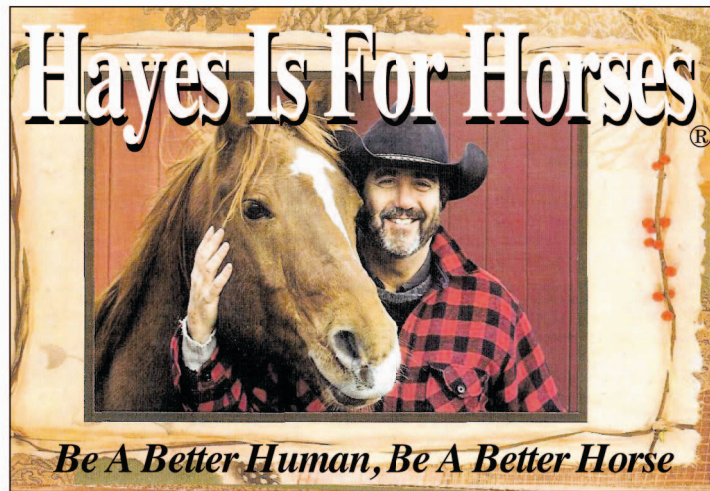


Know Your HORSE'S State of Mind

By Tim Hayes

Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who is in a panic or so angry they're "blind with rage"? You can't. This person is overcome with out-of-control emotions. Their entire being is flooded with adrenaline. They want to either fight or run away. They're only conscious of intolerable feelings of panic or rage, and are unable to think rationally. They behave impulsively and feel they must do something to get relief from the horrible way they feel. While in this state of mind if another person does or says anything to try and help, it usually will make the situation worse. What can one do? If it's rage there's not much except wait until they "cool off" "take a walk around the block" or "count to 10". If it's panic – a fear-based state - sometimes we can help by doing something that "snaps" them out of their current state of mind.

Later when calm or feeling safe, these people will often say things like: "I was out of my mind" or "I totally lost it." In physiological terms, something has caused this person to go from using the panic/rage driven right side of his brain (the side that reacts without thinking) to using the logical/reasoning left side of his brain (the side that thinks before it reacts). Irrational right brain reactions in humans are usually caused by fear or anger. In horses they are always caused by fear. The brain of a horse although far less complex than that of the human, is similar in having a right and left side that functions differently. When a horse is using the left side of his brain he is able to think – "do I want to let this human walk over and put that halter on my



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head or do I want to walk back to my herd?" When a horse is using the right side of his brain he is unable to think. He reacts. Sometimes he is not only afraid, he's "blind" with fear. This can happen whether you're riding on his back or walking him on the ground.

When a horse is afraid, unless he is cornered or trapped (in which case he will fight), he will always run. Horses have survived for millions of years because of this lightning fast instinct for self-preservation. When a horse is using the right side of his brain not only is communication impossible

but any attempt by a person at controlling the horse's ability to move his feet (his survival response) will meet with strong resistance and can often make the situation dangerous for both. This includes pulling on a lead line or pulling on the bit. In fact any use of force especially if it causes pain is futile. Given a choice of relieving his pain - a metal bit digging into his mouth - or relieving his fear –

run as fast as he can - a horse will always choose to relieve his fear no matter how much pain is inflicted. How then can we help the horse and keep us both safe?

NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP PROVIDES A TWO-PART SOLUTION

We cause the horse to switch from using the right side of his brain to using the left side of his brain. This stops the non-thinking fear/flight response and the flow of adrenaline. It initiates the thinking rational/logical response and starts the release of endorphins which soothes and calms the horse.

The way we cause the horse to switch is by moving his feet in a familiar

task that requires him to think and thus use the left side of his brain. A horse does not need to think in order to run but he has to think in order to move his hip sideways by crossing over his two hind legs. This is called disengagement of the hindquarters. It can be done from the ground or from the horse's back. This helps to shift his mind off the upset and back on to us until he is able to relax, think and respond without fear. This is something that can be easily taught and that everyone who rides horses should learn. Someday your life may depend on it. As his leader we must be able to offer our horse positive direction that creates feelings of safety, comfort, trust, respect and reassurance. He will in turn look to us for leadership. This will help to keep us both safe.

A TYPICAL SITUATION

You are leading your horse from point A to point B. You have done this together many times. There is a large pile of sand on the side of the path. It's been there for a few days and you have both walked by it before without issue. You don't notice but today there is more sand and the pile has gotten bigger making it look different. You feel your horse stop and start to pull back on the rope in your hand. You turn around and see your horse resisting going forward.

You don't see any reason for this so you say, "come on" and yank on the rope. Your horse's neck goes up a little, his eyes widen little and he starts to pull back harder. You feel annoyed; you think he is being disrespectful ("acting up") so you pull even harder. In a flash your horse rears up pulls the rope out of your hand, turns and runs full speed right into the fence. The next day you have a dislocated shoulder, and a severe rope burn. Your horse requires 7 stitches in his chest from the vet.

HOW THE SITUATION OCCURRED TO THE HUMAN

I was leading my horse down the path we always go on. All off a sudden and for no reason he blew up, pulled the lead line out of my hand, took off in a panic and ran right into a fence. He hurt my hand and shoulder and put a big gash in his chest. Once in a while he goes crazy for no reason. I don't know what's wrong. I love him but sometimes I think, maybe I should sell him.

HOW THE SITUATION OCCURRED TO THE HORSE

I was walking with my human. I saw a big pile of sand on the right side of the road. I'd seen the sand before but now it looked different. I needed to stop and be certain that whatever created this change was not something that was still there and could threaten my life. I stopped; my head went up so I could see better and the muscles in my neck tightened preparing me to run if necessary. I don't know why but my human tried to pull me forward on the rope. I started to move my feet and go away from the sand to relieve some of my anxiety but for some reason that made my human pull on me harder. Now I couldn't go back, I didn't dare go forward toward the sand pile, the only way I could move to relieve my fear was to go up. When I reared up my human pulled hard on my head with the rope.

The claustrophobic feeling of not being able to move my head or my feet makes me panic. When I panic I stop thinking. My brain switches to survival mode. I react on pure instinct to escape the place where I'm not feeling safe. I must run away and I will use all my power to do so. Since I am not thinking it doesn't matter if my human or I get hurt. I get to live another day.

In order for us to be a leader our horse trusts, respects and responds

to without resistance, we must learn to see the world the way it occurs to our horse. We must understand his nature as a prey animal. We must learn his five triggers that indicate a potential threat and cause our horse to go from the left side to the right side of his brain. We must learn the different behavioral signs that indicate when our horse is using the left or right side of his brain. And finally we must learn and practice our equine language of communication on the ground and on his back so when we see our horse showing signs of going right brain (non-thinking, reactive) we can immediately help him get back to using the left side of his brain (thinking, responding).

I have listed the 5 primary triggers that cause horses to become "right brained". I have also listed some (not all) of the behavioral signs your horse will exhibit that can indicate whether he is using the right or left side of his brain. You may have noticed all of these signs before but understanding what they mean and communicating your understanding to your horse will not only help keep you and your horse safe, it is what Natural Horsemanship is all about. ©Tim Hayes 2012

LEFT BRAIN INDICATORS

- Licking and chewing with mouth
- Blinking of eyes
- Level head and neck
- Muscles are relaxed
- Endorphins are released for calmness

RIGHT BRAIN INDICATORS

- Head and neck are elevated
- Eyes are wide, showing the white
- Nostrils are flared
- Muscles are tight and braced
- Adrenaline is released for power

PRIMARY RIGHT BRAIN TRIGGERS

- Predators (this includes us)
- Places (new or unfamiliar)
- Movement (of anything)
- Changes (anything familiar appearing differently)
- Objects (anything new and unfamiliar)

Natural Horsemanship articles by Tim Hayes are at:

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