



THE EMOTIONAL DICTIONARY

Empathy and compassion are keys to good relationships and good horsemanship, as Vicky Jayne Maris explains

Horses experience a huge range of emotions and good horsemanship inspires equine empathy and compassion. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings and needs of another by imaginatively entering into their reality. Do not confuse empathy and sympathy. Sympathy applies to setbacks and feelings of pity or sorrow. Compassion is what we feel in response to empathy and it motivates us to action. When you have empathy and compassion you can put yourself in someone else's shoes and really feel for them, so horsemanship using empathy and compassion gives us the ability to walk a mile in our horse's hooves.

Many people struggle with emotion. My stepdaughter, Emily, came out with me one day. She watched me work a horse who had a lot of fear, tension, anxiety and distrust, but he was

trying so hard to please.

The emotional balance and harmony between horse and owner was my focus and the session left Emily with a stack of questions. As a teenager she hasn't yet a full grasp of empathy or understanding of all emotions, be they human or equine. The conversation on our way home explored how we learn about emotions and develop empathy. I explained how life teaches us about emotions. We have to experience the good, the bad and the ugly as we pass from childhood into adulthood in order to develop our personal emotional dictionary. Each of us carries our own handmade copy for life and from this we develop empathy. If we have not experienced an emotion, how can we reference it?

We can guess, ask someone who has experienced it, or look up the definition in a dictionary. That will give you a reference, but it's not the same as living through

the experience. The chances are that your description and explanation could be very different from that of another, so the key to developing empathy is to take the focus off yourself and your agenda and open your mind to other ways of thinking. Develop an enquiring mind, seek first to understand, practice being a good listener with all senses, let go of proving yourself and practice humility. Recognise, understand and honour separate realities. The differences between individuals can be vast, and so too the way they see and interact with the world.

Every horse also carries his own unique emotional dictionary. An emotional state of mind will influence behaviour. Understanding this can enable you to look beyond the behaviour to the root cause. My horse, Merlot, was a very emotional horse due to the troubled, abusive past I rescued him from. He taught me many life skills and helped me to refine my horsemanship. Horses are great educators if you are open and listen to the

lessons they can teach.

The way humans see and interact with the world is very different from that of the horse and if you understand, respect and honour these differences you will see his emotions and know when you must step up to help him. Master empathy and compassion in your horsemanship then you can be appropriate with open, honest and meaningful two way communication.

At times there seems little empathy and compassion in the world. It begs the question for those who struggle with these emotions with their own kind how hard it must be for them to be sensitive to horses, as that requires learning a whole new language. If we each actively practiced living with more empathy and compassion all our relationships would benefit.

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