

Horses use their bodies to communicate in a number of ways

OUR EXPERT

Justine Harrison



Justine is a qualified equine behaviourist who uses the science of behaviour to help owners better understand and resolve issues with their horses.

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Have you ever wished your horse could talk? Equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** looks at the ways horses communicate, and helps you decipher the message they are trying to get across

Horses may not be able to talk but they have many different ways of communicating with each other. They use body language and behaviour to express themselves, and leave chemical messages for other horses, in the form of pheromones.

Riders and owners can learn a lot by reading a horse's signs, but they are often so subtle they are missed, or misinterpreted.

Understanding what that swishing tail or tense expression means is hugely important, though. You can be alerted to a health or pain issue, and it may be the difference between having a great ride, or being thrown off!

Building a picture

While you can get an idea of how a horse is feeling, 'at a glance', interpreting equine body language requires you to piece together several pieces of a jigsaw:-

1. Horses use their whole bodies to communicate

To convey a message may require a number of movements. This means body language can only be interpreted correctly when the whole body is seen, and observed for several minutes.

For example, facial expressions may be supported by the horse's stance, or movements in the rest of the body.

Take particular notice of the head and neck, the tail, the hindquarters and overall posture.

If one horse threatens another he may put his ears back. If that doesn't get the message

across, he'll 'shout' louder by tossing his head and neck towards the other horse.

This may be followed by a threatening movement of the hindquarters.

2. Body language and behaviour is context specific

How a horse behaves can mean different things in different situations. Therefore, it is vital to take the context into account.

For example, a horse pawing at the ground in the snow will be searching for grass, but a horse pawing at the concrete when tied up on the yard may be anxious or frustrated, as they are unable to escape the situation.

3. Individual horses can use different signals

According to American equine behaviourist Dr Robin Foster, not all horses will respond in

the same way to things they come across in their environment.

Some can be particularly stoic, while others may seem melodramatic.

"There is mounting evidence that, like humans, animals show individual differences in their ability to express emotions," she says.

"This means horses with low emotional expressivity actually experience stronger emotions than their body language suggests.

"It can be easy to miss or brush off their subtle signs of fear, anxiety, frustration, or even happiness.

"Trying to read these horses is especially challenging if they also have physical features that mask emotions, such as a dark bay or black coat, low head and tail carriage, or small, deep-set eyes."

To interpret your own horse's body language you need to consider the three key factors

mentioned earlier, and observe him in a number of different situations.

Watch him when he is relaxed, drowsy, playing, waiting for his feed, introduced to a new horse or in a new environment.

Knowing the differences between similar body language cues can make all the difference. It could mean you are able to distinguish whether your horse is fearful, or in pain, from looking at the tension in his face. ▶

Learn a new language

Reading the signs

Some parts of the body are very expressive and are used all the time to convey messages. Here is what to look for:-

Face

We can learn a lot from the general level of tension in a horse's face. Some equines are always a little anxious around people, so watch yours when he is dozing, or relaxed in his field, to see what his face looks like when totally relaxed and soft.

When anxious, fearful, angry or in pain we see the facial muscles tense and become tight, especially around the chin and cheeks. Blood vessels may also become more pronounced.

Learning to spot the first signs of facial tension means you can see when your horse is becoming anxious or afraid.

This enables you to reassure him or remove him from the situation. Otherwise he may need to resort to using 'louder' – and potentially dangerous – messages later on, to try and escape the thing that is frightening him.



We can learn a lot from a horse's facial expression

Eyes

A horse's eye is the largest in any land mammal and vision is believed to be his primary sense.

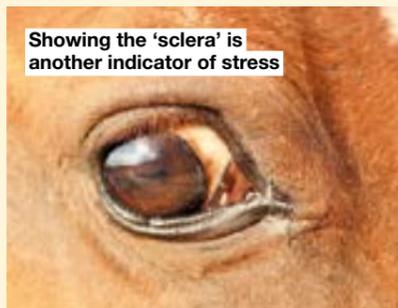
Equines have a wide field of vision, but they cannot see directly in front or behind.

The position of the head can enhance or impair vision. In new or scary situations a horse may move his head quickly, to learn as much about his environment as possible.

Eyes can tell us a lot about a horse's emotional state. A nervous horse in a new environment may have extremely expressive eyes. A tired riding school horse, on his third lesson of the day, may have limited eye movement and a dull, vacant look.

When a horse is relaxed he will have a round, 'soft' eye.

If he is nervous or anxious, the muscles in the inner brow area contract, causing the upper eyelid to change shape and the eye will become triangulated (see below).



Showing the 'sclera' is another indicator of stress

Wrinkles (often called 'worry lines') form above the eye – and the greater the number of them, the more stressed that horse is likely to be.

A horse who is constantly stressed may have numerous deep wrinkles on his upper eyelid as his eyes are continually triangulating in this way.

Eye wrinkles are common in horses, but they differ in number, depth and shape between individuals.

The eye is one of the first indicators that a horse is frightened. Not only does the eye shape change when the animal is scared, but we would also see the 'sclera', or the white of the eye (see picture above).

In some horses, the sclera is always visible, especially in coloured horses with lots of white on their faces.

But, in general, the more white we see, the more anxious the horse is. The whites can also be a sign of aggression.



Worry lines form when a horse is feeling anxious

Ears

The ears are a great indicator of where a horse's attention is directed. The equine ear is very mobile, with 13 sets of muscles that can rotate them through 180 degrees, so they can be quickly directed to any interesting stimulus.

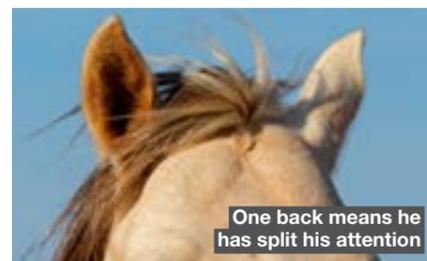
Here's what the ear position of your horse could be telling you:-

- Pricked forward: the horse is directing his attention, and listening, in front of him. Once he has satisfied his curiosity and is no longer interested, the ears quickly relax.

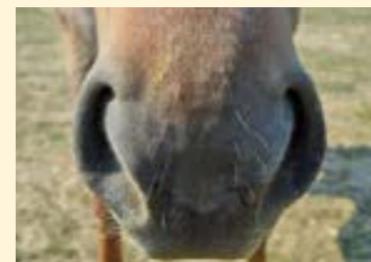


Ears forward and he is interested in something

- One ear backwards: if something catches his attention behind him, he may split his attention and turn one ear backwards to listen out for anything interesting.



One back means he has split his attention



Nose

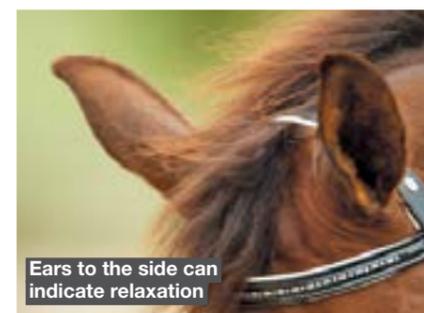
Flared nostrils are a sign of arousal – excitement, fear or when startled. They may also be seen when meeting a new horse or investigating a new environment.

Annoyance or irritation may be indicated by the nostrils narrowing and elongating, with wrinkles appearing behind them.

A long, elongated nose indicates tension and is sadly often seen in ridden horses, or when they are reaching for something.

Long nose 'wiggling' means you've found his itchy spot! It is also seen when a horse is investigating new stimuli.

- Flicking back and forth: we often see a horse's ears flicking back and forth when he is being ridden. This shows he's listening to his rider.
- Turned to the side: this could mean the horse is paying attention to something beside him, or if they are drooping to the side it could indicate relaxation, drowsiness or pain.



Ears to the side can indicate relaxation

- Turned backwards: his attention is focused on something behind him
- Pinned back: indicates aggression or fear.



This means he is focused on something behind him

Heed the warning signs

How would you know if a horse is about to bite? If you are grooming a well-socialised horse with good social signalling and he isn't enjoying what you are doing, you may become aware of the the following signs:

- Tense facial muscles;
- His lips purse and his chin becomes contracted and tight;
- The shape of the eye changes (possibly with wrinkles forming above);
- You can see the whites of his eye;
- The nostrils draw back and become elongated;
- His ears go back.



If you don't take notice of the above, he may toss his head towards you to warn you to stop what you are doing. If you ignore him and carry on, then the following scenario could occur:

- He draws back his lips and bares his teeth;
- The mouth will open;
- His head moves towards you with a warning snap.

If you disregard or miss this behaviour, it may be too late.



Here, the horse is in a relaxed state with his mouth showing no signs of tension

Mouth

Tension around the mouth can indicate a number of emotional states – worry, fear, confusion or even mild aggression.

The mouth or muzzle can become tight, pinched or pursed – this is often a subtle sign and can be easy to miss.

A saggy, droopy bottom lip suggests the horse is relaxed or dozing.

A horse in severe pain may also have a relaxed mouth and droopy lower lip but we would also see flared nostrils and tension in the rest of the face.

An open mouth with visible teeth can mean different things depending on the context. If the ears are back, it's a clear sign of aggression. If you are nearby, move out of his way quickly.

If your horse bares his teeth or his mouth gapes open while being ridden, he may be anxious, trying to avoid the bit or in pain.

In this situation, get his teeth checked by a vet or qualified equine dental technician and check the fit of your bridle and bit.

You could also try a bitless bridle and see if the behaviour stops.

When eating, if your horse stops mid-feed and stands with his mouth gaping, he may be experiencing 'choke', and have an obstruction in his oesophagus. This is an emergency – call your vet immediately. ■

Next time....

In our next issue (January, on sale 19 November), Justine reveals more body language insights, looking at what your horse's posture says about how they are feeling and what they can tell us using the rest of their body