

Spook-Proof Your Horse

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM BORTVEDT

Four simple concepts will help you teach your horse to remain **calm and responsive** when he faces down **spooky, unfamiliar objects**.

ANY NUMBER OF OBJECTS CAN SPOOK YOUR HORSE, and when this happens, the potential for injury to both the horse and its handler is great. When I work with horse owners to help them overcome this common problem, I don't try to teach them to "desensitize" their horse. Instead, I show them how to teach the horse *acceptance*. When a horse accepts a situation, he remains calm and responsive.

To begin, I use four concepts—respect, reward, yield and freedom of movement—to free up the horse's feet, or teach him that it's okay to move a little when scared.

1. Respect



⤴ We can't take it personally when a horse flees from something that scares him. Doing so is a natural reaction. If we remain calm when a horse spooks, he will gain confidence in us and respect our actions. It is also important that the horse respect his handler's personal space and willingly yield to pressure. Note in this photo how my horse respects my space. I can move his lips by simply stepping into the horse's space.

2. Reward



⤴ A horse learns through the release of pressure. The quicker that release, the faster the horse learns to recognize the correct responses. Watch for the horse to prepare to do the right thing, reward that preparation, and release pressure as the horse performs the correct move. The reward can be physical—a pat or a scratch on the forehead—but it can also be just a quiet moment that gives the horse time to think.

3. Yield



⤴ A horse learns to yield to pressure. The yield I typically watch for is the movement of the horse's feet. I'll start with mental pressure, my physical presence and increased energy a pre-cue. Next, I apply physical pressure by stepping toward my horse, invading his space while maintaining a safe position. My horse should move away from my presence. I rarely need to add a verbal cue.

4. Freedom of Movement



⤵ This term refers to a horse's ability to move any foot in any direction. When a horse senses that he has this freedom, it relaxes his mind. When he doesn't feel he can freely move his feet, it has the opposite effect, what I call a troubled frame of mind. Isn't it ironic that until a horse feels that he can freely move his feet, he can't truly relax and stand still?

Making it Work.



« To relax the horse by freeing his feet to move in any direction, I'll start by imagining the horse in two parts—the forequarters and the hindquarters. I'll first work with the hindquarters. Standing beside my horse, I'll step toward his hip and ask him to bend around me as he steps away. When he offers a consistently deep step, evenly and in both directions, I'll move on to his forequarters.



^ To free up the forequarters, I'll use a hindquarter pivot achieved with an exercise I call "rock back and reach." I'll start by backing the horse, but with two important requirements. First, the horse must stay straight through his body, with a flexed poll. Second, the horse's head should stay down. Here's why: When a horse feels constrained, he raises his head; when he knows he's free to move, he lowers his head.



« After my horse has backed several steps correctly, I'll move my hand toward his head and step toward his shoulder. I want the horse to shift his weight to his hindquarters and step laterally, reaching sideways with his forelegs and pivoting on his hindquarters. I'll ask for just a few lateral steps at first, but as the horse develops muscling and suppleness, I'll ask for a half-circle or more.

» The horse will now naturally settle, knowing he can freely move his feet in any direction. Only now will I introduce an object, such as a slicker. I start by placing the slicker on the horse's back. If he moves, I continue placing it on his back until the horse prepares to stop. Then, I'll remove the slicker and let the horse rest for a moment. After the horse accepts the slicker on his back, I'll progress to rubbing it over his body.



« Use this same approach to introduce other potentially troubling objects to your horse. First, establish freedom of movement, and then introduce a new item with the horse standing still. Finally, work with the new item while moving the horse's feet. As you progress, the horse will begin looking to you for leadership and reassurance, and will carry this quiet frame of mind into all situations. 🐾

Raised in Montana, Greg Eliel has worked with horses all his life. A graduate of Montana State University, he spent his early years as a trainer, working closely with Buck Brannaman. Today, Greg's program reflects Brannaman's influence, as well as that of Ray Hunt, and Bill and Tom Dorrance. When they're not on the road conducting clinics, Greg and his wife, Tammy, live on their ranch outside Ellensburg, Washington. Learn more at gregeliel.com.