

## “Triggers” Get Help: Introducing Equine Phobia Reversal Therapy

By Casey Sugarman, Equine Behaviorist

Every barn knows of at least one horse with a hang-up. “She’s a great horse, all except for this one weird thing...” “This horse is bullet proof as long as you don’t...” “Ever since it happened, that’s just the way he is.” Whether it’s a scary object, a scary activity, or a weird reaction... these “fear triggers” can make otherwise good horses unsafe.

There’s no mistaking a horse with a phobia. The obvious sign is when the horse turns into an animal possessed, stops breathing, goes to „Mars“, stops thinking, becomes extremely unsafe, bolts, or all of the above. Less obvious signs are when the horse is in a „frozen panic“. While absolutely still, the horse’s eyes start moving sideways with a dra-a-ag to them... a dangerous explosion is about to occur.

If you wish you could help your horse become more rational, if you’ve tried the medications and herbal calmers, the sacking out and months of repeat exposure, and are still in the same boat, your story is quite common.

Contrary to popular belief, *even beliefs held by some behaviorists*, phobia reversal in horses and other animals is not only possible, it is achievable, the process is predictable, and complete recovery is routine. But Equine Phobia Reversal Therapy is not an arena for recreational trainers.

A Phobia is a fear that has become something like an addiction. A phobia is an emotional abscess; it is analogous to a layered onion. At the core is a rotten center, a buried unconscious memory of *un-processed* ultra-negative experience that handlers may or may not have witnessed. Countless layers of evasive behaviors, excuses, and irrational beliefs surround the core, like the layers of the onion, to keep it hidden and walled off, in order to shield the brain from further trauma.

Phobia Therapy is based in positive reinforcement but does NOT utilize standard clicker training, standard habituation protocols, cowboy schooling, natural horsemanship, nor any psychic/energy approaches. Phobia Therapy rebuilds the horse’s experience through primal emotions, re-experiencing each layer of his memory and putting the horse in complete control of a new rational approach to the trigger. Equine Phobia Therapy also does NOT teach horses to tolerate; it teaches horses to *seek out* the once noxious stimulus.

The work is done by employing the horse’s breathing, center of gravity, curiosity, personality... In Equine Phobia Reversal Therapy, horses are not rewarded for doing a correct *behavior*, horses are rewarded for rationally taking charge of a situation, and then for sharing that authority with a handler. Horses who have gone through the therapy seem to say: “Go ahead, hit me with your best shot!”

Although each therapy is highly customized to each horse, learning curves go through multiple predictable stages of exponential improvement. Also, the horse will carry the new skills to new homes, new owners, and new jobs.

Horses who have multiple fears or phobias usually learn courage from phobia therapy, as they learn *how to learn*. Horses get very excited about their newfound abilities to control and even seek to *play with* triggers that used to evoke terror.

Following are some beginner tips for helping a horse through a common stable fear. But remember, your safety is always most important. Kicking, biting, striking, and rearing horses should be rehabbed by professionals only. Emotional recovery in dangerous horses should be directed by a professional phobia specialist to reduce risk of injury to people and animals. 13

## ***Trigger's Trigger Trigger: Fear of a Spray Bottle***

For tackling “fear of a spray bottle”, fill a pocket with quarter sized treats. Bring the horse, on 10 foot lead into a large enclosed area with good footing, like a small paddock. The lead is only there to keep you and the horse in somewhat close proximity, but the horse is to always be on a slack line. Bring a reliable spray bottle, set to stream, filled with water.

Before you begin, you must promise the horse one very important thing: EVERY single time you hear the horse give a big exhale (ignore snorts), you will stop what you’re doing and give the horse three treats; exhaling is a jackpot. Invite a friend to watch and listen for those exhales to remind you of your promise.

Start with one spritz aimed in the opposite direction from the horse’s head, so he can see and hear the bottle. After each spray, give the horse one treat until the sound of the spray makes the horse’s ears perk up as if to say, “I heard the spray, here comes my treat!” That’s your cue to start working the sprayer closer to the horse. Every foot closer needs about 3 repetitions before you shorten the distance. Give a treat every 3-5 spritz or so, but don’t spray the horse yet.

The first aimed shot should be onto one hoof; the right front is usually the closest. Spray the hoof wall and then the hair just above the hoof. This is the part of the horse most experienced with weird sensation. The horse will stomp the foot as if it’s being bitten by a fly. This is great because the horse is dealing with the insult in a rational and purposeful manner.

Now it’s time to upgrade our approval criteria: now, every time the horse stands very still that will earn him one spritz and one treat. Now it’s time to start moving the spray with the same goal in mind. The first time each torso and neck area feels the water, it should be in mist form. The first time each leg and rump area feels the water, it should be in stream form; the reason is so that you can aim accurately from some distance and because these are the more insult-ready parts of the horse. Your main job is to keep exhaling yourself and to “take 5” often, and start again when the horse is focused on you.

In finishing off the project, aim to be very *inconsistent* with the spraying, but always give the horse a chance to find the big exhale in between every dousing. The horse’s exhales are what teach the horse’s brain that it’s all nothing to worry about. If the horse cocks the leg you are spraying or if horse bends away from the bottle those are great signs. This is the picture of a horse who is playing the part of the catcher behind home plate; kicking you or the spray bottle is the last thing on his mind.

By the end of this game, you should have a thoroughly wet horse, an empty pocket, and a buddy who can’t wait to play the spray bottle game again. After the horse “sleeps on it” a few times, and forgets why he was ever afraid of that fun toy, he’ll be an old pro, and you can save those treats for some other game about some other spook.

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