

## **Aggressive Horses**

**By Marie Hoffman**

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Have you ever owned a horse that would pin his ears when you approach him while he is eating? Have you known of a horse that would chase you out of the pasture?

Over the years I have worked with several horses who would pin their ears, bite at their handlers, kick, or even chase their handlers out of their stalls or pastures. One of the horses was as young as 4 months old. They were all sexes: mares, geldings, and stallions. They were many different breeds.

In order to change the horse's behavior you must first find the reason for the behavior. Is the horse so afraid he feels the need to be aggressive? For this article I will call this Type A. This would be similar to a horse cornered by wolves and attacks to save his life. Though humans are not wolves some horses perceive them as dangerous, or is the horse higher on his perceived pecking order and considers the handler a submissive horse he can chase away from his space or food. I will call this Type B. Both types can learn to change their behavior, but should be handled differently. The handler also needs to have a different attitude. Type A horse needs confidence and the handler should do as much as he can to instill it. Type B need to learn respect and so the handler needs to always approach the horse in a confident yet friendly manner.

Sometimes it is difficult to tell which type you are dealing with until you get started. It is necessary to be able to read their body language to tell which type they are.

The situation I like to use is: I have the horse in a stall. I first see if he will let me walk into the stall without pinning his ears or turning to kick me. Often because the horse was just brought here, he has not associated the stall as his space yet. So Type B will usually not try to protect his space yet. Most will stand and let me walk up to them if they are Type B and will move away if they are type A. Type A will not want to look at you where type B will. Type A may turn his rump to me and/or move so his head is in a corner so he can't see me.

There are varying degrees of both types of behavior. There are also (usually stalled) horses that would never be aggressive to humans that would pin their ears when they are fed. These horses are protecting their food from the horses in the next stall. Their expression should change to relaxed when a human approaches. The ears should change to half mast and the eyes to soft. The horses I will talk about in this article are horses that are aggressive to their human handlers.

For Type A horses my goal is to teach them to trust me. You might own a horse that has these behaviors and yet have a good riding horse. Some horses can be used for riding and be serviceable, yet still not trust humans. Not all horses are so afraid that they become aggressive, but some are insecure enough and feel threatened enough to want to protect themselves from humans. One horse I retrained like this was named Dream. He was a AQHA gelding that had attacked several people. He once broke down the front of his stall to bite at someone. He was more of an exception on the aggressive side. He did not ride well either; he wanted to run away all the time, he was so afraid. This horse was actually very gentle in his personality. He had been trained by too many quick fix trainers (6) and felt the need to protect himself from humans. He would not look at a human at all. He avoided eye contact. The aggressive behavior never appeared while I trained him because I never pushed him to the point he felt the need to protect himself. Knowledge of the horse's body language is very important in retraining this type of horse. Over the period of 6 months with the help of TTellington-Jones Equine Awareness Method, he learned to trust and respect humans. He learned to tie, accept electric clippers, ride in an arena and on the trail and load in a step up horse trailer. Dream is now safe to be around and is happy in his life as an advanced school horse over fences.

How I teach a horse to trust can be very individualized. The time it takes to change the horse's behavior can take several days to several months. Usually I will go to the horse several times per day and go in and do TT.E.A.M. circles with my hand on the horse's shoulders and talk in a toning kind of voice. This is like saying "Gooooooooo boooooooy". I ask nothing of the horse at this stage. If the horse is still moving away after several days and I have approached him 30 or more times, I will bring in a little grain to put in his feed pan to eat while I do the circles. I want him to have a positive association when I am with him and touch him. The chewing will activate his para-sympathetic nervous system (his thinking state) and deactivate his sympathetic nervous system (his instinctive state).

The use of TT.E.A.M. touches on the horse gives the horse a different sense of his body and usually improves his relationship with his handler. As I use the TTtouch on the horse, I will find if there are any sore or tender places. I will note them and see if they are the cause of the horse's aggressiveness. If the horse is ticklish or sore he will show aggressive like body language

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to tell you to stay away from that spot. This is different than either Type A or B aggressive behavior. It should be recognized as the horse communicating with you that what you are doing is unpleasant for the horse. This should be treated like a Type A behavior, but if the handler acts timid the horse could soon become a Type B. The confident handler should use different touches to train the horse to accept being touched on his body all over. If the horse is sore the soreness should be relieved before you should expect the horse to stand while you touch him all over.

Type A horses will not usually pin their ears as you approach. If they do, they want you to leave and are close to a Type B. Some horses may pin their ears when they approach and/or eat their grain though. In either case, I do one of two things. I use my hand to physically move the ears forward every time they start to go back to pinned, if I feel the horse is safe enough to stand next to. Of course I stand right by his shoulder and neck where I am safe. Or, standing in a safe place I will, using only enough force to get an ear forward response, use a whip to tap the horse on the shoulder or neck until he puts his ears forward. It usually only takes one tap to have the horse put his ears forward. When I tap the horse, he will usually move away from me to the back of the stall. I quit with the whip the second the horse moves his ears forward, even a little. If I did not quit then, the horse would become more afraid and the aggressive behavior would become worse. Some horses will put their ears up at the sight of the whip and that is great. I would prefer not to tap/hit the horse in any way, if at all possible. The handler MUST be able to read the horse's body language to tell the split second the horse moves his ears away from pinned and changes his expression from aggressive. The ears are the window of the horse's emotions. The horse's attitude and expression will change dramatically once he puts his ears up.

Once the horse puts his ears up I will lead him over to the bit of grain I put in the pan and stroke his shoulder while he eats it. I might use my hand or use the whip to stroke him. I am also talking in a toning voice.

If you watch your horses loose, look at the expression of the more submissive horse when he tries to snatch a little hay from the dominate horse. He will have the look in his eyes, ears and muzzle of what I call "asking" to have a bite of hay. This look is a non-threatening posture showing respect but not fear.

Once the horse starts to look forward to my visits by standing when I approach him with his ears in a normal position and his eyes are looking at me, I sometimes bring grain and sometimes I do not. Eventually I eliminate the grain.

Once the horse will let me approach him, I stroke the horse all over his body first with the wand (a four foot stiff whip). If the horse kicks at the wand, I hold him and stand at the shoulder where I am safe and keep stroking until he quits. The first time he lets me stroke his leg without kicking I quit stroking him there. If I hit him for kicking at the wand, I would only be justifying his fear. I have had some horses especially under the age of 1 year that it took a very long time to get them used to being stroked on the hind legs. They would kick, crouch, and sometimes lie down. I think they are ticklish. I will stroke either slower or faster depending on which way they are able to tolerate one short stroke without kicking. Over time I will gradually be able to add more strokes without the kicking response.

Once the horse is used to the wand and then my hands, I then use a light soft towel to gently flap all over his body. I make sure I do this gentle enough at first that the horse does not become frightened. He may flinch, but if he moves away I use the towel in a different manner until he can stand. I will often just rub the horse with it at this point. Once the horse can accept this I will very gently pat him with the towel. Once he accepts this I move on to a gentle flopping of the towel on his body. I will gradually work up to a more aggressive flapping. Making sure at no time I sting him with the towel. I hold the horse and do not tie him. I want him to accept my different ways of touching him. y giving him the option of moving away will give me a better indication of how well he is accepting my training.

If the horse is very tense where he is unable to chew when I put my fingers in the corner of his mouth or tap my fingers on his tongue. I will give him a small amount of grain to encourage the chewing to activate his para-sympathetic nervous system (his thinking state) and deactivate his sympathetic nervous system (his instinctive state). It is very important for the horse to be in his thinking state or the lessons will not progress. He can be in his instinctive state of freeze and not be learning to change his behavior though he is standing quietly while you work with him. I always put my fingers in the corners of the horse's mouth often to check if he is able to chew and thus learn the lesson I am teaching. If he is unable to chew, then I know to slow down or back up in my methods because I am going too fast and the horse is unable to learn because he is in his instinctive state of freeze. The order of instinctive states of the horse are: flight, fight, freeze, and faint.

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I would continue with this horse in the same step by step system. I would use other things that I knew bothered him gradually building his trust. I use things like going over plywood, between, over and under plastic and going near things the horse is unsure about. I would be very attentive to his body language signals to be sure that he was never challenged beyond what he could be successful at handling. The horse must stay calm or go back to calm quickly. The handler must also at all times stay calm and keep breathing.

This may sound funny to say the handler needs to keep breathing but it is easy when things do not go as planned to hold your breath and so will your horse. Breathe a sigh and the horse will often visibly calm down. If one member of the horse's herd sighs then it signals all the horses that it is safe. Set things up to be successful.

The change in the horse is gradual, though the dangerous aggressive behavior usually disappears within the first week or so. It is necessary to continue with the trust building exercises until the horse has a good confidence level in the handler. He must trust that the handler will treat him fairly and not challenge him beyond what he is able to handle. Once the horse is at this point the aggressive behavior will usually not return.

Type B horses are handled with a different focus by the handler and I will cover this in Aggressive Horses part 2.