

Getting to grips with napping

OUR EXPERT PANEL



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Justine is a certified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help owners solve a wide range of issues with their horses. She is the UK chair of the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants. Visit: www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk

Q My Welsh Cob has started napping and doesn't want to leave the yard for a hack. My riding instructor says he's being lazy but he's usually an honest horse and this is unusual behaviour for him. Could there be another reason why he's doing this, and what should I do?

Name and address withheld

JUSTINE SAYS A 'napping' horse may freeze, back up or turn for home when ridden away from the stable or yard. In extreme cases he may run backwards, rear or bolt. We often see these behaviours when a horse is put into a situation he finds frightening or painful, and, in fact, we could consider these to be normal behavioural responses. The more extreme the behaviour, the more frightened or uncomfortable the horse may be.

Horses that nap are often labelled as naughty or lazy but this is unhelpful because there will always be at least one underlying reason for the behaviour.

He may be reluctant to leave the yard as he's fearful of repeating a painful or traumatic experience – possibly as a result of an undiagnosed physical problem, ill-fitting tack,

poor riding technique or an incident that's frightened him previously.

He may have separation anxiety and be worried about leaving the security of his home and equine friends, or you may have asked him to do too much, too soon, which is causing him to be anxious.

These can be complex issues and it will need a well-structured plan and a patient approach to rebuild his confidence.

- Firstly, rule out any possible physical issues with a thorough veterinary check. Also, ask a master saddler to ensure your tack fits well and is not causing any discomfort or pain.
- If your horse worries about leaving his companions, practise short separations. Start by taking him just a couple of steps away from his friends, then increase the distance gradually in future sessions.
- Build your horse's confidence by very gradually introducing him to unfamiliar objects in a safe environment and reward him for approaching them.
- Don't ask too much, too soon. Ensure your horse is physically and mentally prepared to perform what you're asking him to do.
- Watch out for signs of anxiety. Ask a friend to walk with you – having someone on the ground can be enough to boost a horse's confidence and your helper can watch your horse's body language and look for signs of anxiety. These are triangulation of the eye or tension in the cheeks, chin, muzzle or lips.
- Take it slowly. Forcing your horse or punishing his behaviour will only reinforce his fear, so you must encourage and reward him for every small step he takes.
- Stay calm and relaxed – If you're worried about hacking, your horse will be too.



If your horse's behaviour has changed, have his saddle fit checked



Often, there is an underlying issue causing the horse to nap

If your horse has had an all-clear from your vet and saddler and the behaviour continues, ask a qualified behaviourist to help you resolve the issue.

JEN SAYS Napping is often considered to be a behavioural problem, however pain must always be ruled out as a primary cause.

Back pain, lameness, ill-fitting tack or teeth problems can all lead to an uncomfortable horse whose subtle signs of discomfort may have been overlooked.

The Animal Health Trust has recently conducted fascinating research into the facial expressions of ridden horses and found significant differences between sound and lame equines.

Horses in pain may have their ears back, tip their head, partially or fully close their eyes, have an open mouth with exposed teeth, and may be above the bit. Many of these signs are missed by owners and so a horse refusing to move, spinning, rearing or bucking may be the next sign the horse is giving the owner that they are in pain.

An assessment by a vet to rule out lameness, health conditions and oral problems is therefore the first step if you are experiencing a behavioural issue with your horse. I would then recommend booking a visit by a qualified physiotherapist who can

assess the horse for any areas of muscle spasm, tightness or tenderness which could be causing pain or discomfort when ridden.

Another factor to consider with behavioural problems under the saddle is the rider. A rider who is not well balanced, experienced or strong enough may not be able to give the right aids to correct a horse's movement and ride him forward.

Similarly, if the rider has not dealt with a horse with a behavioural problem before, then the experience of napping may stimulate the rider's own flight or fight response. The increase in physical tension in their body and elevated breathing and heart rates can

affect the horse by making them anxious too, exacerbating an already tense situation.

The rider's tension is also likely to reduce the effectiveness of their seat and leg aids and will make them feel less secure in the saddle.

Once any physical problems have been ruled out, it can be useful to ask a calm professional or experienced rider to ride your horse to see if the horse naps with them.

If the horse is relaxed and happy to go forward and doesn't nap, then it's possible the behaviour could be as a result of the original rider's anxiety or miscommunication with the horse. This can be solved through lessons with a sympathetic instructor. ■



Spend time spook-proofing your horse