

An equine behaviourist can help you overcome a range of issues, including difficulties with trailer loading.



# Finding Help for Horses

EQUI-TREK TRAILER

## WHERE TO TURN WHEN BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS ARISE

BY LAUREN FRASER

**W**hen horses have behaviour problems, owners may be uncertain where to turn. Problematic behaviours can be dangerous to anyone interacting with the horse. They may prevent the horse from safely engaging in activities, or they may impact the horse's health, welfare, and quality of life. Thankfully, there is a new group of horse industry professionals who can help: clinical or applied animal behaviourists, and certified horse behaviour consultants.

Behaviours commonly addressed by these professionals include aggression, reactivity, dangerous behaviours in-hand or under saddle, or refusal to participate in events such as trailer loading. These behaviours can occur for numerous reasons, frequently because of fear or anxiety, prior learning, genetics, or management practices which fail to meet the horse's needs. Sometimes underlying physical or medical conditions are contributing factors. In

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such instances, the horse's veterinarian will play a critical role in diagnosing and treating the horse before behaviour modification work can begin.

While horse behaviour professionals may also train horses to perform new, wanted behaviours (e.g., how to load in a trailer) the techniques used to address behaviour problems differ from those used by horse trainers. Whereas most horse trainers primarily use reinforcement to train horses how to perform wanted behaviours on cue, horse behaviour professionals use techniques such as systematic desensitization and counter conditioning to change the negative emotions which cause unwanted behaviours to happen.

For example, horses who are dangerous to handle for injections usually behave this way because they're frightened. This fear develops through an involuntary learning process called classical conditioning, resulting in a "this predicts that" effect for the horse: needles predict fear and pain. Using systematic desensitization and counter conditioning, a horse behaviour professional would gradually expose the horse to all aspects of the injection event, while simultaneously pairing each level of exposure with something desirable, such as high-value treats. This approach changes the "this predicts that" association, and the event then begins to predict good things for the horse: feeling safe and receiving treats. While these proven techniques have been researched and used for more than a century with many other species, including humans, they still are not well-known in the horse industry.

If you are looking to have your horse learn new, wanted behaviours such as

being started under saddle or trained for a specific discipline, a horse trainer is the right professional for the job. As the horse training industry is unregulated in Canada, the onus is on owners to screen potential professionals before hiring. This also applies to those seeking help for behaviour problems. While anyone can claim to be a behaviourist, the term is generally reserved for those who have a master's or doctorate in animal behaviour, or for veterinarians with advanced behaviour degrees. As

using certain training techniques can worsen existing problems or create new ones, owners looking for help should seek out qualified professionals with certifications from organizations like the Animal Behaviour Society, or the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants.

In addition to your trainer, coach, veterinarian and farrier, a qualified horse behaviour professional can be an excellent addition to the team of professionals that helps care for your horse. **CHA**

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