

Thomas Herding Technique

Discovering the Communicated Equine

A View From The Hoof

Equine Post Traumatic Distress Disorder;

Thoughts and Theory

By:

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At the writing of this paper, which embraces my own personal viewpoints and perspectives encircling the concept of the title, I am freshly returned from a wondrous trip to Amman, Jordan. I went to Jordan as special guest of Her Royal Highness Princess Alia al Hussein and her intrepid Princess Alia Foundation. My trip was twofold; to sit and witness my very first in-person Arabian Horse Show via the Jordan Nationals 2012, held at the Royal Stables, and secondly, to observe and conceptualize ongoing and developing innovation for their children with challenges and horses Emotional Wellness therapies, which are just lovely.

I left Jordan with two very different opinions. Regarding the equine assisted wellness, I was overjoyed with what they had in place and excited at the potentials therein going forward. I was rather troubled however, with what I saw unfolding for the Arabian Horses taking part in show.

The Arabian Show Horse

My special area of focus and study regarding the horses, all horses in all disciplines and therapy, is mental aptitude, mental soundness and moreover, what I have termed profiling their Emotional Conformation and stability. I study too the effect that psychological stress and layered experiences has on their ability to perform and their ability to pass along their Behavioral Genetic Code. I mostly deal with race horses, dressage horses, jumpers and so on, including of course therapy horse prospects and the training of these wonderful horses. Thus, having come to the Royal Stables fully prepared to relax and enjoy a show about a most beautiful breed; I was saddened, shocked, and unnerved a bit, by what I saw from a profiling perspective.

Let me take a step back if you will. For many years I had heard more than a few troublesome comments from people around the world who would tell me that *“those Arabian Show Horses can be edgy to manage and deal with.”* Over the years I have heard a multiplicity of Arabian Show Horse *behavior issue* comments, seemingly centered purely around and attributed to, “the breed”. It wasn’t until I sat to watch firsthand a show that I came to realize I had my doubts about it being “purely the breed”.

I was expecting to see a show full of the natural motion and the deliverance of the pure spirit of the horse in all his/her splendor. Where the body and mind were in harmony, and we would have the chance to marvel and relish, in fact sincerely savor the natural beauty of the purest of breeds of horses. Instead, my senses were quickly removed from enjoying the total horse because I saw these horses enter the arena filled with stress and anxiety. Their movements, far more keen to somehow appease a somewhat perverse form of human entertainment, seemed to be anything but beautiful, and certainly not balanced and natural in fluid motion.

These horses have an already fast rhythm of psychological motion, their senses move much faster than many breeds of horse. Their interpretation of stimuli from a sensory perception needs little encouragement, and left to their own natural devices, would be just fine. From a psychological standpoint, I saw these otherwise beautiful horses being brought into the arena much like a pin-ball being sprung forth, injected if you will into a game of psychological chaos.

It seemed that in order to achieve the *sought-for movements and beauty*, the horse was being driven from stimulus to stimulus with much aggression in order to make them “bounce” from point to point. Body language reaction to stimuli without a psychological interpretation of that stimuli, layers the “acquired instincts”, or better put, layers the “learned behavior” part of the horse (and human too does it not?), with purely a react-to-survive psychology which will thus be associated with anything similar going forward. Then we wonder why we have a *hard to handle, recalcitrant* horse away from the show ring.

This isn’t the beauty of the horse. This isn’t natural and pure balanced motion, this isn’t both physical and emotional conformation; two things that to me the show world should be judging for, training for, breeding for..., this is controlled chaos.

Emotional Abberations/Unbalanced Psychologies



When we take a look at the definition of the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and then we take a hard look without the confinement of defined species but just at the meaning of the term, can it not be said that indeed there are a great many horses dealing with an equine version of PTSD? As an equine Emotional Conformation Profiler, and a man who studies and investigates what is essentially equine psychosis; I see all the earmarks of this stress-driven, fear-driven, survival-driven disorder.

For the horse, living in the *now* without the luxury of reason, surviving in the moment is primary. We may see the environment we create as a show, as a training measure, but the horse sees each moment, each experience in compartmentalized fashion. This happens because the horse doesn't have reason to add to memory or experience. It has learned behavior and mental conditioning to govern its life, to manage its affairs, indeed, to survive. When stimuli is applied in rapid succession like those I saw being employed at the show, we "see" the physical reaction, but that physical reaction only tells us a visual result of the unseen psychological impact. Not allowing the horse to mentally interpret removes one half of what in my opinion should be a part of the judging; their Emotional Conformation.

When this happens, the horse employs a new survival ally, *Behavioral Overcompensation*. This serves the horse well in natural environments, yet can be the downfall of performance and behavior in our human induced environment.

It is within this avenue of learned behavior that leads them to sustainable survival whenever and wherever the actual or *associated* stimuli are triggered. The residual impact on their psychology is, in my own opinion; Equine Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

This is a skewed layer of behavior that forms its own *comfort zones* for the horse to move into when stressed or presented with any stimuli or environment. What we teach horses by not allowing them to use all of their senses to process interpretative stimuli is that physical reaction in these and similarly associated circumstances is equal to surviving that experience. We humans like to associate this behavior quite often as a *hard to manage* horse.

Once this avenue has been taken time and again, the layers become blended together, and because there are learned behaviors not governed by mental reasoning, we see only a physical result. This is not only sad, but dangerous to both human and horse.

Think about the base value of all living species: survival instincts. Environmental stimuli become layers. It is both in good cases and bad cases, associated with a trigger. The trigger is in place in the form of a learned behavior so that the horse can "learn" the difference between a sage brush blowing across the landscape and a predator pouncing from behind its cover. Once in place, this trigger, which has allowed survival, becomes associated with other very similar experiences and thus



the horse is “learning” about survival in an environment. This is assimilation and adaptability that will be in play even when the environment changes, allowing the horse to transition properly because he or she is communicating environmental stimuli properly. Over still more time, associated stimuli evolve into *perceived* stimuli. This is a key location within the psychological area, a place that can house both comfort and aberration, indeed, both sanity and insanity. Where the horse decides either to react or not react, where the “decision” is automatically made between physical and non-physical reactions.

These are layers of mental growth and experience slowly blended together from an initial *compartmentalized* learning capacity. Training the horse for anything, especially on an Emotional Conformation level, is compartmentalizing layering based upon the Individual Herd Dynamic that is indeed their Emotional Conformation Profile. This is why for me, whether I’m working with the development of a training protocol for an individual in any discipline, or trying to unravel emotional issues like so many onion peels, an Emotional Conformation Profile has to be done first. We cannot aid an individual until we begin to understand the individual.

Long Term Impact

Mother Nature has many universal rules when it comes to individual species evolution and sustained survival, the most important being *The Principles of Adaptability*.

A living thing surviving in place such as a plant, only has to evolve to fit one environment and has no need for learning, reason, or association. Human influence notwithstanding, any stationary or mostly stationary life form has a finite number of influences to adapt to and has a great many years in which to do it. The environment in which a species lives has a great influence on its individual evolution.

For the species that quite often has to adapt to environments as well as assimilate to social aspects as part of their individual survival and functionality, the principles of adaptability are rules of the game.

Physical change is necessitated by environmental conditions and stimuli. Mental interpretations of these happen prior to the physical response. This is why in training the horse; we must train the mind ahead of the body, if we wish to have the most efficiency from that body. What we are doing then is employing nature’s plan of natural evolution. Evolution is itself managed by layering, compartmentalized experiences and learned behavioral responses slowly blended together that over time, allow form to follow function.



Mother Nature is far less impetuous than her human inhabitants; we often seek instant gratification and indeed desire immediate “change”, so we perversely influence the environment and the very fabric of the ability to learn. This impetuosity can have a damaging effect on our world, in our own inner worlds, and the lives of the animals we breed and train.

Because of the principles of adaptability, a continued psychological stress and pressure that is allowed to slowly become entrenched as a necessity of survival, continually bred into a species, will begin to change the species over time because said species has a base of sustained survival and will thus adapt to repeated influences that impact that survival.

Indeed, even the human is subject to the rules of adaptability and our own emotional and physical wellness can be, in purely my own personal opinion, either positively or negatively impacted.

Transitional Wellness

When actual reality and *perceived* reality become enmeshed within their associations and the transitions between them blur, the survival based trigger points begin to spawn erratic behaviors.

For the horse, exercises in what I call *healthy transitions* or *Transitional Wellness* must be compartmentalized. I believe that to therapy the issues, each issue or perceived association has to be addressed. We need the trigger to facilitate transition. The interpretation of the stimuli manages whether the trigger is positive or negative in resulting affect. How we do this for the training of an otherwise healthy and emotionally sound horse is not unlike how we do this for the troubled case: creating environments that allow a smooth transition into a comfort zone in individual compartments; we then build, layer and blend. In dealing with aberrations, we must create associated stimulus that create a natural transition that is a comfort zone and a result we desire. This will begin the process of a natural transitional wellness, one stage at a time, one layer at a time, one new *learned behavior* at a time.

I believe that for helping the human we can perhaps learn something from this scenario; normally we have “reason” to help differentiate an otherwise blended bowl of associations. This allows us to learn rapidly and to forward think, our intellectual growth being on the fast track of sorts. To me, I feel that each intrusion upon emotional wellness and stability via stress, experiences, emotional pain and even mental confinement begins to impact the balance of reason over perception.



Self-preservation has deep roots. Some compartmentalized experiences are laced with reason, while some are wont of it. I believe a key is creating associated environments, where reason begins to manage experience one piece at a time; thus we then can blend these compartments to transition together. Proper interpretation of both real and perceived stimulus is *Transitional Emotional Wellness* and a key ingredient to successful mental management of one's life and experiences.

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