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D o ' s & D o n ' t s

NO  
FEAR

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Dr. Bruce Nock, MS, PhD

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# CREATING FEARLESS HORSES

## Do's & Don'ts

Bruce Nock, MS, PhD



*Liberated Horsemanship, LLC* was established in 2003 by Dr. Bruce Nock, career scientist and professional horseman. *Liberated Horsemanship, LLC* provides high-quality training and services to horse enthusiasts and professionals through carefully selected experts.

# CREATING FEARLESS HORSES

## Do's & Don'ts

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A B O U T  
T H E  
A U T H O R

**B**ruce Nock, M.S., Ph.D., has been a scientist for 40 years. He is a tenured faculty member of multiple departments at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, Missouri. He is a subject of biographical record in both Marquis' Who's Who in America and Who's Who in Medicine and Healthcare.

Bruce has published numerous articles of original research in leading scientific journals on diverse topics including learning theory, wild horse behavior and stress physiology. Currently, his research is funded by the United States National Institute of Health and focuses on transgenerational and epigenetic effects of morphine.

Bruce has a deep practical and academic knowledge of animal behavior and related topics. He has a Master of Science degree from a psychobiology program at *Bucknell University* that focused almost entirely on animal behavior and related subjects. He earned a PhD from the world renown *Institute of Animal Behavior, Rutgers University*, and continued with four years of post-doctoral studies that focused on behavioral neuroendocrinology. The best part is, he can relate what he knows to horse management and use and communicate it in straightforward, understandable terms.

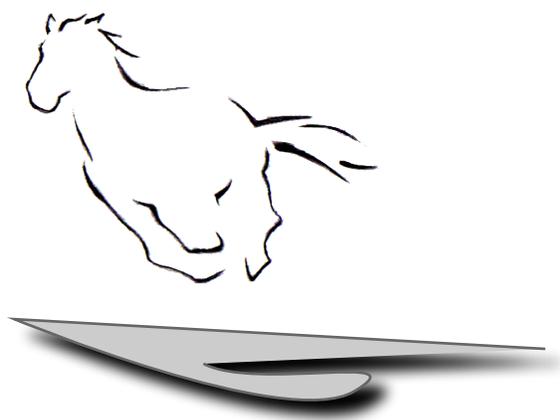
Bruce is an avid horseman—a dressage and trail rider. He has been helping people train and ride horses for many years through books, articles, clinics and private lessons. Bruce is the author of the acclaimed books *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Levels and Riding Styles*, and *Ride For Tomorrow: Dressage Today* and the highly

regarded series of articles entitled *The Biology of Natural Horsemanship*. Bruce has also published numerous other articles in leading scientific journals and the popular press.

In addition to *Liberated Horsemanship, LLC*, Bruce serves on the faculty of *The Kerulos Center*—a non-profit organization which finds science-based solutions to pressing questions and concerns that affect the lives of animals. He is also a member of the *Advisory Board of the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign (AWHPC)*, a broad-based coalition representing over 10 million supporters. Bruce has written a series of science-based articles for the AWHPC on how Bureau of Land Management practices negatively impact the long-term health and welfare of America’s wild horses. He has also written a number of declarations to support legal actions by advocate groups against the government’s management of our wild horses.



**Bruce & Gabriel Oak**



# Creating Fearless Horses

*I* just dozed off when the airplane suddenly dropped. My stomach didn't. Then 'thud' as we hit the bottom of the air pocket. I froze, muscles tense, heart racing, every sense on alert.

*Fear*—That unpleasant emotion caused by the *belief* that something is a threat.

We've all experienced it. Maybe it was a mouse, snake or spider that wandered into your world. A close call in a car. A letter from the IRS.<sup>1</sup> A bump in the night. A snarling dog. A call to the boss's office. A horse that bolted. Or how about that guy, it's always a guy, who jumped out from behind the door and scared you half to death? He got a real kick out of that one. But, I bet you didn't. Being scared or frightened isn't fun unless you're at an amusement park. The real deal is a whole different story.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Internal Revenue Service.

So, can we all agree right-off-the-bat, we don't want our horses to be scared or frightened?<sup>2</sup> We know from our own experiences that it is not a pleasant emotional state. But is that the real reason we don't want our horses to be frightened? It's part of it. But it's not why we work so hard to get our horses "used to" things they are afraid of. Their fears limit what we can do to and with them. Fear also makes them do things that scare us ... things that could get us hurt, like spooking, bolting, and kicking. It's like that plane that dropped in the air pocket. It happens quickly. At the speed of light. In the blink of an eye. Scary fast. However you want to say it. In a split second, the horse is out of control, doing something that puts us at risk. And it can occur when we're riding or just working around a horse on the ground.

So, what can we do about it? That's what this article is about. I can't cover all of it here. For now, I'm just going to tell you what we can do by working with a horse from the ground. I'll explain what I do and don't do and why. But, as in the first article in this series, I will try my darnedest to do it in understandable terms and without getting bogged down in a bunch of learning theory mumbo jumbo and jargon. But that *is* the theme common to this series of articles.

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<sup>2</sup> Be careful what you agree to because I'm going to hold you to it later,

## S A F E   B A S E

I generally start by establishing a positive social relationship with my horses—one that makes them feel not just comfortable but also safe when they are with me. I want them to see me as ... well, as a Trustworthy Leader. That's how I think of it. Someone who always gives their welfare the highest priority. Someone who would never do anything that might hurt them. Someone they can feel safe with. Someone who makes the world a safer place for them to live in. That's how I want my horses to think of me. It is my foundation for everything.

But holding such a position carries responsibilities with it. Here's what I wrote 15 years ago:

“A true leader always puts a follower's well-being before all else including his or her self-gratification or glorification. It goes beyond giving the horse sufficient food and water and a comfortable place to live. It also means seeing that he gets sufficient exercise to keep him physically and mentally fit and that there is sufficient variety in his environment and daily routine to keep his mind active and alert. And, never betray the horse's trust by abusing his willingness to comply with your wishes by asking him to do anything that overtaxes him or that he can't do safely. Treat him respectfully and kindly while keeping his health and welfare of paramount importance.”<sup>3</sup>

But there are many benefits too, not just responsibilities. For one, establishing yourself as a Trustworthy Leader is a crucial step toward minimizing the frequency and intensity of fear-motivated behaviors. Think about how you feel when you are with someone you trust and respect, like your husband, big brother or parents. Safer than when you are alone, right? Same for horses. It's one of the factors that drives the herd

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<sup>3</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004, pages 111–112.

instinct.

In Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training I told the following story about my Arabian mare Moment:

“I remember a time when I was standing in a large pasture talking with a friend [now my wife Jean] while our five horses grazed nearby. Then something spooked the herd and they quickly galloped off out of sight—all except my horse, Moment. She came over to stand close by me. If you know anything at all about herd behavior, I’m sure you recognize this as an extraordinary thing for a horse to do. It is even more remarkable because Moment was not renowned for her bravery and was prone to flight. Apparently she saw me as her “safe base,” a place where she felt secure and out of harm’s way.”<sup>4</sup>

I apologize to those who already heard this story. It is one of my most cherished ‘*Moments.*’

I’ll give you one more example. Same horse. Jean and I were on a trail ride in a local park. It was our first time there. We came to a wooden bridge. Moment stopped dead in her tracks. It looked dangerous. But I knew it was solid. So, I tapped Moment to go forward.<sup>5</sup> She didn’t hesitate. She didn’t feel good about it either. She actually spread her legs and sort of spider-walked cautiously across the bridge. I don’t know how else to describe it. I’ve never seen a horse go forward like that otherwise. When we got to the other side, I looked back at Jean and said, “You gotta love a horse that will do that for you.” You can interpret this any way you want. For me, it was a matter of Moment trusting my judgment that the bridge was safe, even though her instincts were telling her something different.

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<sup>4</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004, page 110.

<sup>5</sup> For those wondering: I tap with one calf or heel to go forward and to change gaits. I don’t squeeze because it momentarily freezes the hips in place and disrupts the synchronization with the horse’s movement.

These are examples of the sort of trusting relationship I strive for. I'm not going to tell you how to do it here. I covered it in *Ten Golden Rules*<sup>6</sup> and in *Ride For Tomorrow*.<sup>7</sup>



**Moment and I in the early 1990s**

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<sup>6</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Nock, B.: *Ride For Tomorrow: Dressage Today*. Liberated Horsemanship, LLC Press, 2009.

## J E F F E R Y ' S   A D V A N C E   &   R E T R E A T

Equine Exposure Therapy, EET, that's what I call it. It's not as hard to say as *Preventative Reciprocation*,<sup>8</sup> but it's not as catchy either. In any event, EET provides the blocks for building on the foundation of a positive social relationship. For me, it is a key, generally-applicable, natural strategy for reducing fear and minimizing the occurrence of all the different things horses can think of doing in its wake. It is how I get horses used to things they are likely to encounter and may be inherently afraid of, like winter blankets, fly spray and so on. And of course, I use Equine Exposure Therapy to introduce all of the trappings for riding, e.g. saddle blankets, saddles, and bridles. You're probably thinking, "Sure, desensitization. I know how to do that." And that is where I start to make trouble. Or maybe I should say, "That is where I start to get myself into trouble." Yes, unfortunately, that is probably more accurate.

You see, some of you. No. A lot of you are not going to like where this article goes. You will find it to be an affront to what you do and believe, and to trainers and clinicians you admire. Consequently, you will say something like, "He [meaning me, the author] is mistaken, doesn't know what he's talking about," although you might use harsher language to make the point. I suppose some of you won't even finish reading the article. It will "tick you off." Others, who don't read closely enough, will just think I'm saying the same thing others have said. Be all that as it may. Let the chips fall as they will. It is time for someone to be a *Speaker for the Horse*. Horses have been expressing their objection to desensitization for a long time ... but they continue to be ignored by the masses. Maybe I'll have better luck. Let me explain.

It really isn't desensitization per se that horses and I have a problem with. It is the way it is currently done and taught by influential people, widely-respected trainers

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<sup>8</sup> Nock, B.: *Preventative Reciprocation: Eliminating Undesirable Behavior Under Saddle*. Liberated Horsemanship, LLC Press. 2014. Available at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

and clinicians. You know it as Approach and Retreat or as Advance and Retreat. Take your pick.

Whoa! You weren't expecting that, were you? You're probably wondering why anyone, me specifically, would take issue with Approach and Retreat? It's a modern-day, tactful component of natural horsemanship, right? That's the spiel.

I personally started to use the method of Approach and Retreat in the early 1990s, nearly 25 years ago. I wrote at length, 14 pages, about it in *Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training*.<sup>9</sup> I told the story of how the method was inadvertently discovered by Kell Jeffery who had no experience with horses at the time. That was back in the first half of the 1900s when Jeffery was spending time recuperating on a cattle station in Australia, long before today's celebrated trainers were even born. Then, armed with essentially just that one method<sup>10</sup> Jeffery became a legendary horse trainer in Australia, pacifying horses no one else could do anything with ... horses even experienced professionals were afraid to deal with.

I admired Jeffery when I wrote *Ten Golden Rules*.<sup>11</sup> I still do. The method of Approach and Retreat *as he practiced it* is effective and comparatively tactful. I have used it a great many times over the years to unburden horses of unjustified fears of one thing

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<sup>9</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Jeffery also touted another method he called "The Magic Lunge." I have given the magic lunge a great deal of thought over the years ... what it does and why. I believe it establishes a rudimentary social relationship. Not like the one I strive for but sufficient to provide a foundation for Approach and Retreat. I have never written about the magic lunge and do not intend to do so beyond what I write here. I do not advocate the use of the Magic Lunge. I don't think it is harmful as Jeffery practiced it. I have seen Clinton Anderson use a semblance of it in a video. He did not do it as I have seen others do it ... people who actually watched Jeffery. What Anderson did in the video, in the name of Jeffery, had the potential to physically damage a horse in my opinion. But in the end, there are better ways to accomplish what the Magic Lunge appears to achieved anyway.

<sup>11</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

or another, or to just eliminate unwanted reactions to this or that. Here's the thing, Jeffery's Approach and Retreat and the method I described in Ten Golden Rules are *not* the Approach and Retreat method advocated and practiced today by so many people ... even by famous clinicians from Australia who call what they do the "Jeffery Method" or who have visited Australia regularly over the years. What's the difference? The point of retreat.



Jeffery approached/advanced *only* to where the horse began to show signs of anxiety ... to the point where it was apparent that the horse was preparing to run. Then, he retreated. The idea was to retreat just *before* the horse moved his feet ... before an escape reaction occurred. To someone watching, it might have appeared Jeffery was doing nothing of significance what-so-ever ... nothing that would dramatically impact a horse's behavior. Here's what one person reported after watching Jeffery:<sup>12</sup>

"Here, before a large and skeptical crowd, he demonstrated his method by handling and quietening a ten year old gelding which had been given up by previous horse-breakers. This horse was a confirmed kicker, and when yarded before he was caught he seemed to be occupying his time by kicking at the rails and anyone who ventured too close. It seemed a highly dangerous or even impossible task for anybody to catch and handle this

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<sup>12</sup> The Jeffery Method of Horse Handling by Maurice Wright, pages 7–8, first published in 1973 by R. M. Williams Pty. Ltd. and reprinted in 1987 by F. Cockington & Co. Pty. Ltd., Port Adelaide, South Australia.

horse without putting him in a crush. At this time Mr. Jeffery was said to be 75 years old and suffering from a weak heart. He seemed too frail and old to tackle any unbroken horse, let alone this old outlaw.

He had the horse roped by one of the stockmen who rode in on a quiet horse and passed the rope around the horse's neck. The old man immediately took the rope and ordered his offsider out of the yard .... in no time he seemed to have the horse mesmerized to the stage where he could handle most of his body and legs without any sign of resistance or fright on the horse's part.

He then called for a four gallon oil drum which he placed beside the horse. Having handled the horse's back he then proceeded to climb on the drum, which capsized, throwing the old man at the horse's heels. To everybody's amazement the horse hardly turned a hair. From then on he proceeded with his handling and mounting technique before an incredulous crowd. Nobody, including myself, could see how all this could be achieved without some kind of tranquilizing or hypnotism."

A frail, 75 year old man with a weak heart. And "in no time he seemed to have the horse mesmerized."<sup>13</sup>

## WITHOUT DRAMA

And that's why "Nobody ... could see how all this could be achieved without some kind of tranquilizing or hypnotism."<sup>14</sup> Without the drama, as I call it, ... without the horse struggling to escape in this case, it is hard for people to believe, understand

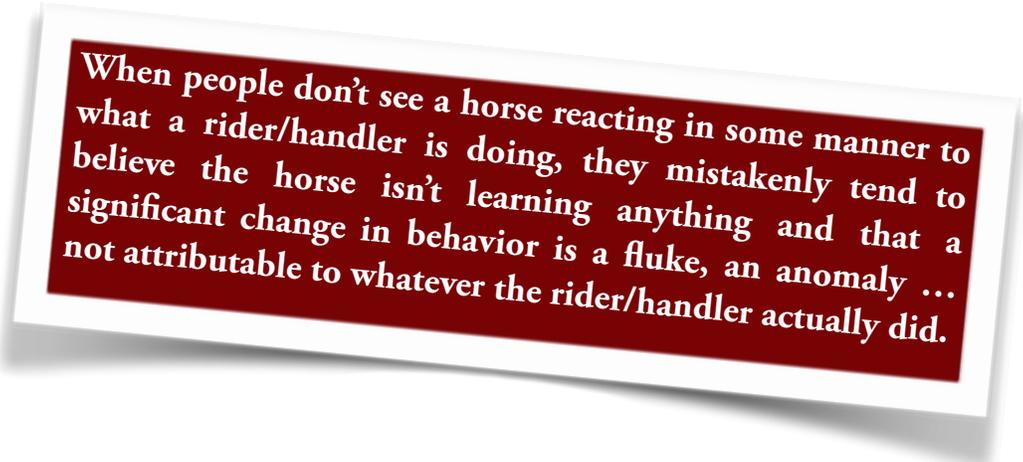
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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

how, a method can be effective. I touched on it in *Preventative Reciprocation*.<sup>15</sup> When people don't see a horse reacting in some manner to what a rider/handler is doing, they tend to believe a significant change in behavior is a fluke, an anomaly ... not attributable to whatever the rider/handler actually did. They can't believe, especially when dealing with an "outlaw" horse or difficult behavior problem, that the solution can be uneventful. But, apparently Approach and Retreat as practiced by Jeffery, without drama, *was* effective ... very effective, wouldn't you agree?

Of course drama also makes demonstrations more interesting and impressive. Unless you already know the trainer is working with a "difficult" horse, why would anyone be impressed by someone handling and mounting a horse that does nothing but just calmly stands there? And maybe I shouldn't say this but ... Drama sells sticks and such too. It's good business I suppose. But, if your relationship with your horse and his mental health is important to you, then it seems to me you should avoid drama like the plague.



**When people don't see a horse reacting in some manner to what a rider/handler is doing, they mistakenly tend to believe the horse isn't learning anything and that a significant change in behavior is a fluke, an anomaly ... not attributable to whatever the rider/handler actually did.**

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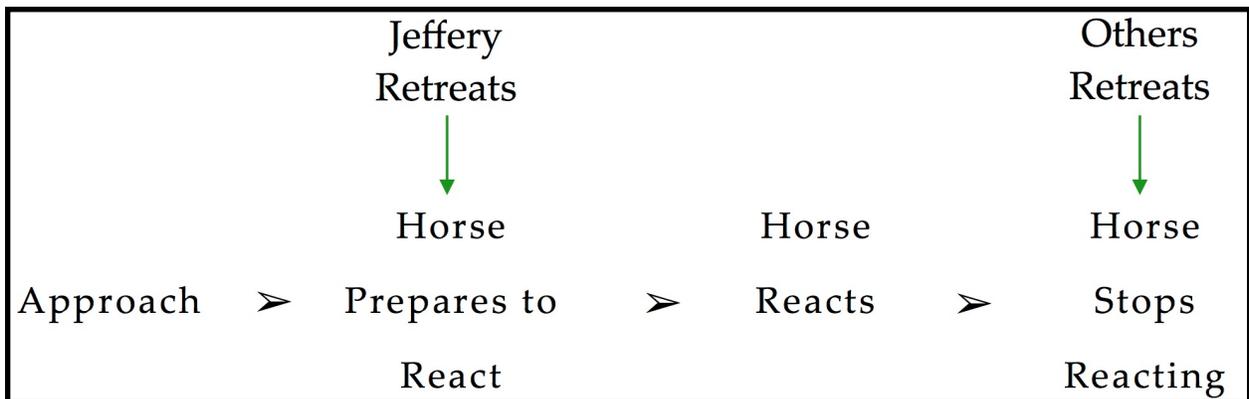
<sup>15</sup> Nock, B.: *Preventative Reciprocation: Eliminating Undesirable Behavior Under Saddle*. Liberated Horsemanship, LLC Press. 2014. Available at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

## T H E O T H E R G U Y S & G A L S

At one point, Jean and I put our scrap wood on a pile beside our driveway. We didn't want to waste the wood and it was a convenient place to keep it. The pile was there for years. To us, it just blended in ... became part of the landscape. We didn't even notice it unless we needed a piece of wood. Then one day someone said something about how much wood we have. There it was with wood of all different shapes and sizes, and not stacked all that neatly either. Suddenly we realized how unsightly the woodpile had become. Perhaps you have had similar experiences. You just become accustomed to the way it is and don't give it a second thought ... until someone or something brings it to your attention.

I sort of feel that's the case with Approach and Retreat. It is used and taught by so many amateur and professional horse people that it has become part of the "landscape." The way it is done is the way it is done. No one gives it a second thought. It is just accepted for what it is ... better than the sacking-out the ranch hands used to do.

I'm talking about the people who continue to advance beyond Jeffery's point of retreat. The people, and there are a lot of them, who retreat *only* when the horse stops reacting to whatever the scary thing is they are being desensitized to. Clinton Anderson



even warns, “Don’t be a premature retreatter.”<sup>16</sup> You’ve seen it. Horses struggling at the end of a rope while the handler follows them around shaking a plastic bag on the end of a stick. That sort of thing.

The problem horses and I have is this: In between where Jeffery retreated and where those “Other Guys & Gals” retreat, the horse is scared. That’s what the reaction is ... a fear-motivated attempt to escape. Clearly some people, i.e., those “Other Guys & Gals,” actually believe it is important to frighten a horse, elicit a fear reaction, for desensitization to occur. Oh, there is nothing ruthless about the approach. There is a certain ... well, tactfulness to it, at least compared to the “sacking-out” of the olden days. But don’t be fooled. The difference between sacking-out and the Approach and Retreat as done by the “Other Guys & Gals” is merely a matter of degree, not kind. Both are examples of Flooding<sup>17</sup> ... a desensitization method where exposure to the stimulus continues until the horse gives up ... stops trying to escape ... stops moving his feet. However you want to say it.

Not so long ago the Health Protection Agency concluded from a review of scientific literature published from 2004 to 2010 that flooding “can exacerbate or provoke mental health problems.”<sup>18</sup> Others say, “Flooding’s potential harm usually outweighs its potential benefits.”<sup>19</sup> Dr. Jim MaCall, spoke out against flooding as a

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<sup>16</sup> This quote is from a demonstration I personally attended.

<sup>17</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Carla Stanke, Virginia Murray, Richard Amlôt, Dr Jo Nurse, and Professor Richard Williams: The Effects of Flooding on Mental Health: Outcomes and Recommendations from a Review of the Literature. <http://currents.plos.org/disasters/article/the-effects-of-flooding-on-mental-health-outcomes-and-recommendations-from-a-review-of-the-literature/>. 2012.

<sup>19</sup> PsychCentral at <http://psychcentral.com/disorders/sx25t.htm>.

method to desensitize horses decades ago.<sup>20</sup>

But, like the misdirection used by magicians, the “Other Guys & Gals” draw the attention of the audience away from the horse by their calm, matter-of-fact manner, informative discourse, and friendly banter. The horse’s ‘screams’ and objections to what’s happening are disregarded. No one seems to notice the fear in their eyes (see picture<sup>21</sup>) or the potential harm being done as the horse struggles unsuccessfully to escape. Look at the horse. Look at the pictures.<sup>22</sup> They tell the real story.



Then, finally, the horse gives up.<sup>23</sup> That’s the part that worries me the most. What is the horse’s mental state when he finally stops moving? We know he’s scared when he’s trying to escape. Avoidance and escape are fear-motivated behaviors. That’s not

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<sup>20</sup> McCall, J.: *Influencing Horse Behavior: A Natural Approach to Training*, Alpine Publications, 1988, page 53.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, C. and Meyer, J. F.: *Bridle Without A Battle: Make Bridling Easy With This Approach-and-Retreat Method*. In *Horse & Rider*, February, 2006, page 43.

<sup>22</sup> Of the process, not just the finished product.

<sup>23</sup> See picture on page 19. In *One Session From This ... To This*. Monty’s Special Training Clinic Daily Journal at <http://www.montyroberts.com/tag/horse-training-2/>. 2013.

open to debate. Even if the handler is calmly declaring something like, “it’s OK for him to move” as he follows him around shaking a plastic bag on a stick, the horse is still scared. And, you already agreed fear isn’t a pleasant emotional state. Worse, it is a powerful stressor. I’ve written and lectured before about how repeated exposure to stress negatively affects horses. Let me be brief here.



It is now estimated that 90% of all of our visits to primary care physicians are stress-related. It is likely to be just as harmful to horses. Stress finds weaknesses and turns them into pathologies. It is detrimental to hoof health, increases the risk of laminitis, contributes to the development of insulin resistance, and directs extra calories into visceral fat, the harmful fat that surrounds internal organs like the heart, liver, and kidneys. It weakens bone, causes the atrophy of muscles and connective tissues, causes Cushing’s disease and ... well, it’s not a very good thing.

But, what about when the horse “gives up” trying to escape, stops moving his feet? The point of retreat for those “Other Guys & Gals.” What is the horse’s mental state at that moment? What are the long-term consequences? PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder? Learned Helplessness? Maybe. Some would say so. As a neurobiologist

with an appointment to a psychiatry department,<sup>24</sup> I'm hesitant to attach such terms to it.

But, whatever you want to call it, you've seen it. Although maybe you didn't take notice because it didn't seem out of the ordinary. But, once you do begin to notice the aftermath of being repeatedly exposed to an inescapable threat, a threat natural escape behaviors are useless against, you will see how prevalent it actually is. I'm talking about all of those horses that have lost their enthusiasm for ... well for life, it seems to me. Horses that just stand there with that dull look in their eyes and lacking animation. Horses that have stopped reacting to the world around them ... not just to those inherently scary things but most everything. The absence of curiosity and engagement with their surroundings. Think I'm exaggerating the potential impact of waiting until the horse gives up to retreat? Consider this. PTSD is usually the result of a single traumatic experience. Just one. Not a bunch. Not a year's worth. One.

Unfortunately, there are so many despondent, deadened, horses in the United States that they look normal to people. Even worse, their pathological lack of reactivity makes these automatons attractive to people. "Bombproof." People want them. So, trainers keep producing them.

It is not the sort of horse I want. I want a horse that is curious about his surroundings, and alert, mentally active and authentically enthusiastic, about life in general and about the things we do together. I want a horse who notices things as we go along on a trail, enjoys the outing as much as I do, but that I can trust to make good judgments too. Not one that just plods along like a sluggish, about-to-breakdown ATV. Being safe and mentally sound are not incompatible. A horse can and should be both.

But there's more. My relationship with my horse is very important to me as you

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<sup>24</sup> Don't worry. I have a faculty appointment to the psychiatry department at Washington University School of Medicine but I'm not a psychiatrist.

might have guessed from what I wrote above. I'm absolutely certain I'm not alone in this regard. I bet there isn't one person reading this who doesn't feel the same. In *Preventative Reciprocation*, I wrote,

"... most people are reluctant to punish horses. They [horse owners] love their horse and they want him to love them in return. They figure, "If I do something he doesn't like, maybe he won't like me." It makes sense to me. I know, when someone does something I don't care for, it definitely puts a damper on our relationship. Why would horses be any different?"<sup>25</sup>

Let me answer my own question: I don't think they are.

Remember that guy ... you know the one I wrote about at the outset; the one who jumped out from behind the door and scared the bejeezus out of you. He didn't do it to be mean. His intentions were good. He just did it for amusement. He even got a good laugh out of it. Nevertheless, it didn't endear him to you, did it? It didn't make you like him any better, did it? It didn't improve your relationship with him, did it? It didn't make you love him, did it? Even though it was ... *just a little joke*.

Scaring horses in the name of desensitization is no joke to them either. I don't see the difference between punishing a horse or scaring a horse to make them behave better. Don't talk to me about love and partnerships and all that sort of stuff and then go out and scare horses or have someone else scare them for you in the name of desensitization. Like punishment, fear is not a building block for a trusting relationship ... regardless of the reason. The reason doesn't really matter. Not to the horse. Once again, it is like that guy who frightened you. Doing it as a joke didn't lessen its impact on you. Frightening horses in the name of desensitization is the same. It doesn't do the horse or your relationship with him any good. '*Aaaand,*' it isn't necessary. Look what

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<sup>25</sup> Nock, B.: *Preventative Reciprocation: Eliminating Undesirable Behavior Under Saddle*. Liberated Horsemanship, LLC Press. 2014, page 10. Available at [LiberatedHorsemanship.com](http://LiberatedHorsemanship.com).

Jeffery accomplished without eliciting a full-fledged avoidance reaction if you don't want to take my word for it.

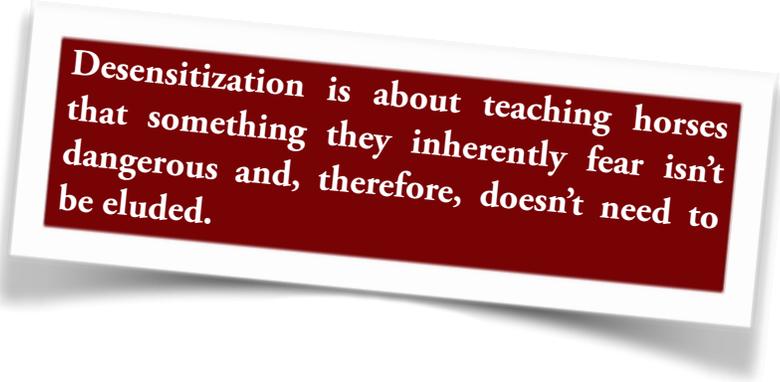
But let me tell you more about Equine Exposure Therapy and how it differs from Approach/Advance and Retreat. EET still utilizes the same terminologies, i.e. approach/advance and retreat, but there are significant differences that make EET far better for your horse and your relationship with him.



*I don't see the difference between punishing a horse or scaring a horse to make them behave better.*

## EQUINE EXPOSURE THERAPY ... EET

Desensitization doesn't destroy original fear memories. It is a process of learning new information about the frightening thing. More specifically, it is a process of learning new information with a bearing on the relationship between the threatening thing and a fear reaction. What the horse should learn from desensitization is that the fearful thing isn't actually dangerous, not that despondency is the only recourse ... not that he can't escape using instinctive, *natural* avoidance behaviors like running away. The realization that natural reactions are useless has the potential to cause psychological problems. On the other hand, discovering something or someone really isn't a threat through progressive, compassionate exposure is beneficial. It's a revelation that is good for mental health. And it is subject to and governed by natural laws of learning and memory, the core underlying theme of this series of articles.



Desensitization is about teaching horses that something they inherently fear isn't dangerous and, therefore, doesn't need to be eluded.

### The Point of Retreat

**Golden Rule #3: Signals Should Never Be Ignored.**<sup>26</sup> Like all of the "Golden Rules," it is based on a fundamental principle<sup>27</sup>, natural law, of learning. I wrote about it and its importance in Ten Golden Rules of Horse Training in a chapter about Improving

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<sup>26</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

<sup>27</sup> That's what I originally called the Golden Rules ... Fundamental Principles. But, at the urging of the editor at Half Halt press, I changed it to Golden Rules as it went to press. Better? Worse? Who knows. They are what they are ... natural laws of communication and learning.

Sensitivity to Aids and Cues.<sup>28</sup> It is *the* Golden Rule I see violated most often ... by far. What happens then, when you repeatedly stop signaling before the horse makes some sort of acceptable response? He gets progressively less responsive to the signal. It's the basis of **Golden Rule #10: The Reaction to a Stimulus<sup>29</sup> Dwindles if the Stimulus Terminates Without the Reaction Occurring.**<sup>30</sup>

Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. Said another way, if a stimulus a horse normally reacts to repeatedly goes away before the normal reaction occurs, then he will become progressively less reactive to that stimulus. It's confusing but ... Holy cow! In plain words, that means the horse becomes DESENSITIZED to it.

That's it. You got it. And, it doesn't matter whether the stimulus is a signal, aid or cue, or something frightening.

Therein lies the reason why you do not have to scare a horse to desensitize him to something he is inherently frightened of. You don't even have to advance as far as Jeffery did. You just have to go to a point where the horse is aware of and recognizes the scary thing as the scary thing ... to the point where he starts to *think* about reacting to it. Then, retreat. That's how it is done for Equine Exposure Therapy. Why run the risk of jeopardizing your relationship with your horse or causing him some sort of psychological harm by advancing to where he has an ineffective, fear-motivated escape reaction? It is unnecessary.

So, one important feature of EET is the point of retreat. In my mind, it is one of the crucial differences between EET and the Approach and Retreat used by "The Other Guys & Gals" who don't retreat until the escape reaction occurs and stops. With regard

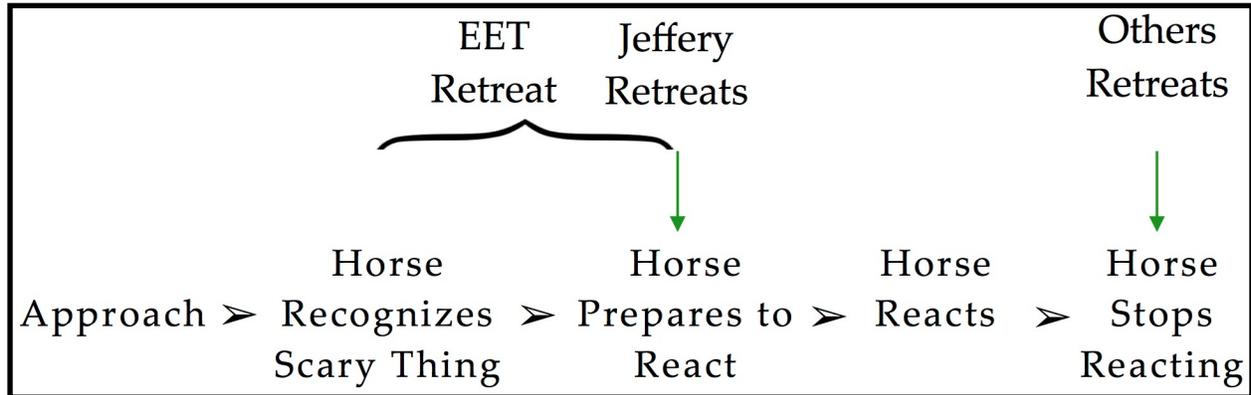
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<sup>28</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004, Chapter II.

<sup>29</sup> A "stimulus" is anything that causes a reaction.

<sup>30</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004.

to Jeffery's Approach and Retreat, the difference is not nearly so dramatic. For EET the retreat can be done as far along in the approach sequence as Jeffery went but preferably it should be done even a little earlier. But the difference is ... well, maybe not negligible but not crucially important either.



But the point of retreat is only one difference. There are two more differences between Equine Exposure Therapy and Approach and Retreat I want to tell you about. They are additional refinements to the desensitization process that further reduce the potential of doing psychological harm and dampening your relationship with your horse.

### Restraint

There he is again, that guy, the one that was behind the door earlier. This time, he's not hiding behind the door, he has a snake. You don't know whether the snake is poisonous or not. But you really don't care. You are afraid of snakes in general. They are all dangerous as far as you are concerned. You do your best to avoid them. I'm with you there. So, which would frighten you more? That guy coming at you with the snake when you are free to leave or when you were tied to a chair? That's an easy one, right? Tied to a chair, of course. You're defenseless. Things are more frightening when you know you can't get away. It's the same for horses. And they know when they aren't free

to flee as well as we do. Otherwise, they wouldn't stand quietly when tied.

Approach and Retreat is generally done with the horse at the end of a rope of some sort. Cherry Hill even says, "you may wish to hobble him."<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Equine Exposure Therapy is *always* done without physical restraint. No ropes attached to the horse. No halter even. Nothing. If the horse isn't naked, you aren't doing EET.<sup>32</sup>

Restraint, even the perception of restraint, is a potential stressor in itself. If, as part of the biomedical research I do on the consequences of stress, I want to restrain a rat for anything more than a mere injection, for example, I have to get special approval to do it from the University and Federal Government ... and I have to have a good reason for doing it. Desensitization isn't about increasing a horse's tolerance for stress, as some people say (see sidebar).<sup>e.g.</sup><sup>33</sup> *It is about teaching horses that something they inherently fear isn't dangerous and, therefore, doesn't need to be eluded.* It is about reducing their stress.

**Desensitizing a horse to multiple things without scaring him can help to build trust and decrease the occurrence of escape and avoidance reactions, as discussed above.**

**Some people believe that subjecting a horse to a little stress, i.e., scaring him a little, increases his ability to deal with other stressful/scary things. It just "ain't so."**

**The proof is in the pudding: The physiological response to a stressor can habituate under certain circumstances. In other words, the physiological response gets smaller with repeated exposures to the same stressor. But habituation to one stressor doesn't affect the body's response to a different stressor.**

Add a scary thing to the mix when a horse is restrained and the psychological impact, potential for psychological harm, can be significant. Of course, if you wait until after the escape reaction stops to retreat, like the "Other Guys & Gals" do, some sort of restraint is imperative, right? Otherwise, you would be chasing the horse all over the

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<sup>31</sup> Hill, C.: Sacking Out. [http://www.horsekeeping.com/horse\\_training/sacking\\_out.htm](http://www.horsekeeping.com/horse_training/sacking_out.htm), 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Do it in an enclosed area, like a riding arena, paddock or even a pasture. Not ... I repeat, NOT in a stall.

<sup>33</sup> Hill, C.: Sacking Out. [http://www.horsekeeping.com/horse\\_training/sacking\\_out.htm](http://www.horsekeeping.com/horse_training/sacking_out.htm), 1998.

place. It just wouldn't work. That's not the case for EET. Then, your aim should be to *never* elicit a fear reaction. So, you can and should work with the horse without restraints.

There is another advantage to working without restraint. Horses understand restraint, as I said. During the process of desensitization, that "knowing" masks the motivation to run ... their fear. The appearance of visible signs of fear, the inclination to take evasive actions, is delayed by restraint. You can see them earlier in the Advance sequence when the horse is free to move away.

Let's do another mind experiment. Here comes that pain in the 'bleep' guy with the snake again. When are you likely to show signs of evasion first? When you are tied to a chair or when you are free to walk away? Here's what I would do. Tied: I'd just freeze and stare at the guy and his snake as he approaches. I might let a harsh word or two fly in his direction too. But, as far as trying to escape, I wouldn't do much because I would know being tied prevents it. But, as he approaches more closely, crosses a threshold where the fear takes hold, rational behavior goes out the window, and I'd start flailing around like crazy trying to get free. And the expletives would surely fly at that point. On the other hand, if I wasn't tied ... well, I'd walk out of the room pronto ... pretty much as soon as I recognized he had a snake with him. Horses aren't all that different from us. Their reactions would be much the same under similar conditions. They express their fear more readily when they aren't restrained.

So, working without restraint provides a clearer, more sensitive indication of what the horse is feeling and thinking. A better idea of when/where you are about to cross that threshold where the horse goes from thinking about evasion and doing it ... the EET point of retreat.

Here is something to try. Maybe you will see a difference. Maybe not. Many

people do. If you normally tie your horse to saddle up, do this instead. Take everything off of your horse ... *everything*. Then, turn him loose in a riding arena or the equivalent. Now, saddle him. No restraints.

I ask people to do this often and it is very common for the horse to move away as they approach with the saddle. It surprises them. These are often horses that have been ridden for years and that give no indication that they want to move away when they are tied. Restraint fabricates an illusion of acceptance. When the horse isn't tied it gives the owner a better picture of how the horse feels about the saddle. Try different things ... learn how your horse really feels about the things in his world.



**Restraint fabricates an illusion of acceptance.**

There is one thing I have to admit. It is a *little* harder to do all of this if you haven't already established that Trustworthy Leadership foundation I talked about above. It's possible though. I've done it many times. But the approach then has to be done with even greater sensitivity, alertness for that point of retreat ... the point where thinking turns to action.

### Retreat

You are unarmed lost in the Alaskan wilderness after your plane crashed. You were resourceful enough to start a fire before nightfall. But now it's dying down. You need more wood. So, off you go to look for it, stumbling around in the pitch dark without a flashlight. Suddenly, there it is ... not firewood, a huge Kodiak bear. Supper time ... for the bear. You turn and run for the fire with the bear at your heels. Thankfully, he stops short as you reach the fire. Story over? No way. You know the bear is out there

somewhere, lurking around in the darkness. Do you think your fear would subside? Heck no. Muscles tense. Senses on alert. Eyes wide open. Scanning for movement. Listening.

Desensitization—what you are trying to get the horse used to is the ‘bear.’ Well, probably not actually a bear. But you get the idea. The equivalent in the horse’s mind. And, just like you, he can continue to worry after the first encounter with the ‘bear’ even if he can’t see it any longer.

That is why the retreat is so important. Out in the wilderness, you continued to worry about that bear even though you couldn’t see it, right? Same for desensitization. The scary thing can’t just be removed from the horse’s view. Some people don’t even go that far. They just take it away and then bring it right back after an instant.

Instead, the retreat should convince the horse that the threat is over ... that the ‘bear’ left the vicinity. It can’t continue to lurk out there in the darkness. I often say the retreat has to give the horse a “psychological break.” An opportunity to take a deep breath. The retreat isn’t just a brief interruption in the process. It has a purpose.

Take that bear again. What are you going to be thinking about as long as he’s out there lurking around? The bear, naturally. Strategies to defend yourself. What you can do to keep the fire going until morning. What you will do when the fire goes completely out. That sort of thing. You aren’t going to be wondering how scuffed up your shoes are going to get from walking through the wilderness. It’s all about the bear. Until you become totally convinced he has moved on and the threat has ended, you aren’t likely to relax and turn your focus to other things. That’s what you are aiming for when you retreat. Especially early on in the process, the retreat has to be sufficient so the horse turns his attention to other things. Why?

Because that is the visible sign that the learning process has had an opportunity

to take hold ... that new information about the scary thing has had a chance to solidify into memories. That the relationship between the scary thing and the fear reaction is being reformulated. You don't learn much when you are stressed, worrying about survival. It is only after that when memories become consolidated and new understanding occurs. That's what the retreat should allow.

Withdraw as far as necessary to allow that to happen. Later on, when the horse has become comfortable with the scary thing and really isn't paying particular attention to it, then the retreat can be just a brief interruption to the process. But don't just stand there forever waiving a plastic bag or whatever over the horse's head. That's annoying. I'd move away after a while and so will horses.

Not so long ago I had the opportunity to work with a mare no one could catch, including a number of professional trainers. I'm not so sure the mare was actually afraid of people but she did have an avoidance reaction to them. "They tried everything." At least that's what the people at the facility said.

The mare was kept in a good size pasture, maybe three acres or so. Not only did she take advantage of the entire pasture to avoid capture but she also used other members of the herd to hide behind when convenient. It was a perfect situation to test the boundaries of EET effectiveness.

Now I won't bore you with the whole story. I only want to make one or two points. Early on, when I retreated, I actually left the pasture and went into the barn where the mare couldn't even see me. Smart horse. Suspicious horse. That's what it took to convince her I wasn't still lurking around, executing some new strategy to catch her. As the process continued, the retreat became less and less dramatic. The horse never moved and stayed relaxed during the process. Did we "catch her?" Yes, but it did take some time.

And there were times early in the process when I could have put a halter on the horse. But I didn't ... and the crowd moaned. Wondering why ... why I didn't capture her when I had the chance? At that point, I felt it would be a violation of the trust I was trying to build. That was my first priority. Later, I was able to put the halter on the horse easily. One step at a time. Always making sure I advanced slowly enough in the progression so that the mare remained comfortable with me and what I was doing. Eventually, my friend enjoyed taking the horse for daily walks, letting her graze now and then, before returning her to the pasture. Catching her was not an issue any longer. And so the process proceeded. Always working to strengthening the horse's trust. Rewarding her for cooperating.

There was never any drama. Onlookers left after the first 15 minutes. That's when I first approached and touched the horse with my hand. It was boring to watch, I'm sure. No drama. It was just the moon phase that made the horse catchable that day I guess. Of course, I didn't sell any special stuff either ... no sticks, books or articles. No spectators. No sales. But an alert horse happy to be handled and feeling good about the world. That's how it should be ... at least with regard to the happy horse part, not the sales. Sometimes the process goes quickly. Sometimes it doesn't. Jean reminded me of something I said to her when progress with her horse (Picture on next page) didn't seem to be going fast enough: "You have a lifetime with this horse. Just take the time it takes to do it right." She says it is one of her favorite quotes because it highlights our commitment to doing it right.



**Jean and Marten Blazing A Trail In Missouri**

**Table of Differences Between Methods of Desensitization**

	<b>Jeffery's Approach &amp; Retreat</b>	<b>Other Guys &amp; Gals' Approach &amp; Retreat</b>	<b>Equine Exposure Therapy</b>
Point of Retreat	As Horse Prepares to Flee	After Escape Reaction Stops	Any Time Between When the Horse Recognizes the Scary Thing to When He Prepares To Flee
Restraint	Yes	Use Is Imperative	No
Purpose of Retreat	Unspecified	Unspecified	Psychological Break for the Horse
Significant Risk of Psychological Harm	Slight	Yes	No

## S O M E F I N A L T H O U G H T S

### What You *Can* Do

Who's calling so early on a Sunday morning? A student. Someone I had been working with for some time. I was helping her start two new horses. She wanted to do it herself but under my direction. And so, we did a lot of desensitization, Equine Exposure Therapy, of course ... to the saddle pad, to the saddle, to the bridle and so on, for both horses. I explained how to do it and why as we went along ... over and over again.

When I answered the phone she was gushing with enthusiasm. There had been an "incident." Nothing serious. But one of the horses needed oral medication. She explained how difficult it had been for her to get it into him ... the horse just didn't cooperate. But in the end, she got it done and was proud of it. And now she "just had to tell me about it." So, I listened. When she was done, I asked, "So, you didn't approach and retreat?" Dead air. For maybe five seconds or so. I could feel the wheels turning in her head. Then, she said, "I never thought of that." Instead, she turned it into a wrestling match.

Equine Exposure Therapy is useful for a lot of different things. It is not only a method for getting young horses "used to things." It can be helpful for things that pop up all the time ... throughout a horse's life.

Recently my friend Yvonne Welz, the editor of *The Horse's Hoof* magazine<sup>34</sup>, posted on FaceBook, "Belle [the mare she uses for dressage] forgot what fly spray was ..." It made me smile. The first time I brought the fly spray out each spring my stallion, Gabriel (Picture on next page), acted as if he had never encountered such a dangerous thing before in his life. So I approached and retreated, EET naturally, without restraints. It didn't take long and it was done ... until next Spring at least.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.thehorseshoof.com/>



**Gabriel Oak and His Best Friend Henry Hee Haw.**

Learn how to recognize when EET can be used as a humane, risk-free method to extinguishing unwanted reactions. Not just fear-motivated behaviors. It is useful for getting rid of behaviors with all sorts of different underlying motives. If your horse is reacting to something you don't want him to react to, that's the time to pull EET out of your toolbox.

For reasons that are unimportant, I once taught my Arabian mare, Moment, to walk forward when I walked forward, stop when I turned to face her and back up when I faced backward and walked toward her haunches. To my surprise, the next time I tried to mount her by turning toward her haunches she backed up. The faster I walked

to try to get into mounting position, the faster she went backward. Big joke to everyone looking on. How did I solve the problem? Equine Exposure Therapy, EET.

In *Preventative Reciprocation*, I talked briefly about horses that don't stand still for mounting. I said it was easy to fix. But I didn't say how. Cliff hanger or just annoying? Maybe the latter I guess. What's the big secret? EET. Advancing and retreating through the sequence of approaching and mounting. That's how I teach horses to stand still for mounting. It is also how I fixed the problem of Moment walking backward. It really doesn't matter why the horse doesn't stand still. You can teach him/her to do it, stand still, using EET. It generally doesn't take very long because, most of the time, it isn't a fear-motivated behavior. But that's another story.

So, if you want to appear to have all of the answers, look for commonalities, not differences. You might be surprised by how little you have to know when you understand how widely what you *do* know can be used. Too often when training horses people get bogged down worrying about superficial differences rather than looking more deeply for similarities. It's a case of becoming absorbed with the differences between trees and overlooking the fact that they are all part of the same forest. In the first article of this series, I explained how the same method, Preventative Reciprocation, could be used to eliminate a number of very different behaviors, from minor changes in direction to bolting. Equine Exposure Therapy ... same thing. It is a way to eliminate unwanted reactions ... a lot of different types of reactions ... by working with horses from the ground.

### What You *Can't* Do

I don't use Equine Exposure Therapy to desensitize horses while riding. There is a much better way to do it. But that's also another story. There I go again. Cliff hanger or

just annoying? Either way, I *would* like to tell you the *other* reasons why I don't use Equine Exposure Therapy while riding except in special circumstances.

First, it is usually not possible or at least it is inconvenient to control the potency of a scary thing when you are mounted. Unless you have an assistant on the ground, you are not likely to have any control whatsoever over its physical attributes. That's an important aspect of EET that I really haven't covered in this article. But what I wrote in Ten Golden Rules holds true. Wait a minute—I know you are all jumping up to buy your copy. Don't bother. I've included the relevant section in the addendum.

Second, when you are mounted you also can't modify the potency of a scary thing by moving it toward and away from the horse. You could take the horse closer to the frightening thing and then turn him around and ride away, but that is not the same. It might seem like an inconsequential difference, but riding a horse toward and away from a scary thing is, in fact, entirely different than moving the scary thing toward and away from the horse, as per EET.

You see, horses normally react to a scary thing by moving away from it. Therefore, if you ride a horse away from the scary thing, you are merely accommodating and reinforcing his inclination to evade it. In addition, because the horse is just doing as you directed him to do, there is no learning process in play ... at least not with regard to the relationship between the scary thing and the reaction.

But, never say never. Here's a story about when I used ... well, not EET exactly, because I was riding ... which means Gabriel wasn't naked. But I did use the advance and retreat paradigm.

"As I was riding [Gabriel], I stopped and gave the horse an opportunity to graze along a fence line. All was well until the horse moved a little to reach a nearby morsel of grass. When he did, the dressage whip that I was carrying dragged along the fence and the sound that it made

spooked him; he didn't go far, just a few steps. As soon as he calmed down, I rode him back to the fence line and allowed him to graze. When he was calmly grazing, I intentionally rubbed the whip along the fence; he spooked again. I rode him back to the fence. This time, I tried to make the rub a little shorter. It wasn't short enough; he spooked again. I repeated the sequence. This time, I only tapped lightly on the fence. The tap got his attention but he didn't spook; the length of exposure to the frightening stimulus—the sound made by the whip on the fence—was below the horse's threshold for reacting. After a moment, I tapped again and so on, each time making sure that the horse was calm before I tapped. After a while, I found that I could tap a number of times in a row without causing a reaction. Eventually, I was able to drag the whip very briefly along the fence without eliciting a response. Then, I could drag it for a little longer. Eventually, the horse became totally desensitized to the sound of the whip dragging on the fence.

After the initial trial-and-error to find a sound that was below the horse's threshold for reacting, anyone watching while I desensitized the horse would probably have concluded that I was merely playing absent-mindedly with my whip while the horse calmly grazed."<sup>35</sup>

## NO DRAMA

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<sup>35</sup> Nock, B.: *Ten Golden Rules Of Horse Training: Universal Laws for all Training Levels and Riding Styles*. Half Halt Press, Inc., 2004, pages 147 – 148.

NO  
FEAR

## A D D E N D U M

This article is principally a commentary. But I think there is enough information to get most people started with Equine Exposure Therapy. There is one important aspect I have only mentioned in passing ... stimulus potency. It is crucial to understand its role in EET. Below is an excerpt from what I wrote previously about it. The information is still valid.

### Length of Exposure

Actually, the name “advance and retreat” is a little misleading. There is more to it than simply changing proximity to the horse. More importantly, advancing toward a horse and retreating from him is a way to change the potency of a frightening stimulus. The more potent a stimulus is the more likely it is to elicit a response. Advancing a frightening stimulus toward a horse increases potency and retreating decreases potency.

Another factor that can affect the potency of a frightening stimulus is length of exposure. The longer a frightening stimulus is present, the more likely it is to elicit a reaction from a horse. This principal is as important to understand as “advance and retreat” itself. In fact, it was a key element in Kell Jeffery’s method of breaking horses. Remember that “eventually, Mr. Jeffery could touch the horse before retreating. Then, he could touch the horse for progressively longer periods of time ....” Clearly, Mr. Jeffery intuitively appreciated that the amount of time that he touched the horse was no different, in principal, than physically advancing toward the horse. In both cases, there is a threshold of tolerance—a point at which the horse will react to the stimulus. To comply with Golden Rule 10 (The reaction to a stimulus will dwindle if the stimulus terminates without the reaction occurring), the horse’s exposure to the stimulus must stop before reaching that point.

The length of exposure is important for other types of frightening stimuli as well. For example, before desensitization, a saddle pad, winter blanket, plastic bag, etc., that touches the horse for a split second is less likely to elicit an evasive reaction than one that touches him for a longer period of time. But, the principal is not limited just to touch. It applies to all other types of frightening stimuli as well. In addition, although length of exposure can often be used in conjunction with approach and retreat, it also can be useful in its own right. For example, initially some horses worry about being sprayed with such things as fly spray or coat conditioners. In such cases, it makes no sense to advance and retreat, but you can vary the length of exposure. Start with a single, brief squirt and work toward more prolonged, repeated sprays. Between squirts, allow the horse to relax. Don't keep pointing the spray bottle at the horse; drop it to your side [Remember the bear]. Give him a clear period of relief from the frightening stimulus.

### Changing Physical Attributes

The potency of a frightening stimulus also can be manipulated by changing its physical attributes. Here are some rules of thumb:

- (1) **Size:** Potency usually decreases as the size of a frightening stimulus is reduced. For example: A saddle pad, winter blanket, tarpaulin, plastic bag or the like that is made smaller by being folded is less likely to be frightening than an unfolded one.
- (2) **Sound:** Generally speaking, the more sound that a frightening stimulus makes the more likely it is to frighten the horse. For example: Hair clippers are more likely to elicit a reaction when they are turned on than when they are turned off. The louder a piece of plastic is crinkled, the more likely it is to elicit a reaction from a horse. A firearm that is fired is obviously more likely

to elicit a reaction than one that is silent. Of course, the louder the sound of the shot, the more likely it will cause a reaction.

- (3) Movement: Typically, the more a stimulus moves and the faster it moves, the more likely it is to cause a reaction. In addition, the more irregular the movement, the more likely it is to frighten a horse. In fact, rhythmic movement tends to calm horses, whereas arrhythmic movement tends to excite them. For instance: A saddle pad, winter blanket, plastic bag, etc., that is held still is less likely to cause a reaction than one that is shaken about. One that is moved rhythmically is less likely to cause a reaction than one that is moved in an irregular manner. A rope that is twirled is more likely to elicit a reaction than one that is not. A lead rope that is repeatedly tossed across a horse's back in rhythm is less likely to cause a reaction than one that is tossed at irregular intervals.
- (4) Structural Complexity: In general, the more structurally complex the frightening stimulus is, the more likely it is to cause a reaction. For example: A hair clipper with an electrical cord attached is more likely to elicit a reaction than a battery-operated, cordless clipper. A Western saddle with all of its rigging is more likely to cause a reaction than an English saddle.

Often it is advantageous to modify the physical attributes of the stimulus in combination with the advance and retreat method and/or when desensitizing a horse by manipulating the length of exposure. In the initial stages of desensitization, make the stimulus as physically innocuous as possible: fold it up, make it structurally simple, keep it quiet or use some other means to reduce the potency of the frightening stimulus. Then, desensitize the horse to it by advancing and retreating and/or by manipulating length of exposure. When the horse is desensitized to the weak stimulus, increase its

potency in small steps by modifying its physical attributes—the smaller the steps the better.

There are multiple dimensions by which stimulus potency can be controlled. The more ways you utilize, the better. It allows you to increase the potency of the stimulus in small steps while always staying below the horse's threshold for reacting to it. Desensitization is a process that goes more quickly when you proceed slowly. Eventually, the horse will be calm and relaxed in the presence of the stimulus, even when it is presented at full strength.

But don't stop there. Solidify the training even further by continuing the process of desensitization. If you want a horse to be completely calm and relaxed in the presence of what once was a suspicious or frightening stimulus, don't stop training when you reach the initial goal. Make the training dead solid. Make sure the horse will not react to the stimulus no matter what happens. Take a winter blanket, for example. Your goal probably would be to have the horse remain calm while you put it on and take it off of him. However, if you stop training at that point, you might be unpleasantly surprised at the horse's reaction sometime later when you inadvertently drop the blanket or nonchalantly shake it to remove debris. Train for exceptional circumstances. Desensitize the horse as thoroughly as possible. You should be able to shake the blanket vigorously while standing beside the horse, toss it onto his back, slip it over his head, drop it beside him, etc. Ultimately, you should be able to do anything with the blanket without the horse reacting.

**Acknowledgments:** The author wholeheartedly thanks Jean Nock and Ann Corso for their helpful comments on an early version of this manuscript and for the continuing discussions of everything equine.

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