

Handling with care: PTSD in horses

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Equine companionship is built upon a foundation of trust and care. Yet, maintaining a horse's trust can be challenging, especially when a past event has left the animal with behaviors mirroring what's diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in humans.

Dr. Leslie Easterwood, a clinical associate professor at the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, discusses the signs and measures that can be taken for a horse experiencing adverse behaviors following a traumatic event.

Cognitive recollection

In people, PTSD is a disorder that can develop after someone experiences a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. According to the National Institutes of Health, it is common to experience a range of reactions after trauma and people typically recover from the initial symptoms over time.

However, when someone continues to experience the symptoms associated with the traumatic event long-term, they may be diagnosed with PTSD.

Because horses have cognitive memory and memory recall, they can develop behaviors similar to PTSD in humans in response to repetitive trauma.

"There are many scenarios that can lead to adverse behaviors in horses similar to PTSD," Easterwood said. "They have long memories and can associate any experience that results in [physical pain](#), being scared, or feeling confined with long-term stress."

Horses also are able to recall people, places, and actions that previously caused a spike in fear.

"Aggressive [training methods](#) and capture techniques are two of the most common scenarios that could lead to PTSD-like symptoms in horses," Easterwood said.

The culprit of trauma

As prey animals, horses have a highly developed fight-or-flight response to highly [stressful situations](#); therefore, it is vital to be aware of what has become a trigger for a horse that has developed adverse behaviors, as unexpected reactions can put both the horse and the people working with them in danger.

Easterwood described several stimuli that could be triggers for affected horses.

"This could include anything that causes pain, such as certain training methods or needle injections; things that cause fear, like [loud noises](#) or fireworks; things that move fast or erratically; or things that cause them to feel trapped, including trailers or low ceiling barns," Easterwood said.

Easterwood explains that the *déjà vu* effect of situations resembling the horse's past trauma can lead to physical responses such as biting, striking, kicking, and attempting to flee.

These aggressive behaviors are reactions that the horse has developed in response to the stress of the traumatic event, and identifying the inciting trauma is critical to resolving these behaviors.

Patience is key

Successful treatment for affected horses can require [environmental changes](#), targeted care and treatment plans, and an owner who is

committed to meeting the needs of their horse by focusing on reinforcing positive behaviors and eliminating stressors that lead to adverse behaviors.

The biggest help an owner can be to a horse that has developed unsafe behaviors is to understand itthem — lead with patience and learn of itstheir past in order to better care for itthem in the present, according to Easterwood.

"It really depends on what triggers that particular horse," Easterwood said. "Sometimes they can be 'reprogrammed' through desensitization training, but some horses don't ever get over past [trauma](#)."

Easterwood recommends that owners who suspect their horse has had a past traumatic event that has led to the development of adverse behavior consult with their veterinarian. If confirmed, the veterinarian may recommend specific training interventions or even [medical therapy](#).

"Our typical recommendation for [medical management](#) to owners is mild sedation for times when the stimulus can't be avoided," Easterwood said. "This would be on a case-by-case basis and would require good communication and collaboration with their veterinarian."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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