

BONDING WITH YOUR HORSE

Having fun with your horse starts with connection and **Vicki Jayne Maris** explains how this leads to learning being a natural and enjoyable activity for you both



To access intrinsic motivation in horsemanship the relationship with the horse is key. Horsemanship using the language of the herd where the goal is to be a dependable trusted leader, a pair bond and a best friend is the route to success. Time spent observing horses in the herd, and their social interactions, is valuable. You will see herd etiquette, friendships, bonds and language which you can tap into. Some of this language is very gentle and subtle so study closely to understand

how horses communicate and interact with each other.

Get to know each horse as an individual and what makes him tick. Don't just turn up to do human agenda activities with your horse, create space for quality time with no demands or expectations, just hanging out together so you both feel you belong with each other. It's a connection of minds, bodies, spirits and souls. It feels right, quiet and peaceful. See how your horse wants to interact with you and let him take the lead. He may want to investigate you, engage in contact,

smelling you, nuzzling or licking and you can offer gentle rubs in exchange.

We need to demonstrate unconditional love to our horse. Some horses who have had negative past experiences need industrial quantities of unconditional love before they feel able to return love. My experiences have shown me that horses are emotional beings and seek an emotional connection with their human. Love is one element that needs to be present to unlock self motivation. A horse who loves his owner is usually enthusiastic and willing to

engage in shared activities.

Horses have a strong desire to pair bond so place a high value on bonding time. Value what the horse enjoys and sees as rewarding. Play games that mirror herd language to establish your own shared etiquette. Use your imagination to develop a relationship in which your horse desires your company and interactions. Remember that riding is your agenda and there are lots of other shared activities you can both enjoy. If your horse leaves the herd to be with you it is because you are seen as more

interesting, fun and enjoyable to spend time with. You are on the right track and your horse will turn up motivated.

Grooming should be more than the removal of dirt and checking our horse. It should also include knowledge of all your horse's favourite sweet spots. Mutual grooming is a common behaviour seen in horses. There is an agreed language and social etiquette around this activity. Before they mutually groom, observe how entering each other's personal space is discussed. Two legs or four we all have a personal space requirement. In humans we have a social body language about personal space. How do you feel if someone you don't know that well invades your space? How would you feel if a stranger touched your face? We must earn the right to enter our horse's personal space and respect him and his rights. Clear, fair, calm and consistent leadership using their language is the key to success.

Horses are intelligent, sensitive and intuitive. They read us on every level; our intent, energy, emotions, body language and much more. They reflect right back at us. They know when we are balanced, in harmony, calm and confident or when we are stressed, tense, anxious or fearful. Try to mask your true self and the incongruence will rattle them. A relaxed state is energy neutral. Place value on harmony and relaxation and see how this benefits you and your horse. Time spent together relaxing is time well spent. A relaxed horse is a happy horse and a happy horse equals a happy human. You can teach

yourself to relax and in turn teach your horse to relax. If a horse knows you provide safety and relaxation he will enjoy spending time with you. Spending time relaxing and enjoying each other's company will open up self motivation in both of you. Relaxed horses and humans can be super achievers.

We and our horses are emotional beings, we must recognise emotional intelligence and that emotions control the on-off switch to learning and in turn inner motivation. It is our responsibility to provide the horse with a relationship and environment for emotional balance. We must also take responsibility for our own emotional wellbeing. In humans, research suggests that emotional intelligence is more important than academic intelligence.

I believe an individual who is relaxed, calm, emotionally harmonious and confident will learn faster. It is OK to make mistakes, but training that uses punishment or negative reinforcement will induce fear, anxiety, stress and resistance and these emotions adversely affect learning. You and your horse must feel safe, supported, listened to, included in decision making, respected and accepted, and good horsemanship must include open, honest dialogue.

When you and your horse have a strong sense of connection it opens an incredible partnership and once you have experienced this magical connection it is intoxicating, addictive, rewarding and fun.



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