



SARAH CLARK - HELP WITH HORSE BEHAVIOUR

“What is my horse telling me?”

By Sarah Clark

We horse lovers often have gut instincts about our horses emotions. We instinctively know what they might be wary of and what they will be comfortable with. However, sometimes a little key knowledge of equine body language can go a long way in helping our horses even more, in different situations.

Often when I’m called out to cases of unwanted behaviour I find underlying causes related to pain, or fear or both! But how do we know what signs to look out for, as well as ‘trusting our guts’ with our horses?

This article aims to cover the main body language cues so that you can better understand your horses emotions. If your horse is a little tricky with clipping, shoeing, being tacked up, mounted (or any aspect of your life together!) I hope this may provide some insights for you and shed more light on things.

Horses are all about body language! As compulsively sociable animals this is how they communicate with each other, and how we can pick up more about how they are feeling.



1

2

IMAGE 1 shows a calm and relaxed horse munching on his hay, whereas in **IMAGE 2** (the same horse) you can see the shape of the nostrils, and the chin have changed. In image 2 the horse was experiencing separation anxiety from one specific friend in his herd.



3

4

IMAGE 3 shows a fairly calm and relaxed horse where in **IMAGE 4** (the same horse) he is feeling fearful about the approach of a vet. You can see this in the shape of the nostrils, the lip line and the chin.

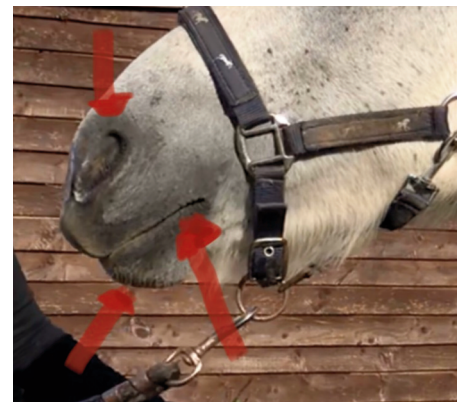




Image 5 shows a horse with underlying pain (ridden) tucking her tail tightly against her rump. Her owner thought her mounting and ridden difficulties were through naughtiness but when we know better we can do better, for our equine friends.

5



There are a multitude of signs that can indicate pain, anxiety, discomfort or even the anticipation of discomfort, but the ones we are going to focus on here tend to be the clearest for us to see;

NOSTRILS

- ✔ Rounded shape with 'fluffy' edges
- ✘ Oval shape with thin edges

CHIN

- ✔ Soft & loose so lips meet
- ✘ Tight, tucked up 'triangular' or appearing as 'parrot mouth' with upper lip protruding

LIPLINE

- ✔ Lips softly meeting with a little curve down in the corner
- ✘ Drawn and very straight

TAIL

- ✔ Held loosely by or away from rump
- ✘ Tightly tucked down, under or kinked

Knowing the difference between horses who are CONFIDENT & RELAXED versus FEARFUL or in PAIN can help in so many ways! It not only helps us with kinder handling of our beloved horses but with effective training, so we can better understand specific anxieties or fear thresholds (such as objects that require some desensitisation training).

- Horses can show just 1 sign of discomfort OR a combination of ALL signs
- Become super-familiar with your own horse's relaxed body language. Every horse is built differently. That way you'll be able to better spot when signs of discomfort arise
- The signs can be shown for just a fleeting moment, so sharpened observational skills are helpful! Signs of discomfort may indicate an underlying problem.

If in any doubt seek the advice of your vet or a registered behaviourist @ equinebehaviouraffiliation.org



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Happy - Horsing!



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