

How to Safely Help your Horse over Fear of Scary Things by Bonnie Martin

Have you ever handled a horse that was afraid of something it saw? If you handle and ride young or many different horses, it's bound to happen. Some horses seem to be super sensitive to so many things whereas others take almost everything in stride. Some will see something they are afraid of and freeze, looking before deciding to leave and others will take off at the slightest suggestion of something amiss. I've been on horses before that were so afraid of something that I could actually feel the horse's heartbeat through the saddle. Not a confidence builder for horse or human either one!

Some horses react in a big way to something that scares them, others startle and soon get over their fear and go on. Being prey animals that were food for predators makes it a necessity that they are aware of their environment. That is the way the species has survived throughout the years, and we can't change that fact. Even very flighty horses can be helped to overcome their fears if dealt with in a calm, consistent manner.

What we can do is help them through some of their fears and to learn to trust that we are not going to place them in harm's way. You can't begin to introduce a horse to all of the many things that might startle or scare it, but you can desensitize them to many things and use the techniques enough that they become a reassuring pattern that will help calm the horse in future situations that are scary for the horse.

Like other skills in horse training, desensitizing a horse to things that scare it works a lot better to start the process from the ground. This is a much safer position for the human, plus it helps build confidence in the horse faster. Later, the concepts will be applied under saddle.

Our understanding of advance and retreat is crucial to the process of desensitizing a horse. If they are flooded with scary things and can't get away from them, their fears just build and build. A horse might eventually just give up and tolerate whatever it is that scared it, but it won't be confident about it, and that doesn't create a safe mount. I bought a young horse who had been started with that kind of technique. He would stand still when something was moving around him such as a rope or even a rider's hand, but he was terrified. Some signs of a problem are a horse with its head high in the air, wide-eyed and not blinking, perhaps flinching if something touches it. Horses like that will tolerate the fear as long as they can and then suddenly explode, perhaps by bolting, perhaps by bucking.

Advance and retreat is a method that introduces the fearful thing in such a way that the horse gets a reward of instant release (retreat) when it first stands still. Then the scary thing is introduced again, and retreat of the object repeats instantaneously. This goes on over and over until the horse realizes that there is nothing to be fearful of and actually relaxes.

An example would be a horse that is afraid of a big ball. Have the horse on a long lead, anywhere from 12-22 feet long, and let it look at the ball from a distance, approaching it if it chooses, but don't force it to. If the horse is scared at all, turn and walk away with the ball between you and the horse, the horse following along at the end of the lead. If it is really afraid still, you might not have a long enough lead line yet. Horses get braver if they are moving after something rather than it coming towards them. When the horse is confident with that, turn and walk backwards holding the ball between you and the horse. This can start with the length of the lead between you and the horse, but gradually the horse will get curious and start to catch up with the ball which is what you want, but the horse does it on its own instead of being forced.

When the horse is curious and trying to touch the ball, hold it still and let him sniff. Remove the ball to a distance before the horse gets scared. Gradually, you should be able to move the ball towards the horse without it being afraid, but don't be in a hurry for that to happen. When the horse is confident, you can approach the horse's shoulder with the ball. Watch for signs of apprehension and retreat before the horse gets upset. This will get your horse confident much faster than trying to make it stand still while you approach with the ball. Eventually, maybe not the first day, first week, or first month, but eventually on your horse's schedule, you will be able to bounce balls off it, roll them under it, and your horse won't pay any attention.

Use this advance and retreat approach with a number of different scary things. Bicycles, umbrellas, cows, feed bags, and beach noodles are just some of the things we've used. You will be amazed at the confidence you can build in your horse that will make it a lot more fun to be around.