The person mounting will then need to swing his/her leg over the horse and sit down.

Drawbacks: You can wrench a knee if you are not careful! Be sure to keep that leg straight and go straight up!

The second way to get a leg up is for the helper to thread his/her fingers together as if in prayer, open the hands and flip them over so the palms are up and the fingers are laced together. It's a human stirrup! The helper needs to bend at the legs and keep his/her back straight, the person mounting will put his/her left foot in the human stirrup and on the count of three, the helper will stand up and boost the rider into the saddle.

Drawbacks: The helper can hurt his/her back if not careful! Be sure to bend at the knees and use your legs for the boost!



Once Mounted

* Stay calm and relaxed. Remember you are now sitting in a blind spot. This is not the time to adjust clothing or helmet. If you need a jacket or need to take one off, dismount to adjust clothing.

* Be confident or at least act confident.

Remember, leaders are never unsure.

* Be aware of others in the same riding arena.

Use all your vision to avoid collisions. It's called peripheral vision.

Try this:

Look ahead of you and don't turn your head. Now, take your arms straight out in front of you, where you are looking. Make your arms wider and wider so that your hands get farther apart. (like, I Love you *this* much!) Keep looking ahead but "open" up your eyes and watch your hands out of the corner of your eyes. How wide can you make your arms before you can't see your hands anymore?

* Go in the same direction that everyone else is going.

* If you have to pass another rider communicate your intentions to that rider. Say, "Passing on the inside" *Inside means to the inside of the circle you are making with your horse. Outside means the outside of the circle you are making with your horse.*

Try this: Draw a circle on a piece of paper. The line is the arena fencing. Now take your pen and draw a dashed line just to the inside of the fence. That is you walking your horse on the rail (or by the fence). Now imagine that you are riding along and you come across another rider is who going slower than you. You would need to pass to the inside of the circle.. therefore you would NOT pass this rider on the fence side.. you would pass on non fence side.

* Give plenty of room when following or passing. Don't tailgate. A Horse length is a safe distance.

* A red ribbons in the tail of a horse, means that this horse is a known kicker! Give these horses two horse lengths!

* Ride with your eyes. Your whole balance is put out of whack when you look down at your horse or the ground. You need to look ahead about 10 horse lengths. Your horse knows when you look down and interprets that body language as non leadership and will take control of the ride. Your horse won't go where you want him to go if you are not looking where you want to end up.

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Horse Sense and Safety Rules

Discipline and Punishment, there is a difference!

If you are rough and punish your horse a lot, he will only learn to fear you. Fear is not respect. A fearful horse is a dangerous horse. If you are fearful of your horse, you may be too aggressive with him, it's a natural predator behavior. Seek help with a professional to overcome your fears and partner up with your horse. But don't let your horse walk all over you sometimes you may have to be firm to get respect, but always be fair. Horses understand the difference.

Stop and Look, Listen Up and Learn.

Move slowly with clear intention. Be casual but not creepy!

If you use the stop and look method, you will be more aware of what the horse is telling you and avoid problems. Listen up and Learn from the instructors, staff and parents. Remember that your safety is priority and the adults are tuned in to keeping you safe! You are here to learn!

Mind the blind!

Don't surprise the blind spots. Try to never approach a horse from the blind spot, but if you have to, be slow, speak in a calm quiet voice to let the horse know you are there, stay close and read his body language! If you are grooming and you step into a blind spot, stay close to the horse, speak to the horse softly and keep a hand on your horse. Don't feel dumb talking to the horse. You can say whatever you want, they don't mind and please be assured, I have complete conversations with my horses. They know all my secrets, hurts and happiness because they are great listeners and they will never judge you or tell on you.

Do not feed fingers to the horses.

Put treats in a bucket and never feed by hand. It's easy to do, you have a treat, you feed the treat, you make it a habit by doing it every day, the horse starts to look at your hand, the horse starts to lip your hand, the horse bites your hand, you lose a finger. The mouth is in a blind spot, which is why horses have whiskers; fingers feel like carrots, we all know what horses do to carrots.

Don't tailgate.

Use the one horse length law when riding and the one car length law when on the ground.

Not all horses get along. You don't get along with everyone in your class, you have friends you like to hang around with and then there are people who just rub you the wrong way. Horses are the same way. They don't always get along with each other. When you put two horses together who don't get along, war can break out and humans get hurt.

When mounted, you should be able to look through your horses ears to the back hooves of the horse in front of you, if not, you are too close.

Tack check!

When tacking up, look to make sure your tack is fitted properly and in good condition. Cracked and dry rotted leather will break easily and you may find yourself on the ground or riding a horse with no steering. Before and after mounting check your girth to make sure it hasn't loosened up. See Girth Check!

Tie correctly! *Tie with a halter and lead rope, never with the reins.*

Never tie a horse with the reins, reins are meant for riding, not tying! Never cross tie with the bit. A horse pulling back while tied with reins or bit can break your equipment and cause pain and injury to the horse. A horse with a sore mouth is an unrideable mount that doesn't trust you anymore!

Never tie or wrap the lead rope or reins to your body.

You could be drug and severely injured. You weigh in at what? 100 - 150lbs? A horse weighs in at average of 1000 lbs. If the horse wants to go, you can't stop it and you need to be able to let go of the horse quickly. As long as you are tied to the horse, you are going with the horse. A horse running away from a spooky object usually stops and turns to face that object after a few strides. A horse with a human dragging beside it bolts and feels like it has lost its ability to flee and the human will be stepped on and kicked while being drug at high speeds, usually back to the stall.

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Treat equipment with care and put it where it belongs.

Keep your tack in good shape by cleaning and inspecting it often. Even if it's not YOUR tack, YOU ride in it and YOU are responsible to make sure it's taken care of, cleaned properly and safe for your next ride. A wheelbarrow will cause major damage to a horse's leg if left out in the aisle ways or in a stall. A pitchfork is easily broken or tripped upon. A water hose laying on the ground can get caught on a horse's leg and panic him. By putting these items away you are ensuring your safety and the safety of the horses. By being safe, you are ensuring that you can continue to ride and enjoy horses at this facility.

Pick up Manure

If your horse goes number 2 when tied to a hitching post or on the cross ties, you must pick up the manure before you leave the cross ties or hitching post.

Dismount to adjust clothing and equipment.

Never take off your helmet while riding or before dismounting. Never take off a jacket on horseback. The jacket makes a strange sound, you are sitting in the blind spot, the jacket touches the horse's rear, the horse's imagination runs away with the horse and off he goes bucking, while your hands are locked behind your back with your jacket partially off!

Always Dress to Impress!

On the Ground

- Long pants
- Hard Closed Toe Shoes

In the Saddle

- Long pants (jeans or breeches preferred)
- Boots (riding boots with a ½ or 1 inch heel, not hiking or dress boots)
- Riding Helmet (not a bicycle helmet)



A helmet is a must when riding. Until you are sure that your horse sense is well developed, beginners are encouraged to wear a helmet when working with horses on the ground also.

Wear comfortable and well fitting clothing.

Baggy clothing can get caught on tack and hang you while mounting or dismounting.

By using these safety guidelines and developing your horse sense, you can have an enjoyable equine experience. The younger and beginner equestrians have a long journey ahead to develop a keen and intelligent horse sense. It's a fun and adventurous journey. This is a journey that lasts a lifetime. We are always learning. The top Olympic riders and trainers will be the first to tell you that they are still learning and growing as an equestrian. They will also tell you not to let your pride grow too much, as a horse will be the first one to humble you.

We must always remember that we are smaller and weaker than our magnificent equine friends. Injuries are bound to exist in a relationship of this type. Never forsake safety for any reason when working with horses. These guidelines are here to help keep you injury free and happily in love with horses!



*May your days be filled with the sounds and smells of happy horses.
And may your dreams be filled with flying manes and thundering hooves!
Alisha Laird - Aug 18, 2006 - Updated 5/13/2010*