



From Prey Animal to Partner

Kate Tapley

When working with horses, it helps tremendously to recognise two basic instincts that have developed over millions of years to help horses survive in the wild. While there are few natural predators to horses in this country, horses have evolved to respond as if there might be, and their survival instincts remain active in the right sides of their brains or their old brain.

The first survival instinct for us to be aware of is the fright / flight instinct, which tells a horse to try to escape from danger. A horse may decide in an instant to run away very fast – or to kick, bite, or push at a perceived threat. It so happens that humans look and smell like predators to horses, so sometimes horses will be triggered into protecting themselves against humans in one of these two ways. Often when people get into trouble around horses, it is because the horse has perceived the human as a predator, and is following its natural instinct to protect itself.



So, the first skill for us to develop is to be non-predatory in our actions, and to assume instead the role of partner to the horse. All of our movements should be round, rhythmical and smooth – like horses' own movements are. We mustn't scream or cling or run near horses, or do anything that might encourage them to view us as predators. It helps to hang your bottom jaw and let all the breath go in your body.

The second survival instinct (or “right-brained” tendency) for us to be aware of is the herd instinct. Horses have a deep-seated need to operate in a cohesive group with a distinct “pecking order,” and to follow the leadership of a boss or “alpha” horse. This herd instinct and clear understanding of leadership roles is essential for the protection of the herd against predators. We can help our horse to feel secure and relaxed by behaving as a leader toward them – assuming the role of the dominant horse to whom our horse would naturally turn for guidance. This builds trust, and gives the horse the sense that we have the knowledge and ability to protect them against danger. It also encourages the horse to engage the left side of his/her brain – where reasoning, thinking, listening and learning occur. Ultimately our horse will come to understand that their relationship with us is that of a partner, not a prey animal. The closer our partnership with a horse, the more connection and communication we can achieve. This allows us to “do less and get more,” and to have more fun more safely.

In order to encourage horses to perceive us as leaders, we must develop the skill of presenting all instructions in their own language they are used to. There are four aspects to the horse's language. The first is focus, and we use three eyes, our two eyes and our belly button to show the horse where we want to go. The second is body energy. When we become active in our body the horse will become active in their's. Conversely when we slow down our energy the horse slows their's. Thirdly we ask the horse to follow a feel with "four phases of firmness" – just as horses do with each other. At first we ask with a touch or suggestion (Phase 1), and then increase the stimuli through Phases 2, an ask 3, a tell and 4 the promise. Phase 4 is enough to cause the horse to wake up and respect our leadership if he/she has not responded to the previous stimuli. Fourthly as we progress through the phases, we immediately *stop* asking when the horse responds correctly. This rewards the horse, and over time the horse will learn to look for this reward at lower phases of firmness. It is also important to remember to persist with the stimuli until the horse responds correctly. If we just "give up," this tells the horse that we don't *really* care if they respond or not – and they will lose respect for our leadership and be even less likely to succeed the next time. Progressing through the four phases of firmness places us in the role of a non-predatory leader with our horse, and this is the best way to encourage the horse to want to be our partner.

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Horses have an almost uncanny ability to tune in to our emotions, body energy, physical movements, and body language – because this is how they communicate among themselves. The more we express ourselves in these ways, the better horses understand us, and the more willing they are to become our partners. For example, to ask a horse to walk through a gateway, increase the energy in your body, look towards the gate, squeeze your ankles together until the horse moves forward, and steer with your legs and reins. As soon as the horse responds and moves toward the gateway, stop asking and move with the horse. We also play games with horses in the same way they do with each other. This helps them to engage the left or newer sides of their brains, and orientates them to us as partners.

Understanding how horses react, communicate, and think helps us to "speak the horse's own language" and develop a mutually rewarding partnership based on non-predatory leadership. This beautiful and unique experience is what we are referring to when we say "**Build a Bond Beyond Belief.**"



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