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“Minimize Fear & Build Confidence Using Herd Psychology”

As an educator in the horse industry for 17 years, I find one of the most common challenges people face with horses is how to respond to fear. Both men and women can be affected by fear, but women seem to experience fear to a greater extent and oftentimes in a more debilitating way.

In my early years teaching, I would occasionally be surprised at the extent of someone's fear, especially when the situation with the horse didn't appear to warrant it. In clinic situations, fear can express itself in many ways and anyone in the role of educator will tell you that it can sometimes be a challenge to recognize someone's behavior as originating from fear. The challenge is then how to help someone develop the skills to move through that fear.

Most people experiencing some form of fear will say they lack confidence with horses. It's natural for the scale of fear and confidence to tip from one side to another depending on the conditions we find ourselves in. Something unique to horses is that we can have great confidence under certain conditions, but when those conditions change (sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly), we can find ourselves beyond our current skill set and running on complete adrenaline and sheer luck!

Anyone around horses for any amount of time will relate to my telling people that I'm living proof that God takes care of fools and children (and I'm too old to be one of them)!

Why We Experience Fear

My opinion has formed over many years of teaching that fear can be recognized as a survival mechanism that indicates to us we have more knowledge to acquire if we wish to enjoy a lifetime horses. When we understand this, we can learn to appreciate that fear is keeping us safe from harm because we instinctively know that we don't currently possess the skill set to do the right thing not if - but when - something unexpected, sudden or abrupt happens.

Another consideration for women is that we can be absolutely fearless when younger, but experience seemingly irrational fear as we age. When women start a family, our risk of physical harm goes beyond just ourselves and extends to our ability to care for our family. Another stage women experience an increase in fear is when we reach an age that we begin to lose bone density. The thought of hitting the ground causes our

physiology to initiate feelings of fear in order to make us avoid putting ourselves in a situation that may result in a fall or colliding with a frightened or disrespectful horse.

Most men don't experience these types of fear because their physiology is designed to take a hit... and even have a good laugh about it with their buddies! This is why people who don't experience this type of fear are particularly challenged when trying to help others who do. We think that if we just keep trying that somehow the fear will eventually go away, and that's where we get stuck with feelings of 'wimping out' or that we just have to try harder or worse yet, gradually decrease our activities with horses or even get out of horses altogether.

Moving Through Fear

People are sometimes surprised at my perspective on fear, especially when I express that because fear is a mechanism for survival we can view that fear really is our friend! With that understanding and new appreciation, the question then becomes how do we learn to move through this fear and tip the scales toward confidence.

I like to put this answer very simply: New knowledge replaces fear.

The type of knowledge that seems to have the greatest effect on building confidence with horses for women is when we understand herd dynamics and learn to demonstrate techniques designed to emulate those dynamics for greater clarity of communication with horses.

An example of this would be that horses are mentally wired to respond instantly and respectfully to the horse they view as the leader in their herd. Herd dynamics are based on a 'pecking order' to establish leadership among the individuals in the herd. Because horses are prey animals and depend on these herd dynamics for survival, the leadership established between individuals is *THE* key ingredient for how a horse will respond.

When horses do not view the human as operating from a position of leadership, we will observe behaviors ranging from extreme fear and lacking confidence, to pushy, disrespectful and downright dangerous. Because we haven't been taught what this means, it's importance, or how to do this, many people go along really pretty well with horses by limited their activities to doing what's familiar and getting into a routine.

There's nothing wrong with doing what we know, but I describe this as having a 'conditional' relationship with your horse. We'll ride inside an arena but not out, or with a small group but not a large one, and never ride on a windy day! It's more common than you think that people never ask their horse to canter for the fear of creating a runaway situation.

Where fear interferes is when we know at a survival level that we're operating within the confines of a routine with horses and it's really just a matter of time before something happens outside of the routine and we then won't know what to do.

What skills would we need to have in order to reach what is my personal goal with horses...

***To be able to go anywhere, anytime and do anything...
and have fun doing it!***

Tipping the Scales Toward Confidence

I wish I could wave a magic wand and instantly give people the ability to communicate clearly with horses in every situation. There's no magic wand, but there is a way for people with enough desire to study from a unique program designed to establish the skill and ability to move towards a high level of communication with horses.

There are three basic ingredients make a recipe for successful communication with horses:

Techniques, Tools & Time

When these three aspects of horsemanship are understood and accessed, anyone's skills can advance quite rapidly. Without any one of these ingredients, the other two will continue to struggle. I'll explain these aspects individually and how they support each other.

Techniques designed for the horse to have the greatest understanding of what we're asking is the basis for advancing our skills. There's a lot of great information available today on how to read the horse, but to me our success lies in the ability for the horse to read us. Because the horse is already clear in the language of the herd, techniques are the framework to emulate the behavior of another horse... and not just any horse... the lead horse.

Everything we could ever ask of a horse can be broken down into three categories:

1. Desensitizing to rhythmic motion - which means teaching a horse through operate conditioning that when our body language is relaxed that they can reflect our relaxation even when experiencing something new, different, sudden or abrupt.
2. Rhythmic pressure - begins without physical contact and is reflective of what horses are most familiar with in the dynamics of the herd, first using posture and intent, then gradually increasing in pressure until the horse makes even the slightest effort and is reinforced with the instant and complete release of that pressure.
3. Steady pressure - is similarly applied, but using physical touch to administer lightest to gradually increasing firmness and release to reinforce the effort and gain understanding from the horse.

These three categories become the basis for communication in all conditions, riding, leading, feeding, handling feet, vet checks, trailer loading, crossing water, giving injections, moving through confined spaces, catching, etc. Our skill and ability for high-level communication in all conditions stems from this basis of understanding. It gives us the ability to 'hold a conversation' with a horse regardless of the situation we find ourselves in.

Tools designed for communication make all the difference in the world to the horse. Can you use just any old tool with horses? Of course you can. Can the horse figure out what it is we want? Sure, they can. Horses are one of the most adaptable, willing and trying animals, but why make it any more difficult to figure out what we're asking of them, especially when we start asking more of them.

I don't disagree that people can get along quite well with the tools they have... but usually under two conditions. First, that person has a strong skill set of pressure and release using any tool, and secondly that the horse is usually operating within a routine where confusion of what's being asked is minimized.

This is where the combination of tools and techniques operates hand-in-hand. When we ask a horse to do something outside of their routine in an effort to expand our interaction, the horse becomes confused and has a likelihood of reacting as any prey animal when put under mental pressure. In that situation our ability to clearly communicate can become quite challenging and this is when the average tool will not support the effectiveness of the pressure and the immediacy of the release that the horse needs to help them out of their state of confusion.

This is why I have tools specially made with very particular specifications. Even the folks that make it for me can't imagine why some of the features I require would make that much difference. They even carry the same design in a variety of colors, but those beautiful colors change the feel transmitted from me to the horse... and I will not sacrifice my clarity of communication just because I like the color purple!!

My product design features are presented on video in my website, KarenScholl.com - there are too many to list here - but anyone can view the subtleties of the design and decide for yourself whether the same features are important to you as well.

Time actually practicing cannot be replaced by anything in the whole world. This is why I feel it's imperative to make learning enjoyable. It's common sense that people will spend more time doing enjoyable activities and it's unfortunate that learning new things can be easily turned into a miserable experience.

Some people are wonderfully talented with horses... but that doesn't necessarily transfer to their skill in teaching people. In fact, those with incredible talent can sometimes become easily frustrated with the student because they just don't understand why the rest of us just don't get it! I'll ask an audience who's paid good money to be yelled at, and you can imagine the number of hands that go up!

Learning anything new puts us outside our comfort zone and into an uncomfortable state. It's been my observation that most humans have a natural resistance to new or different information, some more than others. I like to consider myself an open-minded person, but I catch myself sometimes feeling that same resistance when I hear something I don't necessarily agree with rather than relaxing, remaining open to new or different possibilities and at least considering what's being offered.

By understanding this natural inclination and uncomfortable feeling, we can understand why some people seem to have all the time in the world for their horse while others let them become pasture ornaments. When we enjoy the learning process, develop a willingness to make mistakes and just keep trying... that investment of time will one day result in an amazing feeling of connection and understanding between you and every horse you'll interact with.

To me, time is not just our ability to juggle daily activities... it's about what we do with the time that we have. If we go out to our horse and just fall into the same routine, to me we're not necessarily moving in the direction of that wonderful goal... to be able to go anywhere, anytime and do anything... and have fun doing it!

Even with the most well-trained horse in the world, that horse is still left to figure out our style of communication. This is where my passion for teaching lies... I know that anyone with enough heart and desire can develop the ability I'm describing and to a level that even the horse will think we're brilliant.

In Conclusion

By understanding the originations of fear and that new knowledge builds confidence, our journey with horses can take a new, expansive direction. This direction is guided by our drawing from the psychology of horses through herd dynamics, and becoming the individual they look to in every situation and under any condition in our position of leadership.

A summary of this approach is that *leadership* builds *confidence* and gains the mutual *trust* between horse and human. Enjoy *your* journey with horses!

Karen Scholl travels full-time throughout the United States presenting her program, Horsemanship for Women at clinics, horse fairs and speaking engagements. Learn more on www.KarenScholl.com or call 888-238-3447.