

OUR EXPERT

Justine Harrison



Justine is a qualified equine behaviourist who uses the science of behaviour to help owners better understand and resolve issues with their horses.

Why do horses do that?

Horses may demonstrate strange behaviour in a bid to alert us that they are stressed, worried or in pain. Equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** looks at how we can read the signs

The advent of social media has given us access to a huge number of videos and photographs of horses doing unusual things.

Films of horses head bobbing, sticking their tongues out, smacking their lips, frantically pawing at the ground or even yawning are viewed online every day.

As many people have little understanding of equine behaviour, often their first response to seeing a horse doing something odd or quirky is to compare it to human behaviour.

The horse bobbing his head must be dancing along to the music on the radio, because that is what a human would do. While the one biting at his leadrope, while he is being shod, is just being playful.

Interpreting a horse's behaviour by comparing it to our own actions can be misleading, as there is so much more to what they are doing.

Horses are a different species and have a different behavioural repertoire to humans.

Dismissing actions as quirky or funny may mean we are missing important messages about a horse's state of mind. In fact, some behaviours could be indicators of stress, pain, frustration or poor welfare.

I'm a horse – get me out of here!

Horses have developed a wide range of behaviours to communicate to other equines (or indeed humans) how they are feeling.

In a situation where a horse may feel frightened or stressed, he has four basic behavioural strategies. These can be described as the 'Four F's' :-

- Flight;
- Fight;
- Freeze;
- Fidget.

Flight: If a horse is anxious or fearful, his first response is usually to try and escape.

Horses bolt when they are frightened, jump out of fields if startled, and pull back and break the leadrope when tied up, to avoid being groomed or tacked up. Or he may simply walk away from us to avoid being caught.

But what if a horse can't get away? Flight is not always an option for domesticated horses.

If he's tied up, confined or is wearing tack that will hurt him when he moves, he could decide that escape isn't an option. To save himself and avoid the situation he finds so worrying, he needs to employ a different tactic.



Photograph: www.shutterstock.com/Rita Kochmarjova

If a horse is anxious, his first response is flight

Fight: Horses may fight to try and stop a frightening situation. For example, he might bite the farrier as he is tied up and can't escape the pain of his leg being lifted (if there is an underlying physical issue). Or, he may kick out at the vet who is trying to give him a jab while being confined in his stable.

A new horse may lash out at strange horses trying to greet him if he feels trapped in the corner of the field.

Horses can also redirect their aggression towards a person or object that did not provoke the aggressive behaviour. A frustrated horse may bite at the leadrope that he is tied up with, or even a passer by who has nothing to do with trying him up.



Some horses redirect their 'fight' by biting the leadrope

Freeze: Horses often freeze when they are frightened – they simply don't move. Sadly, this can be mistaken for a horse being 'stubborn' or 'lazy' and is a behaviour regularly attributed to native or 'cold-blooded' horses like cobs.

An example is a horse terrified of travelling who stands still at the bottom of the horsebox ramp, refusing to load. Or, take the horse that is frightened of leaving his home to go on a hack, who 'freezes' and refuses to leave the yard.

What might then happen is the horse is punished or forced to do something he's frightened of. This may result in him performing a more dangerous behaviour shortly afterwards – for example, he could rear or run backwards in a bid to escape. ▶



If a horse freezes and refuses to move, it could be due to fear



Feeding a horse on the floor allows them to simulate natural grazing

Common displacements in horses

There are many examples of displacements in horses – from pawing the ground when being mounted or swishing the tail when ridden to head bobbing while waiting for a feed. Here are a few that are commonly seen:-

Waving a leg when eating

Horses have evolved over millions of years to constantly move and graze at the same time.

They rarely stand still unless dozing or sleeping and would naturally move one of their feet every five to 15 seconds. When we give them a bucket feed, they need to be stationary to eat it, which is unnatural for a horse.

You may have seen a horse waving a foreleg when he eats from a bucket, as he's experiencing conflict with this natural instinct to move. It can also be a sign of frustration caused by hunger or not having adequate amounts of forage.

Many horses knock the food out of their bowl and eat from the ground, as this allows them to move and simulate natural grazing.

You can reduce these behaviours by ensuring your horse has constant access to grazing or ad-lib forage.

Spreading his hard feed onto a pile of hay on the floor can also help reduce frustration, by allowing him to move and eat.

Pawing the ground

Horses paw at the ground for a number of reasons, including digging, foraging, before they roll, or to investigate something on the ground.

However, if a horse paws the ground when travelling in the horsebox he could be frightened or frustrated that he can't get out.

If he stops and paws the ground when asked to walk through a stream or towards a trailer, he may be scared, rather than being bad tempered, stubborn or naughty.

If this behaviour is ignored it could escalate and you risk your horse becoming aggressive and perhaps striking out.

For example, if a vet is trying to examine a horse and he paws with his foreleg, it could be a fear of being injected and frustration at being restricted by his handler. It is important to recognise the pawing as a signal your horse is uncomfortable with what is happening and establish and resolve the cause of his anxiety.

Scary procedures such as vet visits can be improved by ensuring your horse has calm equine company and access to a hay net spiked with carrots to distract him.

In more extreme cases, contact a qualified behaviourist to help with a training programme.

Yawning

Horses yawn when they are tired or relaxing, but yawning repeatedly in a specific situation could also be a sign of stress.

A horse that yawns when you tack up, mount or ride him may be in pain or anxious about the process and you need to work out why.

Ask a vet to rule out any potential physical issues and have his saddle checked.

Take note of what happens when you tack up or ride. Does he yawn just before or after something you are doing? Does he only yawn in a certain area, or when performing an exercise or task that may be painful/difficult for him?

Change what you are doing to see if the behaviour stops. Working out what is triggering his anxiety will help you find the solution.

Abnormal oral behaviours

Oral behaviours are often displayed when horses are feeling stressed. For example, they may smack their lips, play with their tongue or grind their teeth.

Licking and chewing



Licking and chewing can be performed for a variety of reasons

There are many misconceptions about horses licking and chewing during training.

Some trainers believe it is beneficial and the horse is 'learning'. However, others claim it is more likely to be an indicator of stress.

"Licking and chewing is a common behaviour in horses and probably has multiple causes," says American equine behaviourist Dr Robin Foster.

"A simple reason is in anticipation of eating or drinking – a thirsty horse will often lick and chew as it approaches a water trough.

"Another popular notion is that licking and chewing means a horse is digesting a thought, or mentally processing what is happening in the moment. The problem with this theory is that it's impossible to know what a horse is thinking.

"An explanation that fits with objective observations is that licking and chewing is a displacement behaviour, which indicates that the horse is anxious or stressed.

"In many instances, licking and chewing occurs at the offset or release of pressure or challenge – whether physical or mental."

The timing of the lick-chew, after the release of pressure, suggests that the horse's emotional state is changing from a state of high arousal to a state of lower arousal, as it returns to normal.

So if your horse is performing this behaviour, you should consider whether anything has caused him to be stressed.

If you asked him to do too much, startled him or he has experienced pain or discomfort during training, avoid repeating that in the future.

TIP from the **TOP**
Horses are individuals and deal with stress differently. Learn to recognise your own horses stress responses.

Fidget: When faced with an uncomfortable or stressful situation he can't escape from, a horse may also 'fidget'.

This is known in psychological terms as a 'displacement' behaviour. Displacements are normal behaviours that are performed in an inappropriate context, so are often overlooked and misunderstood.

When fearful or anxious, the horse would usually use his flight instinct and move away. But if he feels he can't escape for some reason, he will instinctively take alternative action by performing a displacement behaviour instead of doing nothing.

By moving his body in some way – even though it is not fight or flight – a horse is attempting to reduce his stress and cope better in the situation.

Displacement behaviours are a sure sign of stress and we see them when horses are in conflict.

This is when they are anxious about a situation, confused by what is being asked of them or frustrated. Or, they may sometimes be performed when a horse is in pain.

Research into animal welfare often uses the number of displacement behaviours an animal performs as a measure of stress.

Therefore, these actions are useful indicators and can help us understand how a horse feels about his environment, other equines, handling, training or when he is being ridden.

How humans display stress

Displacement behaviours are not just performed by horses – they are seen in all animals, even humans. However, humans have a different behavioural repertoire so our stress manifests itself in other ways.

In stressful situations humans may wring their hands, rock backwards and forwards, tap their feet, bite their nails or even pace up and down as they struggle to sit still.

We often see people doing things like this in stressful situations such as a job interview, public speaking or even when stuck in traffic. Performing these behaviours goes some way towards satisfying our physical need to move when we are trapped in a scary situation – they help us to cope with the stress we are feeling.



Fidgeting behaviour, such as waving a leg, could indicate the horse is frustrated



Yawning can be a sign of stress

If your horse does something odd with his mouth when he is ridden, it could be to avoid discomfort or pain caused by the bit.

He may put his tongue over the bit, stick his tongue out, pull his tongue tip into his mouth, or smack his lips together.

These are also stress behaviours, so it is important to determine why he is doing this. ▶



It is important to work out why your horse pulls certain faces

Photography: www.shutterstock.com/emess

Horses will naturally smack their lips – to get rid of a fly, for example – but if he does it repeatedly or in a strange context it could be a sign that something is wrong.

All too often, horse owners and riding instructors will use a flash or drop noseband to strap a horse's mouth shut to prevent him performing these sort of behaviours.

This is dealing with the 'symptom' rather than the underlying cause of the problem. Preventing your horse avoiding pain in his mouth could cause him to display a different, dangerous behaviour, such as bolting or bucking.

Ask your vet and equine dentist to check him and ensure he is not in pain.

If he gets the all clear, contact a biting expert to ask advice on which bit to use.

Horses have mouths of all shapes and sizes and it may be your current bit is not suitable for your horse's mouth. Consider riding in a bitless bridle and see if that makes a difference.

Unusual behaviours performed when ridden are often a sign that a horse is anxious about something they have been asked to do.

A qualified equine behaviourist should be able to help you identify the cause and plan a retraining programme.

Nipping or mouthing

Horses may nip because they are unhappy. If he mouths your jacket when coming in from the field, but not at any other time, he may be anxious about being handled or leaving his herd mates.

Nipping when being rugged or girthed could be an indication of discomfort.

Seemingly playful 'nips' can escalate to full blown aggression if ignored, so it is important to get expert help to resolve the issue, or deal with any underlying pain. ■

Why not escape?

Many people believe if their horse was frightened they would barge, bite or try to run away, but it is rarely that simple.

How a horse behaves in any situation depends on his past experiences. One that tried to escape being clipped could have received a smack, then been put in a pressure halter. Now he doesn't try to escape because a fear of experiencing pain is greater than his fear of clippers.

Sadly, this is an all too common way of addressing many handling situations. Rather than teaching the horse the clippers aren't going to hurt, by introducing them gradually, and rewarding him for trying, a more aversive method is used to force him to stand still.

The result is a horse who is still frightened of the clippers, but also frightened of the handler and the pressure halter.

He will have learned his attempt to escape resulted in him getting hurt, so he may be less likely to try that tactic again and puts up with the situation.

Some training methods recommend using a pressure halter, chifney or even

a whip so the horse is more likely to do what is asked. In these situations, we often see stressed horses performing displacement behaviours.

These will keep reappearing and the handler may be puzzled and frustrated by what the horse is doing.

If we recognise displacement behaviour as a sure sign of stress, we can act accordingly. So, if your horse starts to perform an unusual behaviour, take note!

Watch him to see when it happens, notice what you are doing and what is going on in the environment.

Try to work out what is causing your horse to be stressed, and remove it.

If the behaviour occurs because of something you are doing,

does it resolve when you stop, and then start again when you resume?

Less is more – give your horse the choice to move away from things he is worried about. This will provide you with valuable information as to how he feels about what is happening.

TIP from the TOP

If your horse displays an unusual behaviour ask your vet check him over, then contact a qualified behaviourist.



Horses won't always use a flight response, so you need to be aware of displacement behaviour