

Shedding some (Candle)Light on Resistances in Horses

By Edie Jane Eaton TTouch/TTEAM Instructor www.listeningtowhispers.com

It's commonly accepted by TTEAM practitioners that when horses show resistance there's always a reason – or several reasons. These reasons can be such things as misunderstanding what the human wants, tension or discomfort, and fear - all of which affect how our horses go, and influence their behaviour. It behooves us, if our horse is resistant, to take the time to investigate what's going on - in his body and relationship to his environment - and to find out what's behind the problem, rather than jump in to try to correct it.

Even if we do acknowledge that there's a reason for our horse's behaviour – accepting that he's not just naturally ornery, or choosing to be resistant - we may well spend a lot of time seeking to identify a particular trigger for a behaviour yet have trouble pinning it down. Or we think we know what the trigger is, and then get upset with the horse when the behaviour shows up without it: If we don't see the reason, then he's got no excuse! Sometimes we adapt what we do - even go to great lengths - to avoid what we believe is the trigger, like taking apart a bridle to put it on, not carrying a crop, or choosing a 'round-about hacking route. Life can become very complicated!

This trigger-search may be a wild goose chase. Have you ever snapped someone's head off and then gone back to apologise, telling whatever your version might be of - waking up with a headache, alarm not going off, the coffee machine not working, terrible traffic, losing your wallet, etc., not to mention ongoing low-grade stress of an adolescent's rebelliousness or an aged parent's care? Any one of these you could cope with, but all of them at once? No way. Whatever the poor person whose head you snapped off said or did was just the last straw, the climax of an accumulation of stressors. It seems to be like this for horses, too. If only a few provocations are present the horse can cope, but when there are too many the horse loses it.

I think of these provocations – these difficulties the horse has - as candles. They sit underneath and heat up a bowl of water, which represents the horse's level of composure. When there are only a few candles lit the horse manages to keep it together. As more of the candles are lit the temperature goes up past the boiling point, and the horse can no longer cope. More importantly, he can no longer learn! If we are unaware of the cumulative effect of stress it can seem that the behaviour comes out of nowhere, whereas it could be predicted.

Candles can include tension and discomfort in the body, and might be expressed as difficulty with handling, grooming, tacking up, etc.; fears in the stable, of the trailer, or of traffic, perhaps; and lack of trust in the handler/rider which is often the result of misunderstanding.

Small candles may be hard to recognize, and if the horse appears to be doing fine, we may not even be aware that they are lit. Even if we do recognize them, they may seem insignificant, or unrelated to the difficulties we are having, so we let them

continue burning. So too with those candles we feel helpless about or think we can't change. When candles keep burning – no matter how small they are - the water stays constantly warm, and can come quickly to the boiling point. This is the main point I want to make: Even the small candles have considerable influence. Taking the time to identify and extinguish as many as possible can make all the difference. If we extinguish them, the extreme behaviour may not even arise! Consider the following story.

I once worked with a horse with the aim of helping the rider find ways to settle the horse when it 'lost it' at shows. I did a bit of everything: Some TTouch body work to identify and relieve tension, and ground work in the Confidence Course to check out and improve his balance and focus. As always I found some small things that could have been better, so I spent a few minutes addressing them. None of them provoked the problem behaviour, but they did evoke minor concern in the horse. I think I only had one session with the horse, and didn't see the owner again until the end of the show season when I asked if what I had shown her had helped. "Well, she said, I'm not sure - he never lost it....Ahh! I get it!!!"

I use this candle model as an explanation for why just doing the TTEAM work can bring about dramatic and lasting changes in behaviour and movement, even when the practitioner is not focused on "fixing" the problem. As we go through the process of the work we blow out a lot of small candles, sometimes without ever identifying them. In the example above I was asked to help the rider cope with her horse when he reacted. I wasn't asked to stop the horse from being reactive, though that was the end result. It may have been that the rider believed he couldn't change, and that his reactivity was "just the way he is."

With the TTEAM work we find that the description "just the way he is" is rarely true. I suspect that in most horses there are many small candles burning that are quite easy to extinguish, and removing their contribution to the temperature allows the horse to stay more calm and in a state in which he can learn more easily. Once he moves beyond instinctive reaction to a thinking state a chain reaction seems to be set in motion, and issues become resolved all on their own. The result is a horse who - as long as there are no negative influences stressing him – keeps getting better and better.

A TTEAM session begins with an in-depth observation of the horse in order to identify what elements (candles) are contributing to his difficulties. In order to identify the candles we have to notice how the horse shows his concern or anxiety. Understanding the vocabulary of the body, which can be very subtle and include involuntary effects such as tension, breath-holding, or increased heart rate, etc., will help us to identify what the candles are. The language is very individual: it might also be expressed as evasion, chewing, pawing, barging forward, growing roots – you name it.

You'll recognize many of these as common "vices", although they may be nothing more than your horse's way of saying "I'm not happy about what's going on." Sad, isn't it, to think that we often fail to listen to these communications and sometimes punish our horses for them. This is not too different from saying to the horses "don't tell me you don't like it!" Take note of when these behaviours arise, and you get closer to identifying the candles. Notice the subtle behaviours, and you'll find critical little candles that may be constantly burning in the background.

Candles fall into three main categories, which here are identified as misunderstanding, tension and discomfort, and fear. I think that all horse people would agree that understanding, physical comfort and confidence are all important (and all-important!) to successful training and performance.

Misunderstanding:

Simply being aware of when your horse is concerned is a huge part of understanding him, and equally important is recognising when he understands - or misunderstands - you! You will discover that you can acknowledge his concern by changing what you do or giving a moment's break. This will go far to help develop his trust, and your training will become dramatically easier. For both of you the stress levels will drop. You won't be second-guessing each other, and misunderstandings will be a thing of the past. It sounds very simple, and it can be. It helps to accept that the horse is probably doing his best, just as you are, and giving him the benefit of the doubt is a good thing!

Tension and discomfort:

You must always make sure that your horse has no medical issues. TTEAM work is a great adjunct to veterinary care, but doesn't replace it. Tension in the body may make it difficult for the horse to do what you wish and may make some movements uncomfortable or even impossible. By running your hands softly over his body you will be able to identify where he seems to enjoy being touched, and where he lets you know it's not OK. You will also find places where he is tight, and you will certainly notice changes in the texture of his coat and temperature changes related to circulation. It's important that he be free to move as you do this - you want to be able to see what he does, and learn more about his way of expressing himself.

Tension patterns influence posture, and posture is intimately related to behaviour. You may notice that your high-headed flighty horse has a tight neck and poll and a dropped back, or that your nervous horse - who does a great imitation of an elephant balancing on a barrel - has a lot of tension in his legs and belly. It's very exciting to become aware of these relationships and understanding them removes a lot of the mystery from behaviour.

There are common connections between concern in certain parts of the body and specific kinds of behaviour. We often find that horses labeled "emotional" or "neurotic" have issues about being handled around the mouth, or hold a lot of tension in lips and jaw. Tension in the flanks and sides can make a horse unresponsive to the leg, while at the same time they can be surprisingly reactive to being groomed there. Tension in the shoulder and upper legs can reduce circulation to the feet - they may

have icy cold lower legs - and we sometimes find that these horses are nervous about changes in footing, or are spooky. Clamped tails and tension in the hindquarters are common in horses who are nervous about things behind them, or who rush through doorways.

Even without going into specific TTEAM techniques to address these tensions, you may find that your roving touch will tell you a great deal about why your horse behaves as he does, and why he needs your help and consideration. Your appreciation and awareness of what you are feeling is the beginning of making a difference. Just as someone's hand on the top of your tight raised shoulder triggers you to relax it, your touch will set some changes in motion.

Fears:

Fears are very strongly affected by how safe an animal feels. Feeling insecure can aggravate fears, or cause them to develop. Insecurity also undermines the ability to learn, and the stress it causes can have physiological as well as behavioural consequences. A sense of security is vital to overcoming fear, and we can provide security to our horses by allowing them some freedom to move. Do you remember as a child shrugging off the grip of a nervous parent, since being held tightly made you feel less safe? Horses with good balance are more confident, and allowing the head and neck to be free gives them the chance to balance themselves. Movement, too, is helpful, since it has a physiologically calming effect. Have you ever felt the need to move after getting bad news?

When our horse acts up we often wish he would stand still, and it's common for us to want to hold him more tightly, or tell him to smarten up - somehow to stop him from whatever he's doing. The next time this situation occurs, try this: First of all - exhale! Allow the horse a bit of space by stepping forward so you aren't pulling back on his head, and give him enough freedom to look around. If we want our horse to develop self-control we have to back off a bit from trying to control him. If you know what's provoking him, turn him sideways to it, and when you ask him to move forward keep the scary thing to his side where he can see it. You may well see his head come down and the panic subside, and find that he can be aware of what's bothering him and at the same time be able to listen and respond to you. This is great learning for him.

Linda Tellington Jones, the originator of the TTEAM method, has described the intention of the work as helping horses to "move beyond instinct and learn how to learn." These instincts are represented by reactive behaviours and also by protective tension patterns, which interfere with movement and colour attitude. Simply running your hand slowly over your horse can begin to release tension and change habitual postures. Giving him short breaks will help him to process the effects of your touch, and experience what feels new in his body. Allowing him some freedom to re-balance and take stock of his environment will help him to develop greater self-awareness - a clearer self-image. The pay-off for this is better self-control and improved athleticism. Best of all, you will find your relationship deepening as you allow him opportunities to speak to you, and as you listen to what he has to say.