

Reading Horses: Your Guide to a Better Ride *Suzannah Kolbeck*

We all know horses are scared of just two things — things that move and things that don't move — but their response to those fears varies. From groundwork to riding to simple vet care, the way your horse responds to fear can shape everything about your life with them. Want to read and respond to your horse better? Here's your guide to a better ride.

The four types of equine fear response

Most horses respond to unknown situations or objects in one of four ways. There are a few horses who respond in multiple modalities, but most have a primary response.

Fight

Fighting horses need space. They feel caged in and trapped. The only way out is to fight back. Their primary goal is to force the situation or the object away from them. This is the horse that pushes on the bit or runs towards whatever is causing the fear response.

Flight

Flight horses also need space, but they create it by fleeing. If they have any room around their body, they head in that direction, getting as far away as fast as they can. This is familiar as a bolt or a shy, but horses that back and rear are also attempting to flee.

Freeze

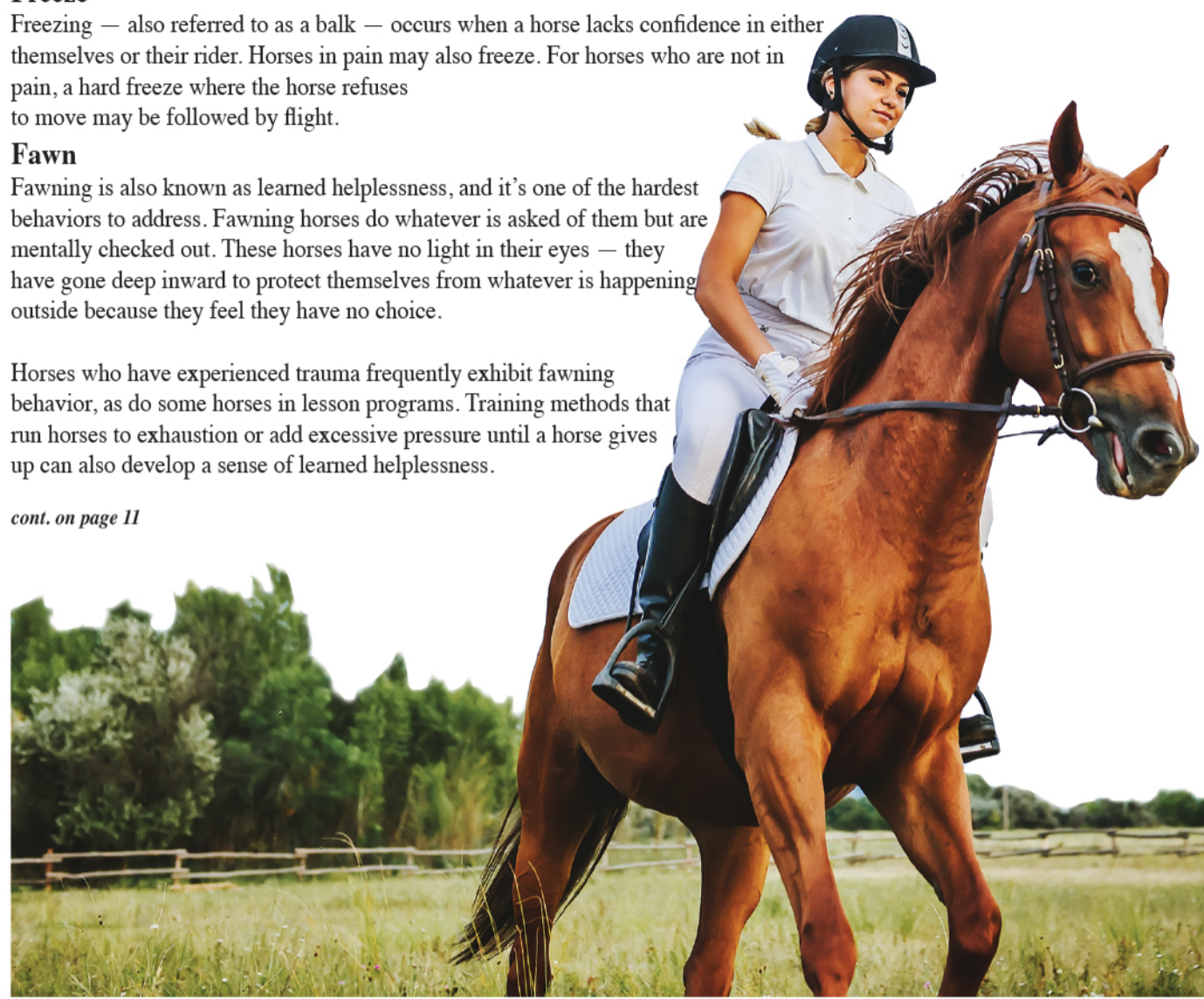
Freezing — also referred to as a balk — occurs when a horse lacks confidence in either themselves or their rider. Horses in pain may also freeze. For horses who are not in pain, a hard freeze where the horse refuses to move may be followed by flight.

Fawn

Fawning is also known as learned helplessness, and it's one of the hardest behaviors to address. Fawning horses do whatever is asked of them but are mentally checked out. These horses have no light in their eyes — they have gone deep inward to protect themselves from whatever is happening outside because they feel they have no choice.

Horses who have experienced trauma frequently exhibit fawning behavior, as do some horses in lesson programs. Training methods that run horses to exhaustion or add excessive pressure until a horse gives up can also develop a sense of learned helplessness.

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Getting back to a good ride

Before attempting to address any of the above responses to fear, it's important to rule out any physical issues.

Poor saddle fit, teeth issues, and other painful conditions can turn your normally cheerful equine partner into a ride you don't recognize.

Consider your own approach to your horse, too. We don't always like to admit it, but many of our problems undersaddle start on the ground. Start with some groundwork exercise for horses before you even think about mounting. This includes studying your body language, tone of voice, and overall relationship with your horse.

Once pain is eliminated as a potential cause, it's time to get to work. If you aren't sure you can safely address the issue on your own, enlist the help of a trainer. Even if you don't send your horse away for training, a few sessions with a professional can get you started.

Calm your fighting horse

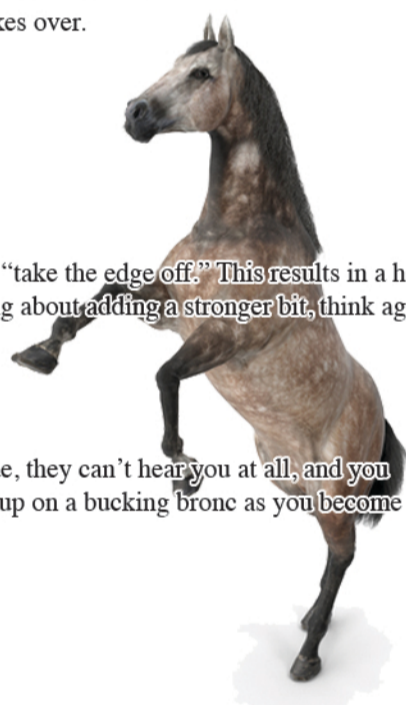
A fighting horse pulls against the bit, lunges towards the threat, and is generally aggressive towards the rider.

This type of horse needs a confident rider; if the rider feels out of control, the horse takes over.

Retraining an aggressive horse means:

- Starting on the ground establishing your position as a leader
- Working on voice commands
- Using praise and rest as rewards
- Checking in on the lunge line before each ride

A word of caution: some amateur trainers lunge their horses endlessly before riding to "take the edge off." This results in a horse that becomes increasingly fit — and no more responsive to you. And if you are thinking about adding a stronger bit, think again. Any horse determined to fight will run through any bit you put in their mouth.



Bring that flight horse in for a landing

Like people flying Southwest Airlines, flight horses just wanna get away. In flight mode, they can't hear you at all, and you won't win by controlling their instinct to flee. Try to contain a horse and you may end up on a bucking bronc as you become what they're trying to avoid.

To ease the flight instinct:

- Stay calm in the saddle, and let them move where they need to.
- Slow down by riding in a circle if you can.
- Approach the scary situation from a distance.
- Gradually reduce the space.

For example, calm the flight response by gradually reducing the space between your horse and the scary object/situation.

If your horse balks at water, don't approach it head-on. Instead, ride in circles or a zig-zag, approaching the water and then retreating before they feel the need to flee. Spend more time resting near the water. This is desensitization that helps your equine friend process the feeling in a more supported way.

To thaw your horse's freeze, let it go

Horses that freeze are some of the most dangerous to ride. They reach a state where their brain simply cannot process the request, however small. While freezing in place seems a minor behavioral issue, some frozen horses follow up their balk with a nuclear meltdown, combining fighting and fleeing. Before that happens, you'll need to learn to let go of the idea of a big movement in favor of small progress. Aim for the smallest movement (ear flicked to you, eye turning, weight shifting in the direction you want to go). When movement occurs, stop asking immediately.

Consider movement in a different direction (for example, turning to the side instead of forward).

Engage the horse's mind with variations in direction, speed, and task.

A frozen horse is not being stubborn or disrespectful. Whether it's uncertainty about your leadership, fear, or pain, in most cases, they have a legitimate concern. The way to help them thaw is to regain their trust and engage their mind.

Give your fawning horse some joy

Fawning horses are people pleasers at the expense of their own soul. Unlike the freeze response, a horse in a state of learned helplessness is compliant but without joy. These are commonly referred to as "dead broke." Even in the best lesson programs, horses may develop fawning behaviors as a protection against the flailing and pulling of students learning to ride. And for horses in traumatic situations, making themselves more attractive to the threatening presence is the only way they survive. Their motto is, "comply, comply, comply."

A fawning horse has completely turned off, but there are ways to bring your sweet horse back to life.

Timing and release of pressure is key (release when the horse even thinks about doing what you ask).

Keep training sessions short. Start with groundwork. Improve your equitation and timing of your release in the saddle.

Show your horse that you care how he feels by giving him choices and responding with praise when he takes you up on it.

When you position yourself as the benevolent leader, they will reward you with a deeper relationship than you've ever known.

Your horse is an open book

With some time and observation, you'll learn to read your horse and their response to fear better.

This improves both your ride and your relationship to make for happy horses and happy trails.

