

Animal Behaviour

Fear and aggression

SEBWAT parameter

(Standardised Equine-Based Welfare Assessment Tool)

Observer approach

Chin contact

Tail tuck (donkeys only)

General attitude

Welfare issue

- The animal is afraid or displays an aggressive response during handling.



Horse showing avoidance (rushing backwards) due to fear.

Welfare significance

Risk of injury

- Fear responses can lead to unpredictable actions in equids such as shying, leaping away, bolting, etc. which can be dangerous for the animal as well as the handler and/or bystanders.
- It is therefore important for animal welfare and human safety that signs of fear are recognised by those handling equids, and handling adjusted accordingly.
- If the animal is displaying fear responses that are being ignored, and feels unable to escape due to being restrained, then the animal's only perceived option is to progress to an aggression response.



Donkey displaying aggressive behaviour during handling.

Negative handling and distress

- Fearful and aggressive behaviours will often provoke a negative human reaction as owners become angry or afraid.
- This can lead to an escalating cycle of heightened reactions from the animal leading to increasingly violent human responses in an attempt to control the unwanted behaviour.
- In addition to causing more stress and suffering at the time, the ultimate outcome of this could be that the animal learns that it cannot prevent the negative human interaction despite its best efforts and enters a chronic state of learned helplessness¹. (See *Apathy* summary for more information.)
- Fear or aggression responses indicate the animal is becoming stressed. Chronic stress leads to immuno-suppression, which can make it more difficult for the animal to fight disease, making illness more severe or longer lasting.

Pain

- The animal's natural response to minimise pain (e.g. lying down or standing very still) can mask fear responses.
- For example, pain in the hooves or limbs may reduce the chance that the animal will display avoidance behaviour, or that such behaviour may be less pronounced.
- Conversely, a protective response to pain can heighten an aggressive response in an attempt to prevent further pain occurring.



Horse displaying aggressive behaviour to the approaching human.

Possible causation

Current pain or discomfort

- Both fear and aggression behaviours can be indicative that the animal is in pain or has experienced pain in the past and is trying to reduce the likelihood that the pain will recur.
- The animal may be afraid that the painful body part will be touched and so could display fearful behaviour such as avoidance, guarding/hiding or aggressive threat displays to prevent contact with a painful area.
- A protective response to pain can heighten an aggressive response in an attempt to reduce or prevent pain. For example, an animal with harness sores may bite when the handler approaches to put the harness on.
- Some causes of pain may not be immediately apparent, such as abdominal or dental pain so handlers should be alert to signs of fear and/or aggression and consider all possible causes.

Previous pain and discomfort

- Equids, especially donkeys, have excellent memories. When a previous experience is linked to a painful or unpleasant outcome the memory is particularly strong.
- The animal may have learned in the past that the approach of a human is followed by a painful procedure (e.g. a veterinary procedure or beating), therefore makes attempts to avoid the approaching human, or begins to display aggressive threat behaviours. This may proceed to genuine aggressive actions directed towards the human if avoidance is not possible.
- This can sometimes be mistaken by owners for being 'naughty' or being unwilling to work, when actually the animal is afraid due to past negative experience.

Rough handling

- When equids are subjected to rough or uncomfortable handling (e.g. pulling, hitting, kicking, shouting, whipping) they can learn to associate any attempt at handling with unpleasant or painful consequences.
- For example, a donkey who has been pulled by the ears may display a fear response to movements near the head or ears (head-shyness). The donkey has learned to associate contact with the ears with pain, and so is afraid of this and tries to avoid it.

¹ Hall, et al (2008)

Frustration

- Working animals live by human timetables rather than their own natural equine time budgets, meaning that opportunities to eat, drink, rest and socialise and perform other natural behaviours are restricted to times convenient to their handler. This unnatural time budget means that equine animals do not spend the normal quantity of time doing activities that they would in the wild.
- Equine animals are highly motivated to perform some natural behaviours, e.g. grazing for long periods of time, staying with a herd. Being prevented from performing highly motivated behaviours can lead to frustration, which in some cases may progress to aggressive behaviours. For example, an animal who can see others feeding but is prevented from joining them, could display aggressive behaviour towards the person/people it perceives as preventing feeding.



Horse showing aggressive behaviour at time of feeding; frustrated motivation to access feed.

Unfamiliarity

- “Neophobia” is the fear of anything new or unfamiliar.
- Prey animals like equids are naturally afraid of anything unusual or unexpected in case it turns out to be dangerous. Therefore neophobia, and avoidance of anything new, is a normal equine behaviour.
- The extent of neophobia varies between individual animals, according to several factors such as temperament, previous experience, environment, age.
- Examples of neophobia include being nervous of strange equipment such as buckets or tools, close proximity of other unknown animals, entering a new place, and even unusual smells such as disinfectant.

² McGreevy 2004

Means of resolution

- Only actions which are both necessary and useful should be carried out on animals displaying fear/aggressive behaviour. If the animal is very fearful, consider whether it is appropriate to continue the activity or whether it would be better to postpone it.
- Work more slowly, avoiding sudden movements, and take time to comfort the animal (using a calm, voice, stroking the neck, etc.).
- The presence of another animal of the same species nearby can be helpful to reassure the animal, however the other animal must be calm and relaxed.
- Providing timely treatment for injuries or disease can reduce the likelihood of fear/aggression behaviours being displayed as a result of pain.
- Equids, as a prey animal, may find having their movements restricted frightening, and therefore welfare-friendly restraint (well-fitting head-collars) should always be used, and attention paid to the animal's feelings during all handling interactions.

Longer term solutions

- Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood that a behaviour will be repeated, however, it is vital that the reward is delivered immediately or the animal will be confused and its behaviour will become unpredictable².
- Counter conditioning can be effective in lessening fear responses, for example, exposes the animal to pleasant consequences of being approached by humans, such as offering food or positive handling interactions so the animal learns not to be afraid.
- Negative human interactions should be avoided, e.g. beating, or shouting. Calm and gentle handling must be promoted at all times.
- Speaking to the animal in a quiet voice, applying equipment or harnessing gently, improving driving techniques to avoid discomfort, and using comfortable methods of restraint will all help to reduce fear and aggression.

Refer to the Working Equid Veterinary Manual, Community Engagement work plans or strategies and the Handling Guidelines before conducting an intervention.

References

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