

Spook Corners By Marie Hoffman

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You are saddled and ready to ride. Out to the arena you go and mount, only to find your horse is still acting like there is a horse eating monster in the corner of the arena. In reality there may be a barrel or a tree or something else your horse has convinced himself he is going to die if he goes near that corner.

This is the case with a horse named Puzzle. He is a 7 year old AQHA gelding that is trained in his basics but has not had very many miles on him.

My first ride on him in my arena where he had been several years earlier and gone around with no problem was very interesting. He would not go near the far end of the arena. He would prick his ears sharply forward and not respond to my cues to go forward or flex his poll. He would not go within 50 feet of the end of the arena where there was a snow fence along a pasture fence. This snow fence was plastic and moved with the wind. Puzzle had lost his confidence. He thought everything that was not familiar would cause him harm or possibly eat him. Even when he was led he would look at new things and raise his head and want to go into his instinctive state of flight.

I needed to train him how to think about new situations and look to his handler for confidence instead of taking control himself. Once he will look to the handler and the handler shows him how to think through the scary situations. He will gain the confidence he needs to handle new situations. I started on the ground leading him through some mildly scary situations.

One example is when I led him past a water hose on the ground. He raised his head and acted alarmed. I took a deep breath to help him breathe. I asked him to lower his head to wither height. Then I used my fingers in the corner of his mouth to get him to chew. He did both of these things and I talked to him telling him he was all right and a good boy. Now he was able to think and learn that the hose was not going to hurt him. We walked by it with his head lowered. He stepped toward me and I used the wand (a four foot stiff whip) to signal him on his neck not to walk in my space. We continued forward. I acted like nothing was happening different than just leading him to be turned out. I stopped him and stroked him all over with the wand. Once he relaxed, I turned him out.

The next time he walked past the hose, he gave it a suspicious look but did not go into his flight reflex thus scaring himself more.

When a horse raises his head and snorts, he is pumping adrenaline into his system preparing him for flight or flight. Once the adrenaline is in his system it is hard for some horses to override it's effects. The horse then overreacts to new and sometimes old stimulus until the adrenaline wears off.

This may have happened to you as a child when you heard an unfamiliar sound at night and scared yourself. Once you became scared then every sound sounded like what you feared most was outside your window. I remember spending a few nights alarmed at every noise outside my window when I was about 10.

My goal was not to let this adrenaline rush happen to Puzzle if at all possible. He was not reacting this way to be bad. He was just scaring himself. If I would get after him and punish him for scaring himself I would have caused more adrenaline to be pumped into his system, compounding the problem. By lowering his head and getting him to chew I can override his instinctive behavior of flight. Thus stopping or minimizing the amount of adrenaline he is instinctively putting in his system.

The same holds true when I am riding him and dealing with the spooking at the end of the arena. I do not want to put him in a situation of him scaring himself and putting so much adrenaline into his system he is acting where everything is going to get him. Yet I do want to ride him into the corner.

I rode him the first ride where he would go comfortably without looking at the scary end of the arena. We worked on flexing at the poll slightly to both sides. Once a horse will easily flex at the poll the rider is able to override the flight reflex similar to lowering the horse's head. When Puzzle was calm he flexed easily to each side. I will ask him to go into the corner during the next ride.

I have noticed that when a horse is going to scare himself and is pumping adrenaline into his system he has a stiff poll and stiff forward pointing ears. Once I can get the horse to flex at the poll, I will ask him to bend away from the scary end or

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object. The goal is to only let the horse look at it with one eye. When a horse is seeing something with one eye and the both and then one again the object appears to jump or move, scaring the horse more. Similar to when you close one eye, opening the opposite eye and then switch the open and closed eyes. What ever you are looking at seems to move.

I will use my inside legs to push the horse toward the direction I want his body to go. This is similar to a shoulder in. When the scary object is on the right. The horse's head is positioned to the left so the rider can see his left eye and nostril. The horse's hips are slightly to the right of his shoulders. The horse is moving forward in direction.

I did this with Puzzle with some success, but he was still very tense about the corners. I ended each session stopping as close to the corner as I could and where I knew he would stand still. I dismounted, led him over to the corner and gave him a bite of grass. I stroked him and told him he was a good boy. I did this after each session, even when I could not get him very close while riding. My goal was to change his expectations about the corner. Instead of being scary, it contained food that was good to eat! The chewing also activated his thinking state (para-sympathetic nervous system) enabling him to retain the new information that the corner was a safe place. When a horse is in his instinctive state he is unable to retain that a situation is safe and he can be calm.

Under saddle I want the horse to turn an ear back when I signal him to do something acknowledging my cue. I also know I have the horses attention on me when he will turn an ear back at the same time and on the same side when I am cueing him with the same side leg. It took several session before Puzzle gained enough confidence to be able to turn his ears toward me near the corner at all. Away from the corner he would turn his ears toward me each time I signaled him with my legs.

Each ride I was able to get him closer and closer to the corner. By the third ride I was able to ride him through the corner doing a shoulder in with a sharp bend in his neck and poll. We trotted several speeds and cantered working on our departures. I also worked with Puzzle on moving forward at all gaits promptly when signaled. I didn't focus on the corner. I just did a shoulder in with a "too" flexed poll to the inside each time we approached the corner. I petted him by rubbing him with my hand while holding the reins each time we went around the corner and he responded to my aids. After the corner I rode him in the normal way. I ended each session standing in the corner while he rested. This was to change his expectations about the corner. Instead of being a scary place it was a place to rest and not work. I dismounted and gave him a bite of grass.

I did this for 5 more rides. Sometimes there were other horses in the arena with me and I would follow their riders when they went around the scary corner. Puzzle did not have any problem with the corner when the horse in front of him went by in a calm manner. This helped him gain some confidence that he also could go into the corner and be safe. I also realized that he needed to work on his own in the corners too. But occasionally following the other horse gave us both a break. Puzzle was able to go through the corner without being the least bit tense and I could ride him through petting him telling him he was a good boy.

By the 6th ride he went into the corners without too much fuss after the first 15 minutes. At first I had to use the shoulder in to get him past but after a few times around he was fine with only a slight bend in his poll to the inside. I reversed and had to do a shoulder in with a strong bend for the first 5 times around. I was able then to continue with only a slight bend to the inside. I continued to rub his neck each time we went around the "corner".

I now have the tools and a starting point to continue Puzzle's education. Puzzle is gaining confidence each ride, becoming calmer and much easier to handle. His calm personality tells me that he will gain this much needed confidence with more positive experiences.