



COLIC KILLS

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Spotlight on The Equine Touch

Understanding Pain In Horses

By Jock and Ivana Ruddock

Pain affects not only the horse's training and athletic performance but also his everyday life, from standing in the stall to playing in the pasture. When something changes in your horse, be it physical, behavioral (or emotional) never discount pain as being the cause. When and if found, pay close attention and do your best to do something about it.



Response - pain in the withers

Too often we hear, "It's a training issue", "it's a matter of respect", "he's just in a bad mood" or "it's just a mare thing" when ninety-nine times out of a hundred the horse is in pain somewhere. Of course there are some horses with training issues, with bad behavior, and moody mares for sure; we won't argue that fact. This is why we work with great trainers who can recognize, by the horse's behavior, the specific clues to confirm that. These trainers also know and recognize pain-related issues; they have their hands ready, before the training session, to check that the horse is pain-free and ready 'to go'.

Remember, horses suffer silently, without words. Changes in behavior or refusing to do what we ask is sometimes the only indication we get that something hurts. As a prey animal he cannot show his lameness or other impairments of natural movement. If he did so, the predator in the wild would very easily recognize him as the 'weakest' one - an easy lunch or dinner.

It is an accepted fact that when the horse shows obvious lameness (except from acute injury) he is already sore in over 80% of his body. He will try to compensate for any pain as long as his body allows him - and the horse is the master of compensation! Eventually when the compensation mechanisms are exhausted or some other damage occurs, the horse becomes obviously lame. This compensation build-up period can go unnoticed for a long time, especially in horses with few physical demands.

If your horse trusts you and understands you, he will by nature comply, provided doing so does not hurt him (we all know of horses who will perform even if in pain to please us!) If it does hurt him to perform the task, and you then force the issue, he will lose trust in you. Making a trusting horse do something when he is reluctant, whether from pain or fear, will dismantle trust. That is risking far too much - not only your relationship with your horse, but also your horse's health.

What Pain Indicates

Pain is a natural warning system, meant to slow the animal (or us) down. Pain 'helps' to limit motion, to protect the body or its parts from further injury. This time of limited mobility allows the body to heal and repair its damaged tissue. Pain gives you feedback on how your horse's body is currently working, and warns you that things are not going well for the animal, so heed that warning. The horse may spend weeks, even months, giving you the first subtle signs, and if you don't know how to read them, one day you may find yourself wondering why you are lying flat on the ground waiting for a doctor, or your horse flat on the ground waiting for the vet.

Recognizing and Describing Pain

Pain can take many forms in the horse, and knowing those can mean a lot to your horse's future health or performance. There is a physical and emotional side to pain and each individual horse can respond many different ways (even under pain-evoking stimuli). The reaction depends on their genetic predisposition (breed), their personality, and of course the level of pain. There are stoic horses (war breeds, police horses) that do not show pain in an obvious manner, and there are horses (more nervous types) who act like every scratch is a broken leg (thoroughbreds). Horses with acute pain will react in a more dramatic way than horses with chronic pain (acute=recent, chronic=old).

The following may be of use to you when trying to identify and describe the pain that has been affecting your horse. Bear in mind that the first signs of discomfort can be as subtle as a changed facial expression or the horse holding his breath should you touch or run your hands over the area that is of concern to him.

Observe your horse in his natural environment and note his physical state – his spontaneous movement, body posture, head position, ear position, nostrils, breathing rate, and eyes.

With more severe pain (to a point) the horse will be reluctant to move, his head goes down (this is not a sign of relaxation, but a sign of depression), his ears turn backward and their movement is minimal, and nostrils are widened with 'wrinkles' around them. The eyes can also be wide open with an almost fearful expression in them. Pain can also change the horse's vital signs - his breathing is more frequent and obvious, sometimes with staccato sighs during exhalation, as well as a heart beat rate increase.

Together with the physical signs of pain, horses exhibit different behavioral/ emotional changes: the horse is less interested in his surroundings. If turned out with the herd, he stays by himself, or if in the stall, he turns away from the doors or turns to the darkest most distant corner. When approached he is not responding or he turns away

and can 'pin' his ears. If you try to offer him grain or a 'treat' he will ignore them, showing no interest in it; also his general food intake can be affected – especially in horses with chronic pain, so take note of any weight drop.

Most caring and sensitive horse owners recognize these signs and they are aware that their horse is not 100%. Many of them however have a problem recognizing the origin of the pain (or close to it); this can be an extremely hard call, even for veterinarians.



Response - pain in the stifle

Pain Origins

Visceral pain (pain from organs) If the pain originates from the abdominal or pelvic cavity we call these symptoms colic. A colicky horse swishes his tail, looks at, bites, or kicks at his abdomen, often grinding his teeth and maybe sweating. Often they move a lot, walking in circles and frequently trying to lie down and get up. In severe pain they thrash around on the ground or try to roll. Their vital signs, breathing, heartbeat and capillary refill time as well as temperature are altered.

Musculoskeletal pain (pain from muscles, bones and joints) Performance horses suffer in many cases with pain in the musculoskeletal system. Those animals are reluctant to move, shifting weight from one leg to another, sometimes holding the limb in unusual positions, many times with the head and neck in a fixed position. If they are forced to move they will alter their weight bearing and favor the affected limb. This abnormal gait (lameness) is noticeable as a head "bob" (when the front is affected) or tail swing (if the hind has the problem).

Sometimes pain is mistaken for muscle soreness and/or stiffness that comes after intensive training or competition, where the muscles have been 'misused, abused or overused'. This post-exercise soreness can be noticeable several hours after exercise. The stiff horse is reluctant to move, looking like a 'wooden horse', but after a short warming up session the movement becomes more fluid and the stiffness appears to disappear. This post-exercise stiffness can be prevented by proper cooling down after

each session and light stretching and mobilization after exercise to help drain excessive lactic acid and other waste products from the muscle. To prevent further injury the horse should have time to recover (minimum 24 hours).

Many horses suffer from back pain, which isn't always due to an ill fitting or badly designed saddle. Everything that affects the horse's normal and natural movement affects his back. Back pain is often misunderstood as a training issue or behavioral issue; many times a lack of performance can be attributed to back pain.

At first horses may react to back pain only by changing their behavior – they start to be 'difficult' during the saddling or girthing up. They pin their ears, swish their tail, toss their head or even try to nip. They cannot stand still and they move away while being mounted, sometimes sinking down or squatting, which they may also do after dismounting. Suddenly they become 'hypersensitive to brushing' and many times they give the farrier or trimmer a hard time when lifting their hind legs. Physical signs of back pain are not so obvious and they can be misinterpreted for other problems.

Horses with back pain are very heavy on the forehand, they do not like to turn in one particular direction, and they are unable to travel straight. They may exhibit front or hind leg lameness as the legs cannot be used properly, sometimes short-striding on front often accompanied by stumbling or tripping. Short-striding behind is often accompanied by toe-dragging.

'Training issues' develop - the horse is resisting, is reluctant to work, or shows a lack of attention to the rider. As the session progresses the horse's resistance grows. Regular backing up and rearing are the end stages of 'obvious' back pain.

When the tissue under the saddle is deeply damaged by excessive pressure, white hairs appear. Muscle atrophy is also a sign of prolonged negative effects of a bad saddle, or unusual movement due to the back muscles not working properly.

If you run your fingers gently over the horse's back (parallel with the spine) the horse will dip his back down; this is a natural reflex. If your horse drops almost to his knees or otherwise overreacts, you know that his back hurts.

At the first sign of pain, whatever the intensity, whatever the origin, one should address it with any or all of the following as appropriate: rest, bodywork, dental work, hoof care, homeopathic remedies, herbs, nutritional adjustments, or holistic veterinary intervention (especially if colic is suspected or in acute cases of injuries).

How Pain Affects Biomechanics

Pain can cause horses to change their walk, trot, or canter, and result in countless other injuries. The biomechanical changes that the horse makes as a result of pain can cause even more pain, strains, stress fractures and other injuries far away from

the site of the original problem. Inadequate dental work is a prime example of, as we like to say, the “criminal” that can cause a compensation “victim” and distant pain reaction, as can badly trimmed hooves.

The biomechanical adaptations a horse has to make to compensate for a saddle that does not fit and a rider who cannot ride can eventually create a myriad of compensation problems, all eventually with their own pain signature, without even considering the direct pain from the origin, the criminal.

When something hurts, the horse’s bio-mechanical body automatically is aware of it, focuses on it, and reacts to it. The most important assignment for any caring horse owner is to find out why the horse is hurting and address the problem holistically. We can use our hands for both discovering trouble spots and correcting them. Bodywork is essential for recovery; touch is an important factor in bringing back balance and wellness.

Considering Pain

Pain should never be considered normal. The horse’s feet, legs, back, neck, TMJ and any other part should not be hurting and interfering with the horse’s normal activity, nor the abnormal activities that we are all too often expecting him to participate in. We know of trainers such as Mark Rashid in whose clinics unsound horses are not permitted to take part (another horse is offered to the student). Jack Lieser is another trainer who checks out every horse on his clinics for training soundness.

The possibility of pain should never be overlooked. A couple of years ago a novice horse owner was overheard discussing her new horse, who was dramatically head shy, with a lady who was pushing to “train” it for her. As it turned out, the horse was in pain. A preliminary check, which took no more than 1 minute, showed that the horse had massive hooks on the teeth, which had not been addressed for over two years and as a result the TMJ, atlas and poll were all directly compromised and in pain, AND a subsequent ear check showed that they were infested by ticks. Clearly this was not a training issue.

When one considers the origin of pain in the horse, it must always be remembered that the criminal may be internal as well as in the skeleton or soft tissue - as much as 80% of all internal problems in the horse have an effect upon the external.

Addressing the Pain

The primary objective regarding pain is to eliminate it by addressing the source (not to disguise the pain with drugs) for the horse’s benefit as well as your own. Severe pain has to be controlled (a topic beyond the scope of this article), as it triggers the stress response. This stress response induces the neural, endocrine, hematological

and immune changes in the body. Some of those actually work against the healing process. A horse in pain is also in a depressed state of mind, which does have a negative effect on the overall healing and recovery, from surgery or injury.

Pain coming from soft tissue is really more often the cause of the problem than we think. The good news for caring horse owners is that they can learn how to detect these 'ouchy' spots with their hands and at the same time make a positive difference in the soft tissue, for the horse and of course for themselves. In a future article you will read about palpation skills, or exploring by touch - so beneficial and yet easily learned.

Hands-on soft tissue techniques are very valuable for safely and effectively bringing back musculoskeletal integrity. Giving the horse appropriate bodywork and exercise, as well as utilizing other holistic modalities, will help to resolve some of the problems from every day work, play or competition.

Early recognition of pain and addressing it immediately helps to contain it to its original location, thus preventing the compensation factor from imposing the problem on other parts of the horse's body. Ignoring the first warning signs allows the breakdown of structure, balance and harmony throughout the entire horse, increasing the risk of serious injury, and a long time interruption of your equine activity.

Remember, pain is a warning. If you want to succeed in your equine activity or partnership, and give your horse better quality of life, you will have to heed that warning immediately. Stop, look, listen, try to find out why and where the horse hurts, assess the situation, change what you are doing and address the problem holistically. Consult your horse specialists - dentist, trimmer, veterinarian, equine osteopath, and qualified bodyworker.

Pain is real, and it is important that when we see a horse avoid or resist, we get out of this frame of mind that "it is a training issue". That answer is simply not acceptable in today's enlightened world of understanding horse behavior.

About the authors:

Jock Ruddock pioneered The Equine Touch, and with his veterinarian wife, Ivana Ruddock, has turned the Equine Touch into a discipline that is now recognized and applauded by all who see or use it, including veterinarians throughout Europe. The Equine Touch, a rebalancing, retraining, and some would say healing modality for the horse, is the first non-diagnostic, non-invasive, energy and connective soft-tissue discipline in the world to be awarded national accreditation status in the United Kingdom. Visit www.theequinetouch.com.