



THE EXPERT
Justine Harrison

Justine is a qualified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help horse owners solve a wide range of problems. Visit: www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk.

Equine behaviourist Justine Harrison looks at the reasons why horses nap and spook and offers sound advice to help you enjoy riding out again

HAPPIER HACKING



For many riders, hacking out is their favourite activity. Nothing else beats a great ride in the countryside or a canter on the beach and the amazing feeling of being at one with your horse.

However, for some – whose horse may not want to leave the yard or will nap, spin and attempt to turn for home, it's an activity to dread and a reason to become confined to the arena.

All of these behaviours can knock the confidence of even the most experienced rider.

But what most people don't think about is that horses can lose confidence too. We are asking them to leave the security of their home and 'herd', so we should prepare and train them to deal with anything they may encounter.

Many riders say that a horse napping, rearing or bolting came 'out of the blue'.

But if your horse panics out on a ride, he has probably been giving you warning signs for a while that have been missed.

The key to avoiding problems is noticing these signals, understanding what they mean and taking action to resolve them, before the situation gets out of hand.

Why do horses nap?

Horses that nap are often labelled as 'naughty' or 'stubborn' but this is unhelpful because there will always be at least one fundamental reason for the behaviour, for example:-

● **Separation anxiety:** Horses are herd animals and leaving the security of their home and equine friends can be frightening. Separation anxiety – where the horse is reluctant to leave a field companion and will neigh for them – may be caused by early or abrupt weaning, poor socialisation with →

Rule out pain

When a horse shows a change in behaviour, rule out any possible physical issues.

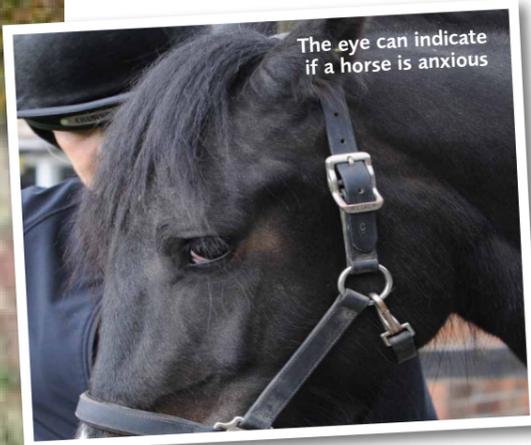
Have the horse's teeth and back checked by a vet and ensure your tack fits well and is not causing discomfort or pain.

Consider if any management changes could have resulted in the behaviour, too.

If you need a strong bit to control your horse on a hack, ask yourself what he may be running away from.



While some horses may get over-excited at the prospect of a canter, others could be anxious about what is ahead



- **Rider confidence:** Studies have shown that if a rider is nervous, the horse may become anxious, too.
- **Learned behaviour:** If, for any of the above reasons, a horse has napped and been returned to his field or stable, he will have learned that the strategy works, and therefore will repeat it. The initial problem still needs to be addressed.

TIP from the TOP
Take a step-by-step approach to training and opt for steady progress. Don't rush your horse.

Spooking is natural

Horses naturally spook or shy – a brief startle at something moving in the undergrowth or an unexpected noise is a perfectly normal reaction. They may also turn or tilt their head to get a good look at something on the ground, or to hear sounds more clearly.

But if your horse spooks excessively, or has an exaggerated reaction when he shies, this is a sure sign he is insecure and lacking in confidence.

Punishing him will only make matters worse. Allow him to have a good look at whatever he's worried about and praise him for each step he takes forwards.



Horses may spook at something new or unexpected

other horses or social isolation (being kept in a field alone or stabled for long periods of time without equine contact).

● **Anticipation of a traumatic experience:** A horse will instinctively avoid anything he associates with a potentially threatening situation. If he has been frightened or punished while out riding, he may try anything to prevent it happening again.

● **The memory of pain:** This could be due to ill-fitting tack, an injury which occurred while out hacking, a rider's poor technique causing discomfort, being ridden when lame or having an undiagnosed physical problem.

● **Being asked to do too much, too soon:** Hacking a new or young horse in an unfamiliar environment can result in problems arising. It can take weeks or months for horses to settle in a new home and feel confident, so allow time for him to explore and introduce him to new objects and situations slowly.

● **Fear of other horses:** Getting bullied in the field can cause a horse to be fearful of a hacking partner. He may want to avoid their company.

If you have bought a new horse and are having problems, it is worth considering something may have happened to him before he came to you.

Warning signs

A 'napping' horse gives clear signals and will stop or reverse instead of moving forward. But how do you pick up on the more subtle signs which indicate a horse is unhappy about riding out?

If he drags his heels at leaving the yard, freezes or tries to turn in a different direction to the one you want to go, he is telling you he is uncomfortable with what is being asked of him.

Your horse may already have separation anxiety. If he is distressed and reluctant to leave field companions, or is fidgety and calls to his friends when he's away from them – even in his stable – this must be dealt with before considering hacking out alone.

Jogging, spooking excessively, refusing to stand still, sweating up, head tossing, tail swishing, snatching at the bit, opening the mouth, teeth grinding or being difficult to stop can all indicate a horse is anxious or in pain.

Ignoring these signs and forcing your horse to go forward might mean he carries on reluctantly for a while.

But sooner or later the problems will escalate.

This could result in bucking, spinning, rearing, bolting or running backwards.

Some warning signs are very subtle. Watch for the eye changing from being relaxed, soft and round to having a clear, triangulated eyebrow position. Tension in the face, a tucked chin, tight lips, high head carriage or stiff body posture are also indicators of anxiety.

Why not ask a friend to walk alongside your horse as you hack out and watch for any of the above?

Overcoming the issues

There are no quick fixes and hacking-related issues can be complex to deal with. Retraining a fearful or anxious horse needs a well-structured and patient approach.

Take things slowly and rebuild your horse's confidence in small steps. Forcing him or punishing his behaviour will only reinforce his fears, so take the carrot rather than the stick approach. Encourage your horse and reward him for every small step he takes.

Tackling separation anxiety

If your horse worries about leaving his companions, arrange for him to spend plenty of time with a sensible, well-socialised companion and practise short separations. Take him a couple of steps away from his friend at first and increase the distance gradually over subsequent sessions, rewarding at every stage.

Boosting confidence

Build confidence by introducing your horse to novel stimuli in a safe environment (see 'Spookbusting', page 20). Another thing you can do is hack or lead out your horse for short distances, accompanied by a friend on a sensible equine companion.



Case Study

"Bolting came out of the blue"

Debbie Peterson from Cheshire kept her mare Jasmine at a livery yard on a busy main road. Hacking out meant she had to ride on narrow roads with blind corners.

"One day, a car passed too close and too fast," says Debbie. "Jasmine reared and bolted for home, along several dangerous main roads. We were lucky to get home uninjured. From that point, Jasmine refused to leave the yard and would rear, spin and nap."

"Previously, Jasmine was bold to hack out and the bolting came out of the blue."

Debbie worked with Justine Harrison to find a solution.

"After speaking to Debbie, I learned that Jasmine had always jogged and spooked on hacks, and would never



stand still if asked – something she would do in an arena without hesitation," says Justine. "Also, over the last couple of years she had become increasingly headstrong and often pulled her head down to try and avoid the bit."

"Debbie hadn't realised these behaviours could be signs of anxiety and had used a flash noseband to stop the mare opening her mouth."

"This didn't stop the anxiety, just hid one of the ways Jasmine communicated she was uncomfortable."

"Debbie moved the horse to a yard on a quiet, private lane and once the horse settled, led her out for short distances, with another horse."

"We let the horses graze on verges and browse on hedgerows," adds Debbie. "This taught Jasmine about her new environment, changed her negative associations of leaving the yard to be more positive and started to build her confidence up again."

"I enlisted the help of some friends and they drove past Jasmine slowly to reintroduce her to traffic."

"They started from a distance and gradually came closer and I gave her treats as they went past."

"We have started hacking out over short distances in company and I feel I'm well on the way to solving the problems."

Once he is relaxed with this, ask him to stop for a few seconds while your friend rides ahead a few metres. Then, walk on to catch them up.

Next, lead him past the other horse before stopping, and ask the companion to catch up. Gradually increase the distances involved.

Training a young or nervous horse

Introduce new environments gradually. You could long-rein your youngster, ride and lead (leading him from another horse) or hack out somewhere quiet. At first, do any of the above with a calm, sensible equine companion.

Lead your horse short distances to graze or browse hedgerows, in the company of his horse friend, so



OVERCOME HACKING ISSUES



new environments become fun and rewarding rather than scary.

Spookbust your horse

Introduce new stimuli in a safe place. Buy some cones, roadwork barriers, plastic sheeting or bunting, for example, and let your horse approach them, one at a time, from a distance initially.

Reward him for every step he takes towards the new object with a treat or a big lip-curling wither scratch.

If you leave obstacles in the arena or around the yard, they will soon become everyday things for your horse.

The memory of pain

If your horse has suffered an injury or been ridden in an ill-fitting saddle, retraining must be methodical.

Re-introduce a (well-fitting) saddle over several sessions, starting with a numnah. When he's happy with this, place the girth. Build up in stages to leading the horse in-hand with the saddle on.

Ensure you reward with praise, a big wither scratch or a treat at every stage.

Do's and don'ts

- ✓ **DO** make sure your horse can stop, turn, walk, trot and canter in a safe area, both alone or with other horses, before taking him out hacking.
- ✗ **DON'T** ride out with people who have spooky or excitable horses.
- ✓ **DO** hack out in calm, sensible company until you and your horse are confident
- ✗ **DON'T** hack on busy roads until you and your horse are both confident in light traffic.
- ✓ **DO** go two abreast – where it is safe and road conditions allow it – and have a calm horse between you and the traffic.
- ✓ **DO** allow your horse to dictate the speed of retraining – go at his pace and don't rush him.

Case Study

"We used the 'leapfrog' exercise"

Sarah Xx's 12-year-old gelding, Jake, had been great to hack out alone but after he was frightened by a dog jumping at a gate, he became spooky and would toss his head.

"In five years of owning Jake, he'd never done this before," says Sarah. "I found a sensible hacking buddy and

rode out in company, to try and rebuild Jake's confidence.

"The jogging and head tossing stopped, Jake's spookiness decreased and he had a swing in his stride."

At this point Sarah introduced the 'leapfrog' exercise – asking Jake to stop and wait while her friend rode ahead, then catching them up.

"Then we swapped and I rode ahead for a few metres and waited for my friend and her horse," Sarah says.

"After gradually increasing the distances involved over a few weeks, Jake's confidence improved.

"I moved on to short hacks alone, letting Jake stop and graze every so often if he wanted.

"His confidence has returned and I can hack him alone or in company."



If he looks anxious at any point, go back a step, end the session on a good note and try again the following day.

The process cannot be rushed and your horse must be relaxed about having the saddle on before you ride him again.

Using step-by-step, reward-based training will pay off long term. As you haven't used fear or punishment, when your horse encounters a new situation, he will be far more likely to trust you and your judgement.

Build your own confidence

Your horse will take a lead from you. If you are confident and give him the correct direction, he should be happy to go where you want him to, and to approach new situations. If you are nervous, he will feed on this.

To help you be more confident in the saddle, follow these tips:-

- Stay calm – relax and think positive.
- If something happens that is unnerving, breathe deeply and talk slowly and calmly to your horse.
- When you ride out with friends and they want to canter, or go along a difficult route, don't be afraid to say no.
- Don't feel pressured by others who think you should be progressing faster.
- Visualisation is a useful technique. Create a picture in your mind of your perfect hack, in as much detail as you can, including what you will wear and

where you will go. Most importantly, think about how relaxed you and your horse are and how much fun you are having. Repeat the image in your mind for short sessions every day, before and after you hack out. This will help break your old nervous habits and create more positive ones.

- Keep your hands low and reins soft and resist the urge to raise your hands if the horse jumps or spooks. **H**

