

Reflections

ASSERTIVENESS

Often mistaken for aggression, **Vicki Jayne Maris** understands the power of assertiveness both in horsemanship and other areas of life

As a horsemanship tutor I love to get out and meet folks and their horses. Often lessons go beyond teaching horsemanship and involve helping people explore a different way of thinking or manage a lifestyle shift.

Recently I went to Olivia with a stunning Welsh section D colt, Nemo. She was experiencing leading problems. I listened carefully to her story, asked questions and observed, then I met her horse and got his take on things. I wanted to see the problem. She was comfortable leading Nemo a short way in the barn but the young horse was curious and easily distracted. Whilst there was no malice, he didn't see his owner as providing clear boundaries, direction or leadership, so off



Olivia and Nemo

he went to investigate things of interest, dragging her along. She was struggling to be a calm assertive leader.

Technique alone was not going to fix the situation as, by nature, Olivia was a gentle, passive soul. As I demonstrated leading, her little horse was eager to learn, willing and responsive to my direction, which amazed her.

Before I handed over the lead rope I wanted to know what being a calm assertive leader meant to her, but she had no idea what being assertive meant. She struggled to understand assertive behaviour and had it confused with aggression.

Assertive behaviour is about calmly and confidently communicating your message using the language of the herd. This is not aggressively disregarding or threatening the rights of the horse. It is not about dominance or not considering the horse and it is not submissively permitting the horse to ignore your conversation. It is a state of mind, how we feel and how we act. There are times you should choose to be passive and times when it is essential you are assertive. There is a sliding scale of passive to assertive and you can fine tune what you need at any



Vicki and Merlot

given moment.

Rope in hand and test driving her new way of thinking and feeling, Olivia set to work. She noticed how powerful she could be by adding assertiveness to her communication with her horse and how little it took to get the job done. She noticed when she slipped back into being passive how confused he became. She learnt that her assertiveness allowed her to be clear and help Nemo too.

She confessed that she had also struggled to have her voice heard at college, so she was going to test drive her new found assertiveness in other parts of her life.

We are not raised to be assertive in our culture. When we are out of our depth it is easy to get aggressive or become passive, resulting in life's

Assertiveness means being positive and confident about ourselves, our ideas, opinions and talents, and expressing these in the service of our values.

events dragging us along. Last year I was dragged along by the death of my beloved horse and the break-up with my long time partner. It took all my assertiveness skills and more to get me back on track. It was hard. What I had asked of my student that day was huge.

Vicki Jayne Maris

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