

Why Did my Horse Do That?

How many times have you heard someone grumble about their horse doing something they thought was uncalled for? They might be fussing about a horse that shied at something as harmless as a butterfly or complaining about a horse that refused to get on a trailer. To the human, these and many other actions don't make any sense. We know butterflies and horse trailers aren't something our horses should be concerned about, but they don't see and think about things our way.

Horses and humans are two very different species who see the world from different perspectives and react to it differently. To start with, humans have eyes on the front of their heads, like other predators, and see better to the front. On the other hand, horses' eyes are set to the sides where they can get more of a view to the sides and behind them. Being prey animals, they need a wider range of vision for their safety from predators.

A horse's first line of defense when it is threatened is to flee. If that's not possible, then they can kick and bite to defend themselves. No matter that in today's environment horses are usually pretty safe from predators. They are wired to think in terms of a prey animal's survival instincts and will do so until they feel completely safe about whatever situation they are in.

Sometimes just an ordinary item being in a different place will catch the attention and perhaps trigger the flight/fight instinct. I remember setting a bucket out in front of the barn one time and then having a mare shy when I walked her around the corner. The reaction didn't make much sense to me at the time because the horse wasn't afraid of feed buckets at all, but seeing it out of place caught her attention and she reacted before stopping to notice that it was an ordinary feed bucket!

Another time, we were practicing swinging a lasso until my horse was desensitized to the moving rope. Then my instructor showed me a different throw, one that the only difference was that the rope swung counterclockwise rather than clockwise. It was like starting over on getting my gelding comfortable with the rope again. The difference in his reaction was due to the fact that he was seeing the rope come at him out of a different eye. Instead of coming from the left, the rope came from the right.

Horse trailers are commonly a place where people get frustrated with their horses. To us, it's no big deal, but to the horse, a trailer can be a big scary place that might be harboring all kinds of horse-eating monsters. To walk up to a trailer and get on, a horse has to be willing to step up into and be surrounded and covered by solid barriers on all sides. Not a comfortable situation for an animal that needs to be able to run away from danger.

Knowing this, humans can take time to make certain that their horses get over any claustrophobic tendencies before asking the horse to get on a trailer and stand there. If your horse can't stand close beside a wall, walk over a platform, and duck under something above its head, chances are it won't be comfortable getting on a trailer either. Work on those things away from the trailer, one situation at a time before putting all of them together and the likelihood of the horse getting on the trailer when asked is a lot greater.

If we will take time to consider the world from the horse's viewpoint, a lot of things they do will make more sense to us and we will be able to find ways to help our horses become more comfortable with situations we expose them to. It works a lot better than just expecting them to see the world from our viewpoint which they never really will.