

# WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

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Do you think of your horse as a member of your family, sort of an overgrown, four-legged kid? You're not alone. Horses bring out the nurturer in many of us. We hug on them. Bathe and brush them. Give them treats. Include them in family pictures. We create cozy, boxstall homes for them, color-coordinate their belongings, and even bundle them up when it's cold. In short, we want to believe our horses want and need the same things we do, and that in return for our devotion, they love us, trust us, and would never hurt us.

But in truth, your equine compadre outweighs you by about 1,000 pounds-and can kill you with a single, well-placed kick. If you care for your horses as though he's an oversized extension of you, you lose sight of that danger, and of a fundamental fact: He's a horse. That means he's wired up to behave and react like a horse-not a human. When you forget this basic fact, you can find yourself on the losing side of a war between worlds. It's the single most significant source of conflict and training frustrations.

To aid in your understanding, I'm going to explain five fundamental differences between your world and that of your horse. I'll cover social hierarchy: vision: habitat needs: response to danger: and food related behavior. For each, I'll tell you how your horse is genetically programmed to operate: how you operate: the opportunities for conflict: and how to manage that conflict. With this grasp of what makes your horse tick, you'll be better able to predict ( and avoid) the equine responses that'll put you at risk of mental or physical conflict.

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## DIFFERENCE # 1 SOCIAL POSITION

**Your horse's world:** He's a herd animal; hierarchy within the herd is critical to survival. In equine society, position in the herd determines what a horse eats and when. Dominant horses get first dibs on everything, from the first drink of water to the best resting spot. A subordinate horse can't enter a dominant horse's personal space unless invited; to invade that space invites an aggressive rebuttal. Because it's to a horse's benefit to move up the hierarchical ladder, many will test their higher-herdmates in efforts to gain in position.

The same powerful instincts drive your domesticated horse.. If dominance/subordination hasn't yet been determined, a kick, bite, or strike will settle the matter quickly. Once position has been determined , a look, pinned ears, head swing, or threat of a kick usually will quell further attempts at space invasion.

**Your world:** Probable the only other large, four-legged animal you've related to on a companion level is your dog. But Fido's a pack animal, subordinate to his alpha, or top, dog. In his eyes, you're that dog; when he wags his tail and nuzzles you, he's signaling affection and subordination. When your horse nicker to you, then nuzzles you, you may get the same warm-and-fuzzy feeling you do from your dog. And that's where you start to go wrong in relating to your equine.

**Opportunity for conflict:** A nuzzle from your dog is a sign of subordination; from your horse, it's a space invasion-and it means he doesn't consider you to be the boss hoss. Just as you may view your horse as a human in a fur suit, he view you as a fellow herd member; In his view, you're either dominate over him, or subordinate to him. If he doesn't regard you as the dominant member in your herd

of two, he'll treat you as a subordinate in one of many potentially dangerous ways. These include nipping, kicking, and/or striking; pushing and/or rubbing you with his head; walking into or over you as you handle or lead him; showing aggression (pinned ears, swishing tail, and/or threat to kick) toward you at feeding, grooming, or saddling time; and generally resisting your every request.

**How to avoid conflict:** He treats you like a horse-do the same to him. If he invades your space, immediately slap the invading body part away. (note: Your horse's attention span is such that you have a 3-second window from the time of the "crime" in which to inflict punishment. After that, efforts at punishment will do nothing but confuse him.) Let the punishment fit the crime: If your horse has made a gentle invasion, such as a head nudge, use a firm slap on the side of the neck; if it's an aggressive invasion, such as a body slam combine a firm smack (if you have a dressage whip, use it) with a loud, furious shout, just as a horse would kick and squeal. This isn't cruelty; it's body language that horses speak amongst themselves and understand.

If your horse shows ears-back aggression toward you at feed time-don't feed him. You'd only reward his bad behavior. Instead, wait until he greets you with a ears-up expression, then feed him-rewarding his desirable behavior.

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## DIFFERENCE #2

### VISION

**Your horse's world;** He has mostly monocular vision, meaning he has an eye on each side of his head. Each eye works independently, sending images to separate sides of his brain as they constantly search for predators lying in wait. As a result, your horse's peripheral vision is excellent. Only when he's directed both eyes on an object in front of him do his eyes focus together for binocular vision, sending a single image to his brain. His long-distance vision also is excellent, as he's an animal designed to watch the horizon on the open prairie. Up-close items are blurry; he's slow to focus on them, and must move his head to do so--this makes the object appear to move. A horse has oversized retinas that magnify object such that they appear 50 percent bigger than they are; equine retinas also make small movements look big. These vision facts, coupled with his inability to focus instantly, prevent your horse from making "logical" decisions. Instead, they provide him with a key survival tool: visual cues that scream "predator alert," inciting him to react instantly and instinctually--without stopping to think--so he can put some distance between himself and the threat. (We'll deal more with the how's and why's of his reactions in a minute.)

**Your world;** Your vision is binocular. You have (or had, before you turned 40) keen up-close vision with good depth perception, and the ability to focus instantly. Your peripheral vision is limited, however.

**Opportunity for conflict:** Your fast-focus vision--coupled with your ability to use logic--gives you an almost instant ability to identify a harmless object as "no big deal." Your horse's eyesight can make that same object appear life threatening. (That's why blowing plastic bag make you think "litter," and him reach to "lion!") Furthermore, his superior peripheral vision allows him to spot "horse-eating monsters" before you do.

He's wired up to spook and run at the first glimmer of a threat. From a safe distance, he can use his excellent long-distance vision to evaluate the scary thing. If you're caught off guard, you could be injured. At the very least, you'll probably be spooked by his behavior, and, when you recover, a bit irritated by it.

**How to avoid conflict;** Stay alert when working around your horse. Use quick-release snaps whenever you tie or crosstie him, so if he does see something that causes a spook/panic reflex, you can minimize risk of injury to you both. (More about this later.)

Always stay out of his flight path, to avoid being run over accidentally. When working on your horse's legs, squat-never kneel-beside them, so you can get out of harm's way quickly, should he spook or bolt. When riding, be attentive to your surroundings, while keeping your horse's attention focused on you. The more he's focused on you, the less he can eyeball scary stuff.

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## DIFFERENCE #3 HABITAT

**Your horse's world:** He evolved to live in the wide-open spaces, and feels safest with an uninterrupted view of the horizon-the better to see any threats, using his keen, long-distance vision. Such a lifestyle enables him to flee danger, without barriers to obstruct his flight path. Designed as a nomadic grazer, you horse isn't by nature territorial, as long as he has the room to mosey and eat. However, if his space is limited (e.g., he's confined), he'll protect his domain.

**Your world:** You're a house dweller; four walls and a roof spell c-o-m-f-o-r-t-and security. You're also territorial; You border your premises with fences and landscaping not only to define property boundaries, but also because physical barriers are seen as protection against external threats. (Hence the popularity of gated-guarded communities.)

**Opportunity for conflict;** Your natural tendency to house your horse in human-type habitats. Stalls, fences, aiseways-the very structures that help you define and protect your "territory"-work against your horse's nature, and his visual acuity. Small, enclosed spaces limit his eyesight, force a solitary existence on an animal designed to live in a herd, and remove his key survival mechanism: flight. You don't understand why he's so spooky; he's living in conditions that are the complete opposite of his genetic design. In an effort to escape threats, he may run over you, through your fences, or into that tractor you have parked in the aisleway.

Constant confinement also can lead to such vices as cribbing, stall walking, and weaving-the result of your horse's genetic drive to walk and graze.

**How to avoid conflict:** Keep stable clutter to a minimum, to reduce the danger of your horse panicking and injuring himself. Design (or redesign) his living quarters with his needs in mind: If you stall your horse, provide as big a stall as possible (14-by 14-foot or larger is ideal). with an attached run, so he can move around, and has the opportunity to scan the horizon.

Provide screened or pipe barriers between stalls, so he can see his herdmates. (small, fully-enclosed stalls will cause low-level stress in your horse-and encourage development of vices.) Make turnout a part of his daily routine. If you can do so, turn him out with a horse friend, so he can socialize, Provide plenty of grass hay through the day, so he can "graze." When possible, turn him out full-time on pasture-preferably with other horses with which he can socialize. Install horse-safe fencing, such as the high-tech fences designed to flex upon impact. Electrify all fences. Doing so will reduce your horse's urge to challenge the barrier, thus reducing his risk for injury.

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# DIFFERENCE #4

## RESPONSE TO DANGER

**Your horse's world;** He's genetically programmed to operate on the basis that survival means successful retreat from predators that want to eat him. In prey-animal behavior lingo, that's your horse's flight response. When possible, he'll spook or spin away from a perceived threat, gallop to what he perceives to be a safe distance, then turn and use his long-distance vision to evaluate the situation. The spook-and-run behavior you dread is a primal equine response to danger. You may learn to ride through it, to regain control immediately after it, and how to desensitize your horse to common stimuli, but you'll never erase it.

**Your world;** Rather than immediately running from a threat, you'll turn toward it, use your keen vision and logic to evaluate it, then decide whether you should flee or stand your ground.

**Opportunity for conflict;** You turn toward a sudden noise or movement; your horse spooks away from it. You can see clearly, evaluate, and logically react to sights and noises in your environment. Your horse can't. The result; When riding, you could end up getting thrown by a sudden spook (and never know what spooked your horse!); on the ground, you could find yourself in a nasty horse-human collision.

Plus, if your horse is tied or otherwise confined (say, in a box stall or trailer) when his flight response is triggered, he'll behave in one of two ways;; He'll resort to a fight response, lashing out with a front or rear hoof against the object of his fear; or he'll struggle blindly against his restraint/confinement, in an effort to escape the threat. Warning: When this powerful :''fight or flight'' instinct takes over, your horse is oblivious to anything or anyone around him including self-inflicted pain. If you get in his way, he'll hurt you, too. This is why a panicked horse will tear off his hoof in an attempt to escape entanglement in a wire fence, flip over backward in crossties, or attempt to lunge to freedom through that tiny window in the front of your two horse trailer, and, well, you get the picture.

**How to avoid conflict;** Discipline yourself to stay out of your horse's flight path (directly in front of him). out of striking range ( about 5 feet in front of either front leg), and out of his kick zone (about 8 feet behind and to the side of your horse's hindquarters; you either need to be right next to his hindquarters, or farther away than 8 feet)

Avoid falling into the "I trust my horse" trap. There's a saying that goes, "It's the good horses that'll hurt you." That's because we let our guard down around those horses we trust, and guess what--we forget they're horses. All it takes is one such lapse for Flicka to inflict some serious damage.

When approaching any horse from the rear, be sure to announce your presence before you enter the kick zone. A dozing horse can be startled awake by a sudden movement or noise-and remember, his up-close vision is poor. His response may be to kick (defend himself) first, and check out the 'threat' later. Get in the practice of keeping your horse's attention focused on you whenever you ride or lead him. By doing so, you'll not only increase your control, but also will be forced to keep your attention focused on him, thus reducing your response time, should a spook occur. A bonus; When his mind's on you, rather than on his environment, you'll also minimize his opportunities to search for-and react to-perceived threats in the area. Never enter a confined area, such as a trailer or box stall, in an attempt to calm a frenzied horse. Only when he's calm, and you can approach without endangering yourself, should you do so. Use quick-release (or panic) snaps whenever you tie your horse. Your ability to instantly release him from the "trap" (if you can do so safely) will help dissipate his panic, thus minimizing risk of injury to either one of you.

Desensitize your horse to stimuli common to your daily environment, and to those to which you'll be traveling (such as horse shows). You'll help your horse learn to control his fears, thus minimizing risk of injury to him, you, and bystanders.

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## DIFFERENCE #5

### FOOD BEHAVIOR

**Your horse's would:** He's motivated by food, but that motivation is secondary to safety and social concerns. Food triggers aggressive interactions-and establishes social hierarchy-among herd members. If a subordinate horse were to approach a dominant horse's feed, the result would be a threat or act of aggression from the dominant one. This is a hierarchy-related dispute-food isn't part of the conflict, merely the trigger for it.

**Your world:** Food not only is necessary for survival, but also has strong social and psychological connotations. "Comfort food" makes us feel good; we also use food as a bribe, a reward, and in our celebrations.

**Opportunity for conflict:** First, when you dispense treats to horses in groups, you'll trigger aggressive, dominance-related behavior, which could result in injury to you, or to the horse(s). (Note: This aggressive behavior often is misinterpreted as jealousy because you're giving treats to one horse, but not all. but jealousy isn't the issue-that's human emotion. The enticement of food induces subordinate horses to challenge, and encourages dominant ones to exert real rather than threatened aggression to assure their reward.)

Second, your urge to make your horse feel good through food can be an inadvertent reward for inappropriate behavior, resulting in reinforcement of such dangerous bad habits as biting. (Examples: Your horse nudges you for a treat; you give him one, rewarding the behavior-and encouraging him to butt you again. Your horse refuses to step into your trailer; you give him a handful of grain in an attempt to lure him in-when all you're really doing is rewarding his balky behavior.... Your horse acts up when the farrier works on him, so you provide handfuls of grain, to keep the horse quiet; he continues to act up-because you give him treats when he does.)

**How to avoid conflict:** Avoid handing out treats in a group situation. If you wish to single out a particular horse for your attention, halter and lead him outside the group enclosure, where you'll be able to feed him safely. Avoid hand-feeding your horse, and never allow him to search your pockets for food. Instead, provide treats in his regular feeder, or offer them in a bucket. This will help prevent nudging and nipping behaviors. Think before you feed, to avoid inadvertently rewarding bad behavior. If your horse is balking, pinning his ears, refusing to stand still, etc., food will reward that behavior. Wait until he's displaying a desirable behavior, such as a step forward, an ears-up expression, or a still moment, before dispensing those carrots.

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Every horseman should read [When Worlds Collide](#). Written by Karen E.N. Hayes DVM, MS, and published in Aug 96 Horse and Rider Magazine