

# Introduction to Positive Reinforcement. Including Ignition of Motivation to Self-Motivation.

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Written to be used alongside support  
of a practitioner of your own choice.



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## Introduction.

Positive reinforcement is often also called clicker training. It is a personal choice as to which people use as a term. I personally prefer positive reinforcement because I don't use a hand held clicker. (More about why later).

Positive reinforcement is reward based training. Where a noise or a clicker is used to indicate to your horse they have done the right thing and a reward will follow.

Horses learn the noise or click marks the correct behaviour and a reward will follow. This is the ignition to motivating and shaping the behaviour you are looking for in training. Eventually because the activity is seen as fun and enjoyable it unlocks self-motivation and will be no need for rewards.

It is a very accurate method to communicate to your horse they have done the right thing. The noise or click will mark or pinpoint the exact moment the horse has done the correct behaviour and the reward then follows. (The horse learns there will be a slight delay between click and reward).



## Why Use Positive Reinforcement?

- Horses love positive reinforcement.
- It enables you to very accurately shape good behaviours. It enforces desirable traits:
- Horses become more focused and engaged in training.
- It allows horses to understand what you are expecting taking away uncertainty.
- This approach achieves faster results.
- It can be used in any training context, handling, groundwork and when riding.
- It a wonderful method to improve your horse's curiosity and desire to learn.
- It enhances confidence in horse and human.
- Horses love the mental stimulation it provides.
- It empowers horses and humans together to feel mentally and physically able to handle situations and tasks.
- For a closer and impressive human-horse bond.
- For horses that have experienced negative or abusive pasts it is essential in rehabilitation.
- It will remove fear of making mistakes.
- All equines can be trained using positive reinforcement.

## Positive Reinforcement is:

- An ethical and kind approach.
- A wonderful approach to motivate your horse.
- Used worldwide across many species of animals.
- Proven to be an effective training method.

## Positive Reinforcement is not:

- Bribing your horse or spoiling your horse.
- Going to cause your horse to behave badly, to mug for food or bite.

## What is a Positive Reinforcement?

In a nutshell a positive reinforcement is when a certain behaviour then achieves a positive outcome. Positively reinforced behaviours become strengthened as a result.

## What do equines perceive as a positive reward / outcome?

- Food rewards. This is a fantastic method to use something tangible in positive reinforcement. It can be offered quickly and gives the horse the opportunity to connect this to the learning. As there a wide range of food rewards we can choose from. So even equines with special dietary requirements can be catered for.
- Natural positive reinforcements, where the behaviour directly gets the horse something it wants. How many times have you seen your horse learn something that enables it to get what it wants? Kick the stable door to get your attention. Limbo under the electric fence to get more grass.
- Praise, approval, appreciation, encouragement, acknowledgement and recognition.
- Pleasurable rewards such as scratching on sweet spot. Tapping into their social pair bonding activities are very rewarding for horses. However as this takes longer to give the horse may struggle to remember the reason for the reward.



## Perception of the value of the rewards matter.

Just as you are an individual so too is your horse. Here is an exercise for you to complete. To get you to think the value of rewards I am going to get you to think about yourself. Here I will list a selection of rewards that you may like to receive. There is no right or wrong order please list from 1 to 10 in priority of which you would like to most like to receive for yourself with 1 being rated the highest and to number 10 the lowest.

- A bar of chocolate.
- Verbal acknowledgement and praise for something you have achieved.
- A pair of warm socks.
- An apple.
- A spa day treatment.
- A £50 voucher.
- After dieting for a month a weight loss of 1kg.
- Celery sticks.
- A pat on the back.

## An Exercise – Perceived Value of Rewards

Rating	1 highest 10 lowest
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	
<b>If you could choose any reward for yourself what would it be?</b>	

## The perception of the value of the rewards matter to your horse.

Think about what your horse would perceive as rewarding. Which rewards if your horse was allowed to choose would your horse place higher than another?

### Here are a few examples of rewards to get you thinking

- A handful of low calorie chaff
- A slice of carrot
- A low calorie horse pony nut / cube
- Sweet spot scratches
- Praise
- A slice of apple
- A sugar free mint
- A large nugget horse treat (Our horse's favourite one is mango and carrot flavour)
- A small nugget horse treat (Our horse's favourite is apple and cinnamon)
- A handful of hay
- Gentle stroking

You can add your own rewards into this exercise. What is important to find out is which your horse perceives as a higher value reward to a lower value reward. Useful when we want to really reward our horse for a try we can give a high value reward. And the rest of the time use lower value rewards.

### An Exercise – Perceived Value of Rewards

Rating	1 highest 10 lowest
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	
9	
10	

It is possible to train just using positive reinforcement. However most people will use a mixture of reinforcements in their approach. Including negative reinforcement. Just because we use the word negative does not mean it is bad.

## What is a Negative Reinforcement?

Something unpleasant is taken away. An example we are all familiar for us is when we drive a car without a seat belt fastened. The car will make a repetitive noise, just enough to irritate you into the action of clicking the seat belt in place. As soon as you comply the noise stops and acts as a reward.

Many equine training approaches use negative reinforcement. A negative reinforcement uses a level of discomfort, pressure or adverse stimuli in the training to achieve the desired behaviour. Pressure release, be that physical or emotional pressure. The release from the pressure or removal of unpleasant sensation becomes the reward.

A negative reinforcement can be on a scale of very gentle or soft through to harmful or abuse. Some negative reinforcement methods are now considered abusive or being questioned as to if they are abusive.

Not all negative reinforcement is bad. However there is much debate as to what is ethical and what is not ethical. This is where lifelong learning comes into play. If we continue to learn and question our approach we can learn more ethical and kinder ways to interact with our horses. Each of us has our own personal views and opinions on ethics.

Negative reinforcement works well if done gently with impeccable timing. Timing is the issue as if we are not accurate or consistent it becomes confusing for the horse.

We must be mindful as a horse has very sensitive skin and can feel a fly land on its skin. So we should aspire to use the softest touch.

Also we must be mindful that horses are sentient and emotional animals. So be aware of training that uses emotional pressure.

**Did you know...** just as you can teach a noise = yes (for positive reinforcement) you can teach a horse a different noise to your yes noise = no (Useful so you can eventually replace the need to use pressure).



## Exercise

**What do you consider to be ethical negative reinforcement?**

**What do you consider is not ethical?**

**Here are few examples of what equines perceive as a negative reinforcement.**

- Physical or emotional pressure or discomfort.
- Physical pressure from equipment we use. Tack amplifies pressure. Consider the type of equipment you use and how you use it. Horses experience terrible negative reinforcement with: Harsh equipment, inappropriate pressure and uneducated hands. Even a head collar, or mild bitless bridle or a mild bit in harsh hands can cause considerable discomfort or pain.
- Physical pressure we apply when touching our horse with our hands when handling. And when riding use of our hands, legs, body and seat.
- Non permissive interactions. For example - Touch. Do we have permission to touch? Sometimes we don't even think about this, yet we should.
- If you consider a horse can feel a fly land on its' skin, we should aspire to be gentle, soft and light with a timed instant release. This ideally needs to be reinforced with a positive reinforcement other than just the release of the pressure.
- Hard aids, sometimes reinforced with harsh use a stick.
- Nagging, no one likes to be nagged, horses learn to switch off from nagging and this is the path that eventually leads to more force.

- Rope waving. Think of the rope if it has a metal clip the horse will be getting that moved near or on its' face. I have seen people waving a rope at a horse side to side and not realise the metal clip is whacking the horse in the face. I encourage people to find an alternative path to achieve the outcome they seek.
- Use of a whip to inflict pain. It's how a whip is used that is the issue here. A whip can have a soft gentle touch right through to inflicting terrible abuse. Negative reinforcement can include hitting or threatening to hit the horse.
- Restrictive nosebands, training aids and gadgets. For me there is no short cut in training. The equipment is often used as a quick fix, or to patch up lack of training. Research has shown that restrictive nosebands cause stress to horses. Training aids and gadgets are also another method of fixing a horse into a desired body shape or to restrict certain undesirable behaviours. They have the potential to be uncomfortable, painful and cause distress to a horse.
- Harsh training methods, drilling, forcing, human desires placed higher than the horse, human outcome driven with no regard for the horse, etc....If you take the joy out of the horsemanship for the horse what is in it for the horse?
- Training practices that use monologue. Removal of being able to express an opinion on the training / interaction.
- With emotional pressure horses often suffer when people are unable to read their horse's responses. Horses can get confused, worried, anxious, frightened, etc. Often leading to resistance. This is often labelled as the horse being naughty.
- Flooding.
- Harsh and excessive negative reinforcement can trigger fear and anxiety. It can become a form of punishment. So we need to explore the topic of punishment.

Punishment as a word leads us to think of abuse. Yet in the world of clicker training / positive reinforcement you will come across the terms positive punishment and negative punishment. It is easy to confuse it with negative reinforcement. People use positive and negative punishment to try to weaken behaviours. There is plenty of debate as to what people consider ethical in regards to using this. Here I am highlighting what is positive and negative punishment, so you become aware of it. I am not suggesting it is ethical. Punishments or punitive measures are a negative reinforcement that has no place in ethical horsemanship. Negative reinforcements include: whipping, slapping, increased harsher requests, chased and forced to run, tugging or pulling on the horse, food or water withdrawn, isolation, forcefully restrained in gadgets, worked hard to break spirit, etc.



**Positive Punishment** is adding something the horse doesn't want. People think it will discourage a behaviour if a punishment is applied when the horse displays an undesired behaviour. The thinking behind this is the horse will link the behaviour to the unpleasant punishment.

There is a wide range of positive punishment out there in the horse world. Here are a few examples out there:

- Whipping a horse for a refusal at a jump.
- Smacking a horse for bucking.
- Shouting at your horse.
- When riding kicking the horse for not going forward.
- Yanking on the lead rope to because the horse won't stop.
- Tapping the horse on the nose for biting.
- Using gadgets to force the horse to comply.
- Chasing the horse because it hasn't done what was asked for.

In my personal experience as horses are sentient and sensitive, and can feel a vast number of emotions such as anxiety and fear, when they behave in a way we don't want positive punishment makes the situation much worse. They connect the situation to the punishment and it can create even more problems. Adding in something the horse dislikes when it is already in an emotional unbalanced state will increase that feeling more intensely.

**Negative punishment** is removing a pleasant or desirable stimulus. Again the thinking is it will weaken a behaviour. Here a few examples out there.

- Taking food away because the horse is kicking the stable door.
- Using a patience pole. This is where a horse is left tied to a pole and left in isolation.
- Social isolation.
- Depriving the horse of food and or water.

Negative punishment by removal of something the horse wants or likes often doesn't work. Because the horse may not be able to connect why it is being removed.



**Boundaries and Corrections.** We need to carefully think about how we apply boundaries and corrections. Once we become more aware we start to ponder which feels ethically right rather than follow what we accept as the norm.

Boundaries and corrections can be applied using just a positive reinforcement approach. It is possible to train only using positive reinforcement.

However most people tend to use a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement.

When using a negative reinforcement you need to reflect on if it is ethical. Aim to use the least amount of pressure with instant release followed by a positive reinforcement reward. If we can be as gentle as a fly with excellent timing we are on track. As soon as there is a try reward generously.

We can aspire to training that uses mostly positive reinforcement and very little if any negative reinforcement. Providing opportunity for the horse to cognitively process, think and learn. Allowing the horse to connect on which actions are rewarding.

Remember just as you can teach a horse a bridge noise = a positive reinforcement, you use a different bridge noise = a negative reinforcement. Horses are so smart often all you will need to indicate with the bridge noise and nothing more.



## **How to Get Started**

Firstly teach a noise = a reward. This is easy to do.

- This is best done either with your horse in a stable or with you one side of a barrier like a gate and the horse the other.
- Place a treat in your hand and offer it to your horse.
- As his mouth goes round the treat press the clicker if you are using a clicker. Or if you prefer make your chosen noise orally. (I don't use a hand held clicker as I don't want to carry it with me at all times when I am with my horse. So I make a click noise orally, it is always with me so I can reward my horse without worrying if I have the clicker with me). Personally I find it a pain to always carry a hand held clicker, but my voice is transportable everywhere.
- If you are going to use an oral noise don't use a word. As if we talk while near our horse and we used the word it would be confusing to the horse.

**Repeat as many times as you need to teach your horse your chosen noise = a reward.**

Next test to see if your horse has learnt the noise = reward. Do this by when your horse is minding his own business chilling out nearby make your click noise. If he's learnt that noise = reward his head will turn towards you with an expectant look. Then give the reward. Your horse has now learnt the click noise is the bridge to a reward arriving.

The stable door or barrier between the 2 of you means we can be safe from pushing and mugging as this something we teach after the horse has learnt a noise = a reward.

### **Food Reward = Bad Behaviour?**

Many people are troubled by using food as a reward. Many reasons I have heard used against the use of food include it will teach the horse to bite, be pushy and have bad manners. In my experience if you are serious about positive reinforcement you will have zero problems. This along with if you observe a herd of equines you will see there is a language, social etiquette and manners that are observed in regard to food or resources. So horses are well equipped to learn how to behave with food.



There exists a misconception that feeding horses treats by hand will make them aggressive. However, if the horse is never reinforced for nuzzling or grabbing for treats, positive reinforcement can eliminate nippiness rather than induce it.

**Teaching a Horse Manners.** It is essential at this stage to teach your horse not to get pushy and mug for treats. How to do this:

- Do this exercise over a stable door or barrier.
- Put a halter and rope on the horse.
- Gently move your horse's head away from you. I use my hand to gently guide their head away.
- Once the head is away from you, click. Then move toward the horse to give the treat.
- Repeat as many times as you need to over a number of days. Keeping a close eye for when your horse offers to move his head away without you asking. When that happens click and reward. As your horse is starting to understand that the moving his head away is the behaviour is what you are looking for.
- This is the start of teaching your horse learns not to push and mug.
- We have to be consistent with not rewarding begging, pushing and pocket nudging. Never give food / treats when your horse nudges or mugs you.
- Only ever give rewards after your positive reinforcement noise.

**Therefore it is essential when starting training with food you establish these boundaries and manners. Plus be very consistent regarding giving rewards.**

## Now we can attach rewarding a horse to any given situation and training.

Once you taught your horse a noise = a positive reward. Here is how to use it in a practical way. I am going to select for an example teaching your horse to target touch. Why? Most horses haven't been taught it, so it's something new for you and your horse. You can't force your horse to touch either, so you will have to engage with your horse in meaningful dialogue. You and your horse will have to work together. You will have to recognise a try from your horse and be ready to reward.

There are so many practical reasons for teaching your horse to target touch: Your horse will never risk touching anything without investigating it first with its' nose. So having a shared language about checking out new objects can be very handy if you wish to do agility, or play with objects such as ball, or help your horse to be confident with everyday spooky objects, or be a confident self-loader into your trailer.

## How to Teach Your Horse to Target Touch

- 1) Select a safe object for your horse to learn target touch. I suggest something your horse is used to seeing every day, so it is familiar and non-threatening. When I am teaching this I use a plastic cone.
- 2) Let your horse relax and be comfortable before you start.
- 3) Place a treat between your fingers and with your hand in a pointing gesture use this to draw your horse's nose towards the cone. I use the word touch as I do this.
- 4) When your horse touches the cone use your click noise then reward.

Once practiced your horse will recognise the hand gesture and word are to indicate to check out an object and that you will reward the right behaviour. Any safe object can be used for target touch training. So get creative. This can be extended to teach your horse to push a ball, or pick up objects and even to retrieve objects.

**Hand Held Targets.** You can also use a hand held target.

They are easy to make, some people use a simple stick with a ball on the end, or attach a short piece of pool noodle onto a stick or make a paddle like bat end.

The same techniques as above for target touch are used to teach your horse to touch the target. These hand held targets are great for encouragement direction of movement, as you can teach the horse to follow the target. Great for motivation of movement from one point to another.



**Target Area or Mat.** You can also use targets to train stand and stay.

Such as on a target mat or an area marked out with poles. Use the same technique as teaching target touch to encourage your horse to touch the mat or area with its nose. Once this is established ask your horse to standing on the mat or in the area and reward. Once this is established you can teach stand and stay. By rewarding your horse when you say the word stand and you take one step back and then if your horse stays click and move to your horse to give the treat. Gradually you can increase the distance and time the horse will stay in the target area. You can then extend this to stand and stay away from a target area.



Teaching stand and stay are really useful techniques to teach our horses. As when we are faced with difficult situations having a horse that has learnt to stand and not move can be a great asset.

### **Case Study - Ruby and Her Fear.**

When I met my horse Ruby her previous owner told me Ruby was scared of large vehicles. When I took Ruby out onto the roads the day I met her we only met a few cars and these didn't bother her at all.

I had no idea at the time when Ruby became mine how bad her fear was. I found out once she became my horse.

The first time we met a tractor and a trailer I discovered Ruby was very scared. She tried to spin and run. I managed to stop her spinning and running. She shook with fear and her hooves did river dance on the spot. Poor soul was really frightened. I had to help her overcome this fear.

I started back at the field. Using positive reinforcement I taught her to stop to the word whoa and to park up / not move with the word stand. In the field we got really good at it. It was very impressive, we could be going at speed, I could drop the reins say the word whoa and Ruby would slam on the breaks. The word stand she would patiently stand still while I walked away and left her and come back. It was important to train this where she felt calm, relaxed and happy.

Why this approach? The positive reinforcement meant she had very strong association that these activities would be rewarding and fun. Whoa and stand are what she was struggling with when she was in a situation that caused her fear. So working on this gave me two words I could use when dealing with her fear of large vehicles.



**Words and rewards are powerful tools.**

I wanted to make it easy for Ruby when we went to the next step which was dealing with large vehicles. So with help from my friend who had a horse that was brilliant in all traffic we had a plan.

When we went out and we saw a large vehicle approaching we would get to a place to safely park Ruby up with the other horse between her and the large vehicle. The other horse being calm and showing her it was ok was one aspect. The other was to get her listening to whoa and stand, with lots of rewards and reassurance.

Over time her reaction to large vehicles got less fearful until she only exhibited a low level of anxiety. She learnt she could trust me and she was safe. Considering when I started this training with Ruby she was 19 years old and this was a well-established and long held fear I felt the shift was huge.

### **Building Confidence and Spook Busting.**

Positive reinforcement plus target touch is great for spook busting and helping horses gain confidence approaching scary objects or tackling difficult situations that cause fear or anxiety.

Positive reinforcement to help you and your horse tackle confidently every day issues. So you can grow your world.

Why target touch matters. A horse will not risk any part of its body or feet until it has investigated things first visually, auditory, and with their sense of smell way before closing the gap to touch. To closing the gap you must show your horse you can be trusted. Place yourself between your horse and what bothers them. This is the safest place as horses don't run towards what scares them.

Observe your horse and help your horse to relax from a distance from what is bothering your horse. Reward your horse for being relaxed. Then approach a short distance and stop. Reward your horse for being brave. Never push over thresholds that cause your horse to become anxious or fearful. You can retreat away if needed to give your horse chance to relax, think and process.

Bit by bit you will close the gap. Each time rewarding your horse for getting closer. Approach and retreat as many times as you need to.

Once close enough if you interact or touch what is bothering your horse it will realise it hasn't hurt you. Your horse will then become curious. You can then use target touch to encourage your horse to inspect the object. Then they will carefully with fully stretched out neck get closer with its nose and use their whiskers.

**After sight, hearing, scent they risk touch in this order nose, head, neck, shoulders, body and last feet.**



## Case Study – Merlot and the Party Balloon.

One day while out riding with a friend we came across a silver helium party balloon floating gently in the breeze down the bridle path towards us. The balloon was slowed by the weight attached to it. Merlot and his pall Guinness had never seen a party balloon before, let alone one out in the countryside coming towards them. Both horses stopped some distance away. Energy high and very worried.

I dismounted. As I saw this as an excellent training opportunity. A golden gift in work clothes. My friend saw dismounting as a bad idea.....as getting off equalled giving in to the horse. I think totally differently.

I lowered my energy, softly sighed, slowed my breathing and walked slowly towards the balloon. Merlot behind me. Each step closer I clicked and rewarded him. Let him know how much I appreciated him trusting me. Giving him chance to think and process.

I got to the balloon and got hold of it. Still walking away I held it in one hand and led Merlot with the other. Giving Merlot plenty of line so he could be as far away as he needed to be. I walked away as predators never leave. Merlot followed, observing the balloon hadn't attacked me, I wasn't in any distress, but totally relaxed. He shifted to getting curious.

He closed the gap to get a better look so there was a loop in the lead rein. He then stretched out his neck and his nose touched the balloon for a few seconds. Click and a treat. I carry on walking carrying the balloon. His nose is then checking it out and he decided it's no threat, and he can't eat it. So quiet bored with it.

Next I let out a small amount of the cord so the balloon moved a little. Merlot wasn't fazed by this at all. Click and treat. I let out more cord. No issues. Click treat. One relaxed and confident Merlot. Poor Guinness on the other hand because his human didn't see this as a training opportunity was still anxious, less than before as Merlot had given him the ok.

As this balloon was out in nature on public bridleway I decided the best course of action was to remove this from the environment.



## Other Useful Applications.

If you want to have a go at horse agility or tackle in hand natural trail obstacles target touch is an essential skill to master.

**Podium:** For your horse to stand on a podium it will

need to check it out fully with its nose before its head will move over a bit further, then it may move more over so nose, head and neck are over the podium before it will risk walking over. You can teach your horse to target touch with its hoof touching the podium.

Pick up a hoof and place it on the podium and on contact click and then reward. It is ok if your horse removes his hoof. Let your horse have time to process. Then repeat picking up the hoof and placing on the podium, click on contact then reward.

Repeat as many times as needed. Then wait your horse to put its hoof on the podium and click then reward. It is ok if your horse removes his hoof at this stage. As you can extend the time it stays put by waiting a few seconds before you click, then reward.

Gradually your horse will leave his hoof on the podium. Then you can ask for the other hoof to follow using the same process. Eventually your horse will happily be on the podium with all 4 feet. This is a very useful skill to teach your horse as it is transferable to trailer loading. If you and your horse have a shared language about the podium you can use this to help your horse place it's hooves on the trailer ramp.



Podiums are easy to make. Use a heavy duty pallet. Reinforce with marine ply on the top. And attach non slip matting on to the marine ply.

## How to extend this to trailer loading.

Once you and your horse are totally comfortable with the podium exercise and have a very established use of positive reinforcement you can move onto trailer loading.

The very first thing to consider is why your horse dislikes going into the trailer or lorry. There are any number of reasons why. Here are a few examples I have come across.

- Previous bad experiences during travelling. If the experience has been traumatizing it is not just about loading it is about dealing with fear, anxiety and the trauma. You need to work on this before coming to loading. We have a module on Fear and Anxiety that you need to work through with your horse before coming to loading.
- The handler is not confident or nervous so it makes the horse anxious. Building confidence is essential before you start.
- The horse has little experience of trailer loading.

- A dislike of enclosed spaces. This you can work on by creating a gradually shrinking squeeze space in the arena. Until your horse feels comfortable going through and into smaller and smaller spaces. You can get creative making these with barrels. Make arches and create tunnels with several arches and cover in sheets.
- An association that where you take them makes them feel anxious or stressed. Here you really need to address this, as no amount of trailer loading practice will change how they feel if they still feel anxious and stressed with where you take them or the activities you do once there. Break down this into baby steps. Stop going out for a while. Just focus on activities you and your horse enjoy. Work on the relationship. Then come to trailer loading, with no agenda to go anywhere.
- The horse can't see the point and what is in it for them to load.
- There are many more reasons why.....so if your horse doesn't like loading ask why. Look at the root cause. Once you work on the root causes you can then work on loading.



## Trailer Loading Using Positive Reinforcement.

### Preparation.

- Place your trailer in a safe place to work with your horse.
- Ensure you are wearing the correct safety equipment, hat, sturdy non slip boots and gloves.
- Your horse has a well-fitting headcollar or halter and long rope.
- Plenty of rewards. Some high value ones as well.

### Starting Point.

- Note how far away from the trailer / lorry ramp does your horse feel comfortable? There is always a line they are reluctant to happily go over. Note where it is and reward your horse when it goes over that line. Retreat back to the place your horse is comfortable as often as you need to. Giving your horse chance to relax, think and process. Play at closing the gap. Reward your horse for getting closer to the ramp. Never punish your horse for moving away from the ramp. For some horses just getting closer in a relaxed state is where we stop the session for that day. Remember to achieve a happy self-loading horse takes time.

## The Ramp.

- You will get to the point where your horse will be relaxed and happy standing at the bottom of the ramp. This is when you use the technique you used for the podium.
- Once you have both front feet on the ramp, ask your horse to target touch the ramp with its nose. Ask your horse to inspect the ramp with its nose a bit higher up. Then back your horse off and give it chance to relax, think and process. You may decide at this stage to finish the session for that day. It is always wise to end when your horse is relaxed and confident rather than push too far.
- Once your horse is confident with both front feet on the ramp and will happily inspect the ramp with his nose. Ask your horse to walk onto the ramp like you did with the podium. At this stage you may get all 4 feet on the ramp, or not. Don't worry if you only get the front feet on. The chances are the front feet are further up the ramp. If your horse is slightly further up the ramp or has 4 feet on the ramp ask your horse to target touch higher up the ramp and if it can reach target touch the sides of your trailer or lorry. Plenty of rewards at this stage. Back your horse off and give it chance to relax, think and process. Repeat as many times as needed. End the session at this stage if you feel it is enough. Stay at this level until your horse will relax standing with all four feet on the ramp.

## Getting In the Trailer.

- While your horse stands on the ramp, the next stage is to ask your horse to target touch with its nose the floor, walls and ceiling of the trailer or lorry. Reward generously your horse inspecting the interior of the trailer or lorry. Give your horse time to relax, think and process. As the next stage is to use the same training you used for the podium and the ramp to ask for a hoof inside the trailer or lorry. It is ok if your horse places his hoof in only for a split second and backs off. Mark with a click the hoof inside the lorry or trailer. This is a time for a maximum reward. Back off and give your horse chance to process. Repeat. This time you walk relaxed, confidently and calmly into the lorry or trailer. Giving your horse plenty of slack rope, so if they need to stop on the ramp they can. They may stay at this level and that is ok. Or they may follow you in. This stage give maximum rewards. As now we really want to motivate our horse.
- Once they follow you in be prepared your horse may want to leave. Let it and no punishment for leaving. Mark with your click being in the lorry and give generous maximum rewards. Given time your horse will want to stay longer.
- The aim is to get to the point your horse learns it can stay, be rewarded and then your horse can learn to relax in the trailer. If you provide food your horse likes such as hay / haylage in the trailer along with giving rewards you make it an environment your horse will want to stay in for longer. You will know when your horse sees the trailer as a place it wants to be because it will happily self-load. This takes time. There are no quick fixes. However sticking to this plan ensures you have a happy horse that is relaxed and confident in loading and being in the trailer.
- Once you have a relaxed horse you can move to putting up the breach bar. And closing the ramp. Only for a few moments. Stay at that level for as long as required. Repeating over a number of days or weeks.
- Then when your horse is happy take it for a very short trip out and back home.

**When travelling your horse it pays to get expert training on how to drive safely to give your horse a stress free journey. Bad driving can make it stressful for your horse.**

### **Testimonial - Loading Louis.**

A positive experience for all (especially Louis!) what a fab hours work, Louis is not the easiest to load and I also have confidence issues with it. Using positive reinforcement Vicki showed me the stress free way to load a horse, no pressure on Louis at all, just a slack rope and lots of reward for the correct behaviour. We loaded him about five times each time got easier, in the end I was leaving the lorry and Louis was staying on by himself to finish the rather large bucket of treats! Still some work to do but with Vicki's technique I am confident that I will soon have a horse that loads himself... Thank you.

Emma Barnes



**Physiotherapy Exercises.** Positive reinforcement is wonderful to incorporate into physiotherapy based exercises. Using target touch for carrot stretches makes it easy to direct your horse. You can also use a stick target to direct your horse with in-hand exercises and over ground poles.

**Safe Interaction and Handling.** Some horses need help to feel confident about being handled. Horses that have prior bad experiences or abuse maybe wary of you touching or handling them. Some areas maybe a no go zone. Positive reinforcement helps to take away the fear and reward the right behaviour.

### **A Case Study – Jimmy.**

Jimmy was one of the most extreme cases I have worked with. He had a horrendous past of violent abuse. I was approached to help with Jimmy after the person who rescued him Stephanie couldn't get near him.

After being rescued Jimmy had been turned out into a field with other horses. Stephanie couldn't get near Jimmy. Any attempt would freak Jimmy out and he would run.

The personal space Jimmy required for feeling safe was huge. The first step in solving Jimmy's fears was to see where the edge of that boundary was. So slowly and calmly in low energy I approached. As soon as Jimmy stopped grazing and looked at me I stopped, so as not to cause him to feel the need to run. I did not want to lose the fragile confidence he had in allowing me to approach so it is essential I retreated a few steps. I wanted him to feel safe with me on the edge of his boundary. This was homework for Stephanie to negotiate with Jimmy if she had permission to approach and stop at his boundary.

Once he was allowing Stephanie to approach and stop at his boundary the next stage was about negotiating getting closer. Once on his boundary taking one small step closer with Jimmy watching. Reward at this stage was to retreat to give him time to think. Bit by bit the gap got smaller. All the time paying attention to how Jimmy was feeling and being mindful not to overstep his boundary.

The day came when Jimmy would allow Stephanie so close, less than an arm's length away. Oh so tempting to reach out to touch. But an absolute no, as this horse had suffered the most horrendous abuse. This stage of just being together was vital no touching Jimmy by Stephanie. Instead we waited for Jimmy to get brave enough to touch Stephanie. That day it was a huge leap of faith for Jimmy as he reached over to sniff Stephanie and gently touched her. Nothing bad happened. Jimmy realised Stephanie wasn't going to grab him or make sudden movements to scare him.

Over time Jimmy discovered Stephanie would give him treats. The very start of positive reinforcement. Stephanie was the first human Jimmy had known who waited, listened and let him have the time and space he needed to try to trust again. Once Jimmy was happy touching Stephanie, it was about dialogue regarding Stephanie being allowed to touch him. The first few times he let Stephanie touch him they so brief, yet huge tries from Jimmy. Which he was given lots of rewards and time to process.

Bit by bit he let her hand settle a bit longer. Bit by bit he allowed her to touch a bit more of him. Eventually he discovered her touch could give pleasure and not pain.

He started to trust Stephanie. Step by step she worked on touching every part of him. Introducing a head collar and leading. He is now one very settled pony with Stephanie and the herd he lives in. His humans around him understand him. There was no quick fix. Credit to Stephanie and her friend Chris who have taken the time it takes to help Jimmy. He has learnt to trust again. In the wrong hands this trust would come undone very quickly.



## Case Study – Frankie.

Frankie was rescued from near death by a welfare organization and rehabilitated back to health. He was rehomed from the rescue organization to Di. She worked with Frankie to establish a wonderful bond and connection. She rebuilt his shattered trust in humans. When I met them they already had a fantastic bond and connection with each other.

The problem was Frankie had developed a very painful skin condition on all of his legs. The vet was working with Frankie and Di to resolve this. However it was getting to the stage understandably that Frankie hated anyone going near his legs. As he associated this was going to be uncomfortable or even painful. A real problem for Di, the vet and the hoof trimmer.

At the worst of the skin problem Frankie was admitted to the equine hospital so the vets could treat him onsite at the practice. Something that added to the emotional trauma for both Frankie and Di.

Once the skin condition turned the corner and healing was starting to take place, it was also time to heal the trauma from the association of leg handling equalled something Frankie hated. Di asked for my help as Frankie hated his legs being inspected, touched or handled.

The starting point here was to use positive reinforcement. So I taught Di how to use positive reinforcement in other aspects of her interactions with Frankie. So he really understood desired behaviour led to reward. Then we could start on the problem areas, his legs. There was a very clear boundary line on where Di was allowed to touch and where not. So using a hand on a stick, as not to risk injury if Frankie was to kick out I instructed Di to gently go over the line just for a few moments. Click and reward if he allowed Di to do this. And give him time to process.

If he didn't allow it, that was ok too but no click and no reward. What he learnt was Di would be gentle and reward when he allowed her to touch just over the boundary. He discovered there was no pain and nothing to fear. Bit by bit Di was able to touch more and more of his legs. Until he was completely relaxed about having all four legs touched and she could use her own hands.

From there it was the next step was about handling his legs and picking up his feet. Touch was one milestone, the next was handling. As the positive reinforcement approach was now well established and there was no anxiety or fear over touch this part was about teaching Frankie to trust with someone holding his foot.



The first step in this was to teach Frankie to unlock the leg you want to pick up. So asking him to move over just enough so he shifted his weight from one front foot to the other but without taking a step. Click and reward.

This would be the start to teach him to balance on three legs. With the unlocked leg not being weight bearing.

Next was to ask him to bend his knee on the unlocked leg. Click and reward. At this stage he was very able to shift his weight to the other leg, unlock his leg, balance on the other 3 legs and on request bend his knee.

The next stage was to ask him to allow Di to hold and support his lower leg and hoof. Click treat. This process had to be taught for each leg in turn. Taking the time it needed. Not rushing Frankie. Allowing him time to process and to feel safe.



You can also extend positive reinforcement into training tricks, liberty work, in hand work and if you ride ridden activities. Plus every day interactions such as catching, leading, etc.

**The only thing you are limited by is your imagination and creativity.**

Watch any horsemanship and there is bound to be a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement going on. Horsemanship is about providing appropriate learning activities, this includes play, tapping into preferred learning styles, giving the horse time to consider options, explore, think and reflect.

Positive reinforcement is one type of application of an extrinsic motivation.

Any horsemanship method is application of an extrinsic motivational approach applied by the human. A human led agenda. What we desire is to ignite self-motivation in the horse (intrinsic motivation). So knowing the difference between a positive and negative reinforcement and what is ethical is essential for success.

We all want our horses to enjoy our shared horsemanship; so knowing how to ignite intrinsic motivation ensures your horse looks forward to your shared activities. When intrinsic motivation surfaces in your horsemanship your horse will engage willingly, offer to you what you have been working on and have a very positive outlook.

When we engage in any training activity, no matter the methods we use with a horse we are using an extrinsic motivation. It could be a positive or a negative reinforcement. And there are good, bad and ugly practices out there.

Motivation is in all species, it is the inner yearning and passion. There are two types of motivation extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Knowing the difference makes a huge difference.

**Extrinsic motivation is usually determined by someone else who has set goals and uses methods such as positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement.** Many of you are already familiar with extrinsic motivation in horsemanship, there is good, bad and ugly to be found. Good use of extrinsic motivation will unlock intrinsic motivation.

**Intrinsic motivation does not rely on being influenced by another.** It is often referred to as self-motivation. It is a powerful force within us all. Enjoyment and interest that comes from within will fuel action to try out new things and gain skills. Two legs or four, we all have personal self-motivational drivers, desires and goals. This is a powerful driver for learning and achievement. Horses and humans are born with a curiosity and a drive to learn; learning naturally through play and social interactions without the need for reward. Tap into this inner motivational force we make learning a fun and enjoyable activity. We all want our horses to enjoy our shared horsemanship; tapping into intrinsic motivation ensures your horse looks forward to your shared activities. When intrinsic motivation surfaces in your horsemanship your horse will engage willingly, offer to you what you have been working on and have a very positive outlook.

## Types of Motivation Found in Horsemanship.

	<b>Positive</b>	
<b>Extrinsic Motivation</b>	Positive reinforcement, training using yes, suggesting, inspiring, praise, rewards, treats, encouragement, appreciation, acknowledgment, recognition, bonus, comfort, etc....	YES, self-motivated because it is enjoyable, fun, pleasurable. Offering without prompting. Inner confidence, feeling safe with trust and partnership. Positive outlook.
	Negative reinforcement, training using no, discourage, correction, consequences, discomfort, punitive measures, discipline, punishment, etc....	NO fuelled maybe by fear, anxiety, stress, confusion. Refusal or resistance fuelled by negative past experiences or entrenched thinking. Shut down, disinterest, un-motivated, what's the point etc....
	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Intrinsic Motivation</b>

To move from a position of your horse saying no to yes an individual needs to travel through maybe. That is about providing appropriate extrinsic based learning activities, this includes play, giving the horse time to consider options, explore, think and reflect.

Watch most horsemanship carefully and there is bound to be a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement going on. Knowing which to use in a given situation can make a huge difference to the outcome. For me extrinsic horsemanship is simply communicating yes or no appropriately to the horse using language it understands.

Extrinsic motivation has limitations. If the activity becomes strongly associated with reward, the activity without reward the motivation can decrease. If you use negative reinforcement you can end up nagging your horse or applying more pressure. This can have serious dire consequences in the long run.

Some horsemanship only uses extrinsic motivation micromanaging the horse to do what we request.

Tactful extrinsic motivation is very useful in ignition of positive intrinsic motivation. The key is how to ignite this powerful inner force with our horse and ourselves. So when a horsemanship session allows a horse the opportunity to give without asking it is essential you recognise and treasure it.

To utilize intrinsic motivation in horsemanship the relationship with the horse is at the heart of success. So time spent on the foundation stones is essential. I have a resource you can access to read on this.

Get to know each horse as an individual. What makes each horse tick? Don't just turn up to do human agenda activities with your horse. I am talking about quality time, with no demands, agendas or expectations. Just hang out together. No doing. It's about connecting with the horse so you both feel you belong together. It's a connection of minds, bodies, spirits and souls. It feels right, quiet and peaceful.

See how it wants to interact with you. Let the horse take the lead, it may want to investigate you. The horse may engage in contact, smelling you, nuzzling, licking etc... You can offer gentle rubs in exchange. We need to demonstrate to our horse unconditional love. Some horses that 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 of unlocking self-motivation, a horse that loves its owner is usually enthusiastic and willing to engage in shared activities.

Horses have a strong desire to pair bond. This is something we can tap into. Spend time bonding and interacting with your horse. Place a high value on bonding time. Value what the horse enjoys and sees rewarding. Play games that mirror herd language to establish your own shared etiquette.

Develop a relationship in which your horse desires your company and interactions. Get creative about shared activities that are enjoyable and fun. Remember riding is our agenda and there are lots of other shared activities you can both enjoy.

If horse leaves the herd to be with you it is because you are seen as more interesting, fun and enjoyable to spend time with. This tells you that 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. 2 legs or 4 we all have a personal space requirement.

In humans we have a social body language about personal space. How uncomfortable do you feel if someone you don't know that well invades your space? How uncomfortable would you feel if a stranger touched your face? Horses too have etiquette and language regarding personal space. We must observe this and earn the right to enter a horse's personal space. Respect is a two way street, we must respect the horse and his rights. 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 if we are balanced, in harmony, calm and confident. They also know when we are in negative energy states, stressed, tense, anxious, fearful, etc.

Try to mask your true self and the incongruence will rattle them. Horses know and you can't fool them.

Negative energy states get in the way of a bond and partnership. A relaxed state is energy neutral. Place value on harmony and relaxation. See how this benefits you and your horse. Relaxation is part of bonding with your horse. It is in their language.



There are many techniques you can actively practice that are embedded in their language. Time spent together relaxing is time well spent. A relaxed horse is a happy horse and a happy horse = 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 it will enjoy spending time with you. Spending time relaxing and enjoying each others company will open up self-motivation in both you and your horse. If something is relaxing, enjoyable and fun we will want to repeat the activity. Relaxed horses and humans can be super achievers.

You, I 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 that is relaxed, calm, with emotional harmony and feels confident will learn faster. This is about creating a non-threatening learning environment where it is ok to make mistakes. Errors are golden opportunities to learn.

By contrast training that uses punishment or unethical negative reinforcement will induce fear, anxiety, stress and resistance. These emotions adversely affect learning. You and the horse must feel safe, supported, listened to, included in decision making, respected and accepted. Horsemanship must be open honest dialogue.

Connection and engagement with our horses are one aspect to tapping into self-motivation. When you and your horse have a strong sense of affiliation to each other it is an incredible partnership. This is why it is so powerful in unlocking intrinsic motivation in horse and human. Once you have experienced this magical connection it is intoxicating, addictive, rewarding and fun.

Being able to challenge yourself and accomplish new tasks is part of motivation. As nothing grows from inside our or our horses comfort zones. However a shared comfort zone is a great place to establish a solid foundation on which to build success. It's in our comfort zones that we can ignite self-motivation through enjoyment and relaxation.

For our world to expand the key to success here is to know what is holding us back. What stops us and our horses leaving our comfort zone? Often it's a mixture of issues. Here are just a few examples: Prior bad experiences / negative event / an accident. Fear: real fear or perceived fear or fear of failure. A lack of faith in yourself: maybe from a lack of knowledge and understanding or uncertainty regarding your abilities.



Feeling inadequate: Feeling out your depth to perform certain tasks or skills or a belief that you are not competent or self-doubt. Lack of trust: Maybe trusting your own judgement or you don't trust your horse or your horse doesn't trust you. Pressure: peer pressure, or pressure you put on yourself and your own expectations. Perfection: The fear of getting it wrong or letting your horse down and the worry that you're not good enough for your horse. Assumptions: What is going to happen, living with what if or negative inner dialogue, etc.

The common effect they have is they erode motivation and are very demoralising.

Sometimes it is really hard to pinpoint exactly

why you lose motivation, this adds to the frustration. You may in the past desperately wanted to do something - but feel unable to because of how bad you feel.

It's important to understand that motivation can come and go. There are things that you can do to build it up again. If you feel overwhelmed or uncertain, that's fine too. There is always a way forward. Knowing what limits you and why helps you to move forward.

The good news is that tapping into self-motivation is a skill that can be developed for you and your horse. The first step is to acknowledge what causes of a lack of motivation. Ousting the monster(s) that cause and fuel your lack of motivation will enable you to take targeted action. This along with planned purposeful practice will help you to accomplish new skills and tasks. The end result is motivation becomes deeply ingrained. Once they are banished they can't hold you back or erode your confidence or motivation.

Here I will share with you how to stretch boundaries outside the comfort zone to be able to accomplish new skills and tasks using a graded approach and retreat method.

Enjoy your comfort zone, have fun there, learn new skills in your comfort zone. This will fuel intrinsic motivation and give you and your horse the desire to take action to accomplish what is just out of reach. It becomes an itch you have to scratch. You both will be motivated to do more.

Having a structured action plan that isn't set in stone that breaks down what you want to achieve will help you to see the next small step that won't be daunting. Seeing the bigger picture and how each small step moves you towards your goal helps. This plan must have the horse at and your relationship at heart.

Nudge away on the boundary edge of your comfort zone and watch how your world gets bigger. This will in turn boost confidence, belief in ability and fuel motivation.

Using self-motivation you and your horse will want to push out the comfort zone. Use your motivation to leave your comfort zone and give yourself and your horse permission to return to your comfort zone whenever you want.

The key here is to expose yourself and your horse to new boundaries but never push beyond the boundaries you or the horse feels too un-comfortable with. Take your time and using lots of patience and consistency you will discover you and your horse can accomplish what was out of reach without losing motivation.

Activities that are enjoyable, rewarding and fun will motivate you and your horse to want to do more. Part of motivation is recognising that there are many types of intelligence. Two legs or four, each have a preferred learning style. When exposed to training or education that only recognises certain types of intelligence it is restrictive for individuals outside of these learning styles, getting lost, confused and even switched off.

How we learn is a fascinating topic. One of which I was very lucky to learn about when I worked for Coventry University. We developed a pioneering approach to learning in which the students recognised their preferred learning styles, chose what they wanted to learn, how and against assessment standards. Empowerment of the learner is king. Learning styles apply to us and our horses. Individually we each have preferred learning styles. This along with tapping into intrinsic motivation unlocks potential and enables us to achieve our dreams.

Have you considered how you and your horse could get more out of learning? How you can set agendas in learning? How to empower your learning? For many of us our experiences of education have been modelled on the traditional formula, which is mostly lead by the teacher, who sets the agenda, pace and selects the delivery style of the teaching. Fine if this matches your horses and your learning styles. Having lessons with a trainer who teaches to your preferred learning styles is only one aspect of the wide range of learning opportunities we can tap into.

You can take control of learning, you can decide what and how you want to learn. Knowing yours and your horse's preferred learning styles can really help in getting the most from learning. For horses and humans there has been a lot of work undertaken in this area. Learning styles in horses many natural horsemanship practitioners have studied this in detail and produced excellent resources for horse owners to use. Mostly these are based on training by temperament. This is tapping into the behavioural psychology of the horse; to match training to an individual horse personality and motivational drivers. For me



horsemanship must factor in a horse's learning style to unlock motivation. This article can never do justice to this as it is in-depth topic. Many excellent resources are available on the topic. Here are just two suggestions:

- Is Your Horse a Rock Star – by Dessa Hockley.
- What Horses Reveal by Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling.

Knowing your horse's learning style is 50% of the picture. What is your horse's learning style? The other 50% is your preferred learning style. Do you know your preferred learning style? Unlock your learning potential and find out what sort of learner you are.

There are many theories about how people learn and this article can only discuss this briefly. There is lots of FREE information on learning styles available on the internet and in libraries etc. Most theories cover three aspects of how people learn:

- Perceiving Information
- Processing Information
- Organising, Using and Presenting Information

**Perceiving information** is how we gather information. We use all our senses. However we all have personal preferences. We use some or all of the following:

**Visual** (sight). Visual learners use visualisation to interpret information e.g. pictures, maps, diagrams etc....

**Auditory** (hearing). If you find taking in information using hearing is your preferred method you will find discussion and debate useful with your learning.

**Reading and Writing**. Some people learn best by reading and writing.

**Kinaesthetic**. (includes touch and movement). If you learn best by touch and movement you need to learn by physically engaging into a task. You learn by doing, hands on, feeling, movement etc.

**Processing information** is how we process the gathered information mentally. You will have a preference for how you process the information. There are four main preferences for processing information; Activists, Reflectors, Theorists and Pragmatists.

**Activists** like experiencing new challenges, completing tasks, problem solving, developing new ideas and concepts, competitive team work, variety, change and excitement, leading discussions and having a go and getting stuck in.

**Reflectors** like to observe, thinking and pondering, to have time to consider before taking action, finding out more information, to review what they have learnt, structured activities, to analyse information and compare information.

**Theorists** like information presented as part of an overall system, theory or concept. To work methodically, to question and probe methodology and logic, structured situations, a clear purpose and interesting ideas even if they are not immediately relevant.

**Pragmatists** like solving real life problems, practical techniques, trying out new techniques, coaching with feedback and practical approaches.

## Organising, Using and Presenting Information



After you have perceived and processed the information the next stage is how you choose to share what you have learnt and put it into practice. Again you will have a personal preference of how you do this. Some people choose to organise the information they have learnt with either a holistic overview or with a detailed logical analysis. Others prefer to present what they have learnt verbally or using images. Two legs or four when we learn in a style that matches our learning style, learning becomes logical, easy to understand and most of all fun. If something is fun we will be motivated.

Learning styles, tapping into our preferred learning style makes learning easy, rewarding and fun. Here is a little bit more on learning and how we can use approaches to unlock self-motivation.

Horses and people respond well to learning through play. It is a great way to bond with your horse, to learn their language and herd etiquette. Horsemanship is a shared relationship with a horse so it is personal, social and emotional. Learning using a shared language in play helps in forming a positive relationship where both parties develop mutual respect and trust. It enables interspecies understanding and communication. Through play horses develop cognitive skills, mature emotionally, gain self-confidence to make sense of the world around them. To maximise playing as a method for learning it must be pleasurable. The tricky part here for us humans is not to be too task driven or have goals, but to look for the intrinsic motivation from your horse. Play is very different to work. Are play sessions shaped by your horse's preferences? How and what does your horse like with play?

Learning via association, this is learning that two things go together. Extrinsic horsemanship uses this with either a positive or negative reinforcement associated with a training request. For me it is as simple as saying yes or no to the horse. Horses also learn without our input via association. Examples of associative learning include: Touching the electric fence results in pain. The sound of the feed room door opening food will arrive. A tight saddle and back pain. Learning what training cues mean for each task. Horses learn what behaviours are effective for the situation they are in, refine them so in turn it becomes a conditioned response. These can become ingrained into behaviour patterns.

The key to success is to use association to achieve desirable behavioural patterns and ignite self-motivation in the horse. I am a huge fan of using positive reinforcement to strengthen an association as being enjoyable and rewarding. Not so easy if the horse has strong associations that something is negative. For example the association of an ill-fitting saddle causing discomfort or pain. The horse will develop behavioural responses in relation to this. Over time the horse will perfect which responses work best to avoid the discomfort. If the

rider has not listened, labelled the horse as naughty the behaviours can escalate to a downward spiral with a host of behavioural issues. Once the root cause of the ill-fitting saddle is highlighted to the rider and it is replaced with a correctly fitting saddle, and rehabilitation for the back pain is addressed the behaviour may well still persist. Especially if the association is deeply ingrained and become a conditioned response. The horse has to then go through a re-learning process.

Sensitization and habituation are two other learning tools in extrinsic motivation in horsemanship. We are either shaping our horse to be more sensitive or helping our horse to be desensitized.

Here is an example from one of my clients Estelle: "Myself and my horse Simba were stuck in a rut where we were both demotivated with me constantly having to nag him and work really hard to get him moving forward. Additionally we both hated schooling and avoided it like the plague. He was fed up, unwilling and getting little enjoyment out of our hacks." Estelle had inadvertently desensitized Simba to the leg aids. The leg aids were no more than background noise. The leg aid had lost its meaning and Estelle was using spurs and more pressure to get the job done. Yes she had asked correctly, yes the horse understood, yes he can feel a fly land on his skin. Firstly we removed the spurs and I taught Estelle to ration her leg aids and to be soft. She was encouraged to only ask once and then react with either yes when he responded correctly or no when he chose to ignore the leg aid. Yes was a positive reinforcement a reward. No was a negative reinforcement. For no I got her to use low grade irritation, like an annoying fly until he gave her a try to which she was to stop the irritation immediately and reward generously. A bit like when you get in a car and drive off without putting on your seat belt there is an annoying pinging sound that only goes quiet when you put your belt on. By association of positive and negative extrinsic motivation the horse learnt to be sensitive to the leg. The end result in Estelle's words: "Oh how things have changed! Vicki has revamped my attitude and riding completely resulting in a horse that now strides out, ears forward, takes an interest in everything that's going on. And all with the minimum amount of effort from me, no more tired legs and red face. Even in the school he is willing, anticipating the next request from me and genuinely trying with anything new that is put his way, I may even try a dressage test at some point, something I would never even have considered. On hacks his schoolwork really comes through, I think he knows how amazing he looks so likes to show off - that's the only conclusion I can come to because I don't even ask, he just offers. Minimum effort, maximum results and a very happy pony!"

Here is an example of how we may use habituation. When preparing a young horse to be ridden I habituate the horse to the equipment that will be used. For example a saddle cloth: Firstly letting the horse examine the saddle cloth, letting the horse touch it, then touching the horse with it, rubbing him with it, and placing it on his back for longer periods of time. This is to desensitize the horse, so it is comfortable, relaxed and I have permission to use the saddle cloth.



Making safe mistakes is another method we can tap into for learning. Many people I meet are keen to not allow their horse to make mistakes, so they micromanage their horse. The down side to micromanagement is the horse doesn't learn for itself. Safe mistakes are a great learning tool. In horsemanship it is our responsibility to ensure our own safety and that of our horse. So when using learning by mistakes it is essential the mistake will not cause harm. Never punish a mistake, allow your horse to cognitively process the mistake and learn what works and what doesn't your horse will be able to learn what you want. It's the feedback we provide in response to the mistake that matters.

This is extrinsic horsemanship, it gives your horse responsibility and it is empowering. Helping your horse with a mistake can inspire your horse. It helps your horse to learn what to differently next time. Mistakes are golden opportunities to learn in works clothing.

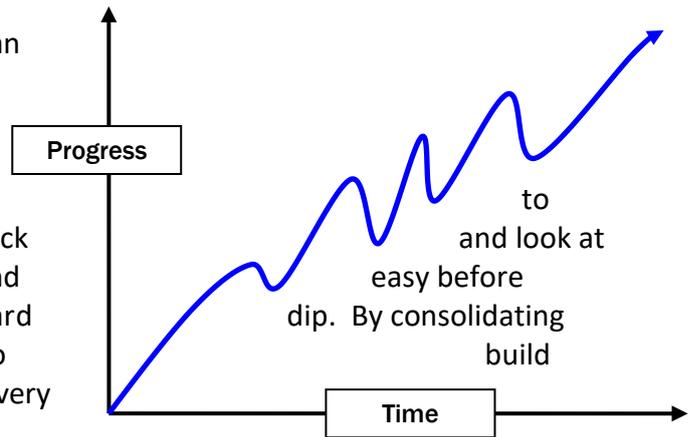
This is just food for thought as I have only touched on a few of many approaches we can use in horsemanship to ignite self-motivation in our horses. Why is self-motivation so important? Being self-motivated comes from inner enthusiasm, desires, interest, with no need of pressure, prodding or supervision. It drives an individual to do things, gives a sense of fulfilment, builds more self-esteem and confidence and improves the quality of life. For me it's the essence of horsemanship.

In horsemanship and life it can be hard to stay motivated. Life has ups and downs, 2 legs or 4 setbacks happen. They are especially part of development of horsemanship. As horse and human are on a shared journey of trying new things, growing as a partnership and learning through a meaningful close connection.

When learning something new and it really works, things come together, it can be like stepping into a pool of enlightenment. It is similar to stepping into a small bright shaft of magical moonlight, you get the feeling, you see things clearly and as they should be. If you experience a setback it's lost. Or it melts away much to your frustration and you are back to your old way of doing things. It is easy to then get trapped into chasing moonbeams. The more you try to recreate the end result, the enlightenment the more it is impossible to find. This is because you focus on the end result and not the journey that enabled you to discover this new understanding / knowledge. Stop chasing the moonbeam and focus on the process that enabled you to arrive to your new learning.

Learning for humans and horses very rarely follows a smooth up-ward curve. You will find you and your horse will have good days and bad days. Sometimes you will feel your progress slip away. It can feel like you take two steps forward and one back. This is a spiky profile, and it is normal. To help you stay positive and motivated it is best to focus on the total distance travelled.

With a spiky profile, the downward dips are an indication that you should focus on your previous learning to consolidate this learning before moving on. Maybe it is the horse and or the rider that needs more time embed this learning. So be prepared to go back the stages that you and your horse have found working on the area that caused the downward your learning you will have a stronger base to further learning / training upon. So it is time very well spent.



A chart of a spiky profile

It's how we deal with setbacks that matters. Some people see a setback as failure. This places them in a mental straight jacket. It can cause action paralysis. Other people see setbacks as failing their horse. The first thing to embrace is a setback is not failure. The only difference is a matter of perspective. If we see something as a setback, we can learn from it and try a different approach or start again. Failure has a whiff of permanence. A setback is not permanent. The difference between the successful and the not-yet-successful is the realization that a setback is simply a stepping stone, not a permanent event. Here shifting your thinking really helps. Who taught you that a setback was a bad thing? It feels bad, so it must be bad. Is that really true? What good does a fear of a setback do us? How about if you looked at a setback as a blessing in disguise? Or a golden gift for learning? Setbacks are inevitable, it's part of learning. Accepting this is a huge part in achieving your dreams. If you want to live your equine dream, setbacks will be a part of your life. Embrace it as it is an opportunity for growth in works clothing. If you lived with no setbacks you would not expand your horizons and at worst end up in a rut.

The key to success is to identify the root cause. Sometimes setbacks are linked to our progress in horsemanship. Learning new skills setbacks are bound to happen. However in my experience setbacks are sometimes not related to our ability or our horse's ability. Setbacks can be linked to life events. Setbacks can be connected to physical and emotional wellbeing. How we feel. Horses are emotional creatures too and no one can convince me that they don't feel a whole range of complex emotions. The best way to deal with a setback is to oust the demon. When it has nowhere to hide it is out in the open, you can take targeted action.



I meet people who regularly beat themselves with the perfection stick. They feel they are letting themselves and their horse down by not being perfect. Remind yourself all any of us can offer is our best, to strive to improve your best and that refining our skills is a journey not a destination. Recognise too that this is all your horse can offer too. Importantly, cut yourself and your horse some slack. Setbacks happen, however if you hold the perfection stick you will beat yourself up over the setback and erode motivation. As perfectionism fuels the inner critic, providing constant nagging reminders that you are not good enough. Left unchecked this erodes confidence and motivation quickly. It's the wolf dressed in sheep's clothing, a villain masquerading as the good guy. It can cut your self-confidence to shreds, kill your motivation and send your performance down the tubes. Perfectionism will suck every ounce of enjoyment and satisfaction out of your horsemanship.

Having unrealistic expectations will guarantee disappointing outcomes. The key to good self-confidence and maintaining motivation is therefore, having realistic, achievable standards and expectations. Swap perfectionism with a burning desire to better your best. Accept mistakes and setbacks are part of the learning process and view them as golden gifts in crappy paper.

## **Top Tips for Dealing with Set Backs and to Staying Motivated**

- Acknowledge the setback and remind yourself setbacks are not failures but opportunities for growth. Give yourself time, cut yourself some slack and eliminate blame. Remind yourself that learning is a spikey profile not a smooth uphill curve.
- Use an action plan as an organic living evolving tool. Remind yourself of your goals. Keeping in mind your goals, monitor progress, review and adjust your plan. Be willing to try different approaches, adjust your attitude, think outside the box and adapt. Extend your mind, become curious, and push yourself to learn. Keep your goals in mind and plan for success to step outside your comfort zone.
- Break your action plan down into manageable pieces. Motivation problems can be made much easier by chunking a task into many small tasks.
- Reward yourself and your horse. Make extrinsic positive reinforcement a key part of your horsemanship as it is a great way to ignite intrinsic motivation in horsemanship. If something is fun, enjoyable, rewarding it is the most powerful tool for unlocking potential.

- Don't be hard on your horse or yourself. We are all work in progress. Take control of your emotions, the journey to your goal will be an emotional rollercoaster with the highs of achievements and lows of negative emotions. These lows can erode your outlook if you allow them. Actively focus on the positives and the total progress made.
- Surround yourself with sources of inspiration. People, attend clinics, images, books, videos etc. Procrastination and distractions are a sure fire way to erode motivation. Once you have identified what is causing you to procrastinate then take action.

“Without setbacks and mistakes, no experience. Without experience, no learning. And without learning, you’ll never truly understand the awakening of your heart’s desires.”  
Robbie Vorhaus.

For me a huge part of motivation is the connection I have with a horse. I look at a horse and see a spirit and soul looking back. Horsemanship to me is interspecies soul companions with a unique spiritual bond. This deep understanding develops into a very special relationship.

## **I understand horsemanship to be in this order:**

1. Intent: This is thoughts, feelings and emotions. We can read a horse’s intent and know what the horse is struggling with. They have emotional needs; seek spiritual harmony and mental safety. Horses telegraph in with us, horsemanship is learning how to receive those messages. It is two way dialogue a conversation. Your horse has no problem in weighing up and understanding your thoughts and feelings. Many people operate at a subconscious level, only seeing the result of their intentions in their horsemanship. Horses often reflect right back at us the development we need to make from within.

Intent gives away very subtle cues that when placed in context become language. Intent plays a very big role in how horses react to situations, tapping into this refines horsemanship. Intent is the seed of focus and motives which then shapes energy and action.

2. Energy: Horses read very subtle signals of intention and energy both within their own species and other species. Horses are very fine tuned, far more than humans. Have you noticed how excitement is infectious with horses? How some people have a calming influence on horses? Being aware of energy and learning to use it appropriately makes a huge difference. Look across cultures and see how energy is embedded in every-day life: For example Native American Indians they understand the connectedness of all life and the importance of attunement. Energy is dynamic in all living things. Horses offer you opportunities to learn about energy, its effects on yourself and your equine partner and in life beyond. The magical connection with the horse is found in harmony and peace. This starts with centred balanced energy with a quiet mind, breathing pattern, rhythm, body language and voice before natural horsemanship technique is applied.

3. Breathing Patterns. In horsemanship breathing is part of communication. Horses are hardwired to pick up subtle changes. For example you can communicate relaxation to your horse via breathing softly, letting the air gently fill your lungs and gently exhale. Observe how your horse reacts to a soft gentle sigh. If you are anxious your breathing pattern will be

short and shallow and only into the top of your chest, your horse will pick up on this too and also become anxious. For many breathing is a subconscious activity and learning to master this as a method of communication is eye opening.

4. Rhythm and Body Language. Rhythm is something we can use to make suggestions to our horse from the ground and in the saddle. In the saddle the rider must allow the horse to move them, so the rider can feel the horse's rhythm and tempo. Only when fluidity is achieved can the rider make subtle suggestions to the horse using rhythm. Body language makes up a huge part of communication within each species, horse and human. It is embedded in communication, etiquette and rituals within both species. Having a shared language is horsemanship and part of this is observing how body language plays a vital part.

5. Voice. My horses are trained using positive reinforcement. I use a noise that equals yes. So I can accurately indicate to the horse a response that makes training very easy to understand. I also love to train my horses to understand a number of voice commands. Horses are extremely intelligent and able to learn many words and attach them to activities and situations.

6. Touch and Physical Aids. These should be as soft as possible. Yet touch is often the only level some humans are using when training a horse. It is often based on monologue telling and asking rather than open honest two way dialogue. The layers of refinement are there in steps 1-5.



**In this resource I share some of my knowledge and insights as a taster that may inspire you to get started with positive reinforcement training in horsemanship to ignite motivation. It is provided to compliment horsemanship sessions with a horsemanship practitioner of your choice. It is not as a replacement for getting professional guidance.**

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