



GETTING HELP IN AN UNREGULATED INDUSTRY:

THE PROBLEM WITH HORSE BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

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“THE PROGNOSIS FOR RESOLVING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS IS MORE FAVOURABLE WHEN INCITING PHYSICAL ISSUES ARE ADDRESSED WITHOUT DELAY, MAKING ROUTINE WELLNESS EXAMS OR ELECTIVE PROCEDURES AN IDEAL TIME TO ASK OWNERS ABOUT THEIR HORSE’S BEHAVIOURAL HEALTH.”

Just as with medical problems, resolving behaviour problems in horses requires a qualified professional. For the owner, equine behaviour problems can result in stress, increased expenses or lost revenue, devaluation of the horse, risk of injury, and damage to the horse-human bond. Horses displaying unwanted behaviours may experience resultant short-term or chronic stress, compromised welfare, or euthanasia. Certain behaviour problems may also prevent owners from providing the health care the horse needs to live a longer, pain-free life. To complicate matters further, misguided attempts to treat behaviour problems can result in additional distress and compromised welfare for the horse, should the client hire an unqualified professional.

Clients experiencing horse behaviour problems seek help from numerous sources. Because many behaviour problems have an underlying physical, and often pain-related cause, veterinarians are in a unique position to help in these situations. The prognosis for resolving behaviour problems is more favourable when inciting physical issues are addressed without delay, making routine wellness exams or elective procedures an ideal time to ask owners about their horse’s behavioural health.

If underlying physical causes have been ruled out, veterinarians can still be a valuable source of evidence-based information to help clients resolve the issue. Even in instances where a veterinary facility does not provide behaviour modification services, veterinarians can educate clients and positively influence the choices they make when seeking help. Helping a client choose an appropriate professional increases the likelihood of a positive outcome, while simultaneously promoting positive welfare for the horse and enhancing the human-horse bond.

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

When considering whom to refer to when addressing behaviour problems, it is critical to understand the skill sets of various equine professionals within the industry. In general, most equine professionals have specific areas of expertise. For example, horse trainers teach horses to consistently respond to set cues by performing desired behaviours, often for a specific discipline (that is, they teach a horse how to perform a new, wanted, behaviour). Riding instructors and coaches teach people how to ride, or coach them to excel in a specific discipline or horse sport. Behaviour consultants or animal behaviourists help horse owners resolve or eliminate unwanted behaviours. These behaviours are frequently accompanied by an adverse emotional response, for example anxious behaviour when trailer loading or being clipped, specific phobias about injections or the farrier, aggression, “herd-bound” behaviour, stereotypic behaviours, bucking, bolting, and so on.

In Canada, the animal training industry is wholly unregulated; any person can call themselves a horse trainer or behaviour professional, regardless of their education or experience. Such lack of trainer regulation perpetuates the use of aversive and inappropriate training techniques, and offers owners little recourse should their horse suffer a physical or behavioural injury during training.

Without an understanding of how horses learn, any animal trainer’s toolbox will be limited. Recent research has shown that many horse trainers and riding coaches are unable to define basic terms of learning theory. This lack of knowledge about how animals learn is especially problematic when trainers attempt to address unwanted behaviours. Unwanted behaviours in animals may occur for numerous reasons, such as pain or other underlying medical conditions, genetics, emotions such as fear, or prior reinforcement. The techniques commonly used to appropriately address unwanted behaviour including counterconditioning, systematic desensitization, or differential reinforcement, which are not generally used or understood by trainers or riding instructors.

Even though the way animals learn is a well-studied science, this information is slow to be accepted in the horse world. Rather, many popular training modalities are based on handed-down traditions and incorrect information about horse behaviour. Without academic understanding of the techniques they are using, trainers may unknowingly use positive punishment and flooding to try and address unwanted behaviours. Numerous animal behaviour organizations, including the American Society of Veterinary Animal Behavior, recommend against such techniques because they increase the risk of causing animals pain, fear, or distress, which can potentially worsen the existing problem, create new problems, or damage the human-animal bond.

Sadly, as can be seen in countless horse training DVDs and training demonstrations at horse expos, these commonly used techniques appear, to the untrained eye, to work—often providing seemingly instantaneous results whereby the unwanted behaviour stops. But effectiveness isn’t enough: cessation of unwanted behaviour does not mean that the animal’s underlying motivations to perform the behavior have been addressed, it just means that the behaviour has been temporarily suppressed. For example, a horse refusing to trailer load may quickly load when the trainer punishes any non-loading behaviour, but only because the consequence for not loading is worse than the fear or pain that may have motivated non-loading behaviour in the first place. All behaviour serves a purpose for the animal performing it; non-loading could be a way for an arthritic horse to avoid pain, or for a fearful horse to reduce anxiety. Additionally, training techniques that result in behaviour suppression cannot tell the horse what behaviour they should do instead, nor do they enhance the bond between horse and human.

REFERRAL OPTIONS

While qualified help can be hard to find when horses have behaviour problems, it can be done. Here are some guidelines to aid your client in getting the help they need.

BOARD-CERTIFIED VETERINARY BEHAVIOURISTS

As underlying physical conditions frequently cause horses to behave in ways that owners view as problematic, a veterinarian should be a client’s initial appointment. Many veterinary behaviourists will work remotely with a client’s primary veterinarian to help with diagnosis and to devise treatment plans. A list of veterinary behaviourists in North America can be found at avsab.org.

CERTIFIED APPLIED ANIMAL BEHAVIOURISTS

Certified applied animal behaviourists and associate certified applied animal behaviourists are academically trained animal behaviour professionals. The difference between veterinary behaviourists and certified applied animal behaviourists has been likened to that of the psychiatrist-psychologist model in human behavioural medicine. The Animal Behavior Society’s website lists both types of behaviour professionals:

www.animalbehaviorsociety.org

CERTIFIED HORSE BEHAVIOUR CONSULTANTS

The International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants certifies animal behaviour consultants who work with dogs, cats, parrots, or horses. Members are tested on their knowledge in core areas of competency related to animal behaviour consulting, and on their adherence to least intrusive, minimally aversive (LIMA) techniques to modify behaviour. While in-person consults are ideal, in the absence of local help, consultants may also work remotely with clients. The organization’s consultant locator can be found at iaabc.org.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT HORSE TRAINERS

While this is still an unregulated profession, the number of horse trainers who use positive reinforcement-based training methods is increasing. These trainers use positive reinforcement in their training to teach new, wanted behaviours, but as with other horse trainers, they may lack experience in using other behaviour modification techniques or working with more challenging cases. Therefore, they may work best under the supervision of one of the professionals listed above.

HELPING CLIENTS GET HELP

This gap in knowledge makes it challenging for owners to find qualified help for their horse's behaviour problems. Section 9.1 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act states that "(1) A person responsible for an animal must care for the animal, including protecting the animal from circumstances that are likely to cause the animal to be in distress. (2) A person responsible for an animal must not cause or permit the animal to be, or to continue to be, in distress." This presents a dilemma for equine veterinarians if they cannot determine whether a trainer they refer to might cause horses to experience distress or be using techniques not condoned by veterinary behaviour specialists.

To complicate matters, there currently is a dearth of qualified help available to horse owners. As certification of animal trainers is voluntary, the number of academically trained horse trainers or qualified behaviour professionals in Canada is minimal. In contrast, small animal veterinarians find it easier to access qualified trainers and professionals. Although dog training is equally unregulated, greater numbers of dog trainers and behaviour professionals are seeking voluntary certification with organizations committed to promoting the use of evidence-based, low-stress training techniques. While not a perfect system, it does make the task of recommending an outside trainer somewhat easier for small animal veterinarians. Equine veterinarians should

be aware of the liability and risks of referring to unregulated trainers and use caution when referring clients to outside sources for behavioural help.

HORSE TRAINERS TO AVOID

In an absence of credentials or a specific list of how they train or modify behaviour, a trainer's website or other marketing materials can give clues to the techniques they may use. Here are some flags that may indicate caution is needed:

- Uses the term "natural horsemanship" or "horsemanship" to describe their approach.
- Uses the words "respect," "leadership," or "dominance" in describing the human-horse relationship.
- Claims to use positive reinforcement but is opposed to using food to train, or states that release of pressure is a reward.
- Trademarks their training techniques or has a proprietary methodology.
- Is observed to use techniques or equipment that cause the horse to feel pain or fear or exposes the horse to stimuli at an intensity that triggers escape or avoidance behaviours. *It is not necessary to deliberately trigger unwanted behaviour to resolve it. Doing so is also counter-productive.*
- Offers guarantees on training results.

In summary, as horse training is an unregulated industry, horse owners and equine veterinarians must do their own research when choosing a professional. There are generally no quick fixes when it comes to resolving unwanted behaviour, especially when the root of the problem lies in fear, or the behaviour has been occurring for an extended period of time. Choosing the right professional for the job will not only increase the likelihood that the unwanted behaviour can be resolved; it will also improve the horse's welfare and strengthen the human-horse bond. [WCV](#)