

Compassionate Handling Series

Horses, Donkeys & Mules



Why does Compassionate Handling matter?

Handling describes how humans work with, respond to, and interact with animals within their surroundings. It is unavoidable when living and working with animals and can have profound and lasting effects on both animals and humans.

Horses, Donkeys & Mules



Being an equine vet is the most dangerous profession in the UK. Equine vets sustain more injuries than people working in the construction industry, prison service, and the fire brigade.¹

TIP

Compassionate handling should be included in veterinary professional training, to ensure this is a key component in procedures.



Horses experienced higher stress levels when being stroked by someone who felt negatively about them, than by someone who liked horses.²

TIP

Handlers should be aware of their own attitudes and feelings to minimise stress in animals and the risk of injury to themselves.



Wild donkeys are territorial with respect to resources like water or food, more than horses.³

TIP

Donkeys are less likely to flee a threatening situation than horses are – this may present as aggressive behaviour or the donkeys may appear 'shut down'. Just because a donkey is tolerating something, doesn't mean they are enjoying it!



Mules show more aggressive and avoidance behaviours to unfamiliar handlers, than those they knew.⁴

TIP

Allow handlers and animals time to establish relationships when working together, and try and keep partnerships consistent where possible.

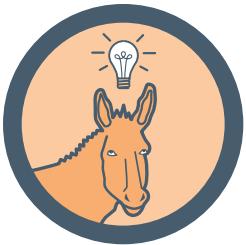
Fearful horses perform worse on tasks when there are stressors such as tapping with a stick, isolation, or sudden stimuli in their environment (e.g. noise or light).⁵



TIP

Compassionate handling is essential to ensure horses can learn and perform tasks well.

Mules outperformed horses, donkeys and dogs in a problem-solving task, making them flexible learners, rather than stubborn, as they are often called.⁶



TIP

Equids are quick to learn and handlers should plan training of animals carefully and use positive handling techniques to prevent the animals from learning undesirable behaviour

Horses remembered how an individual human behaved towards them based on just one interaction, even as long as eight months later, and behaved better with handlers who used positive handling techniques, such as stroking or speaking in a soft voice.⁷



TIP

Consistent use of positive handling techniques will minimise the risk of a negative reaction from an animal

Compassionate handling leads to better outcomes for equines, a safer work environment for vets and faster results for equine trainers. We commit to handling animals with compassion – wherever, whenever and with whomever it takes place – so that all animals experience a positive human-animal relationship throughout their lifetime.



Get in contact with us via email: handling@thebrooke.org or thebrooke.org/compassion to learn more.

References:

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- 3 Burden & Thiemann, (2015). Donkeys Are Different. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jevs.2015.03.005>
- 4 Ali, Mattock, Fouad, & Heleskia, (2015). Are mules or donkeys better adapted for Egyptian brick kiln work? (Until we can change the kilns). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvbe.2014.12.003>
- 5 Valençhon et al., (2017). Stress affects instrumental learning based on positive or negative reinforcement in interaction with personality in domestic horses. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170783>
- 6 Osthaus, Proops, Hocking & Burden, (2013). Spatial cognition and perseveration by horses, donkeys and mules in a simple A-not-B detour task. DOI: [10.1007/s10071-012-0589-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-012-0589-4)
- 7 Sankey et al., (2010). Positive interactions lead to lasting positive memories in horses, *Equus caballus*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2009.12.037>



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