

Anger management

Wild horses rarely show aggression, yet it's a common problem seen in domestic equines. Behaviourist Justine Harrison considers the causes and how to tackle the issue

Horses are naturally friendly and social animals. Their survival depends on herd members looking out for each other, so they form strong friendships with their herd mates, and keeping the peace in a group is vital.

Equine scientists studying herds of wild horses rarely see any sign of aggressive behaviour. In fact, in their natural environment, horses often go out of their way to avoid confrontation.

As a prey animal that relies on physical fitness to escape from predators, the risk of injury from fighting another horse is far too costly.

However, we frequently hear reports of 'domestic' horses behaving aggressively to other horses and to humans.

The question is, why does this behaviour occur? Are horses born aggressive or does our management of them cause aggression?

Nature versus nurture

There is little scientific research on inherited behavioural traits in horses, however anecdotally there is growing evidence.

Certain bloodlines are renowned for their aggressive behaviour, so this is likely to be an inherited trait. Deliberate breeding from aggressive horses is certainly to be avoided.

The management of youngsters will affect their subsequent behaviour as adults.

If a dam is aggressive while in-foal, it can affect the foetus, possibly resulting in nervous and aggressive offspring. Foals which grow up with an aggressive parent may learn that this is normal behaviour.

Youngsters who are unable to interact and socialise normally may attack other horses when they do encounter them, as they are frightened and do not know how to behave socially.

They can grow up to become extremely aggressive in their adult life if this isn't addressed in the correct way.

Stallions, sadly, have a reputation for being aggressive when in fact they are naturally amicable creatures.

In the wild, entire horses do confront each other over mares, but these interactions may be brief and largely based on threats rather than physical contact.

More often than not stallions become aggressive as a result of their management – most are isolated from other horses and kept stabled with little or no turnout.

A negative influence

Some medical conditions can influence equine behaviour. Diseases affecting certain parts of the brain – the amygdala, hypothalamus and

frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex – can lead to an increase in aggression in all kinds of animals.

Scientists have also found links between low levels of serotonin – the so-called happy hormone – and the increased risk of impulsive and aggressive behaviours.

Ovarian tumours can cause mares to become aggressive and some do become irritable and prone to lash out if they are in season, due to hormonal imbalances.

In fact, pain is a common cause of aggression in horses. It is often a warning sign a horse may have gastric ulcers or some form of undiagnosed, painful condition.

Horses are often, quite understandably, aggressive in certain situations, such as when they are having an injury examined or receiving their annual flu jab from the vet.

OUR EXPERT

Justine Harrison



Justine is a certified equine behaviourist and uses the science of behaviour to help owners solve issues with their horses.



A horse may be aggressive towards other equines because he is scared

The 'dominance' myth explained

There is a lot of confusion about equine dominance, and some people incorrectly believe horses have a hierarchy, where one is 'alpha' over a group.

This is not the case – horses have complex societies and do not have aggressive 'leaders' in this way.

If a horse is aggressive to others it is because he is struggling – he may be in pain, fearful of others and unable to cope socially.

Or, his basic needs may not be met sufficiently and he is attempting to defend his limited resources.

A man-made problem

How a horse is managed can have a dramatic effect on how he behaves. Aggression is often a result of bad management and training.

Equine behaviourists recognise there are several different types of aggression, each with potentially multiple causes. The most common forms seen in domestic horses are:

Fear aggression: Horses can be aggressive towards people and other equines because they are frightened.

For example, a horse who is nervous of strangers, or frightened of being restrained and having their leg held up, may bite the farrier.

An inadequately socialised horse may kick out at another horse defensively, as they feel threatened by him.

Territorial aggression: Research tells us that wild horses have very few territorial conflicts. As long as they have enough food, shelter, space and water, there is no need to compete with others over these resources in order to survive.

However, if they are put in a deprived environment they may well defend what little they have as a survival tactic.

We often see this behaviour in horses turned out in small paddocks, where one horse may aggressively defend his space if another comes too close.

A horse may also threaten or lash out at his owner when they enter the stable, if he has been kept inside for long periods.

Confinement causes frustration and a horse may become territorial, perhaps standing with his hindquarters at the stable doorway, or he may kick out in an attempt to protect his space.

Redirected aggression: If a horse feels unable to retaliate when bullied by a person or another equine, he will lash out at the next nearest thing. He might take his frustration out by biting a

stable door or his leadrope. He may lunge at his neighbour when stabled or kick out at anyone who happens to be passing by.

Food aggression: This is regularly seen in horses who have been starved, or their food has been limited at some point. Early weaning can also be a cause – a foal that's taken away from his dam too early, or experiences a traumatic weaning, is at risk of developing food-related aggression in later life.

A horse that's possessive about his food is anxious he might lose it. An example of this is the horse that bare his teeth at a neighbour over the stable wall when he is eating from his haynet.

Likewise, a horse may put his ears back and threaten his owner when they enter the stable if he is eating his feed.

Learned aggression: Once a horse has realised that any of the above forms of behaviour have been successful for him – even if the original cause no longer exists – we refer to this as learned aggression.

Take, for example, a horse that felt pain from an ill-fitting saddle when the girth was fastened and bit his owner. If the owner then stops tacking



Learned aggression may be caused by ill-fitting tack

Equine behaviour

him up, he's learned that biting the owner caused this to happen.

Even if a well-fitting saddle is then procured, the horse may continue to bite when tacked up.

Proceed with care

An aggressive horse can be extremely dangerous. The behaviour often escalates quickly and is difficult to change. It can also be self-reinforcing and may quickly become habit.

So if your horse is showing any sign of aggression, seek the advice of your vet and an experienced behaviourist immediately.

Aggressive behaviour can be complex and often has several causes. Don't try and diagnose the problem yourself and never attempt to force your horse into submission – you may make matters far worse and put yourself and your horse in a dangerous position.

Avoid being tempted to punish or bully an aggressive horse. Even if in some cases it may appear to 'work' in the moment, it will simply have suppressed the behaviour and will not have addressed the root cause.

Restraining your horse with harsh equipment such as pressure halters or chifneys, or punishing them with a whip can easily cause the behaviour to escalate and he could become even more dangerous as a result. ■

How to deal with an aggressive horse

1 Your first step is to call the vet as pain is often the cause of aggression. Rule out any physical problems with a thorough physical check-up and get the horse's tack checked to ensure it fits him well and is not causing any discomfort.

2 Contact a qualified equine behaviourist who will be able to analyse the causes of the behaviour and create an effective management and behaviour modification plan, to deal with the problem without using any forceful practices.

3 Don't put your horse in the same situation that caused the behaviour – aggression often escalates and habits can be formed quickly, so you should avoid your horse repeating the behaviour at all costs.

4 Ensure your horse has constant access to forage. Horses would naturally graze for anything up to 20 hours a day, so even a few hours without anything to eat can make them anxious about their food.

5 Maximise turnout with friendly, well-socialised horses and ensure your horse

has plenty of space to run around, play and enjoy some relaxation time.

6 If your horse has become aggressive towards another equine he may well be frightened or struggling socially. If he has some special horse friends he gets on well with, turn him out with these instead. It may be that he needs more time to feel confident and learn how to behave with others.

7 Make sure he has plenty of space to eat his own food away from other horses without feeling threatened. And never be tempted to interrupt your horse when he is eating – leave him alone during this time.

8 Watch his body language – if he has put his ears back or lashed out you may have missed earlier warning signs. Keep an eye out for tension in the facial muscles, narrowed eyes, pursed lips, elongated nostrils or head tossing.

9 Consider why your horse may feel threatened – a horse who kicks out may simply be defending himself.

Living in harmony

Many owners choose to turn horses out in single sex groups. The reasoning behind this is often that horses are thought to be more aggressive in mixed herds and therefore the risk of injuries is higher.

In 2009, a team of Norwegian scientists investigated the behaviour of horses in same sex and mixed sex groups.

They also wanted to see if the horses' behaviour was affected if the space they were in was reduced.

Sixty six horses were divided into small groups of three or four. The different

divisions were mares only, geldings only and mixed sex.

After allowing the horses a few weeks to acclimatise, their social behaviour was recorded and compared.

They were inspected for injuries before and after grouping and again after a month. The team of researchers found that sexual grouping had no significant effect on the horses' social interactions or injuries.

Most of the aggressive interactions recorded were threats and did not involve

physical contact. Very few injuries were found and most were superficial.

However, aggression was highest in the groupings with the smallest space per animal and more horses per feeding place.

The results also showed that horses in the male and mixed sex groups played more than horses in the female groups.

To conclude, researchers suggested that the management of feeding and space allowance are probably more important than gender for successful group housing of horses.



Wild horses living in a herd rarely show aggression

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