



Jenni Nellist BSc(Hons) MSc 07974 569407 jenni@jenninellist.co.uk

www.jenninellist.co.uk

Horses Translated with Jenni Nellist, Clinical Animal Behaviourist

Veterinary Newsletter Autumn 2019

Behaviour research news: Can classical music have a positive effect on the welfare of stabled horses?

Night time in a stable block can represent an under stimulating environment for horses; a socially living, crepuscular species most active at dawn and dusk when living in natural conditions. This can especially be the case in stables where horses can only see each other over the stable doors, rather than a broader range of sensory access such as touch. Researchers Greening and Hartman from Hartpury College played Beethoven's 9th at 62.3dB on a continuous loop between 20:30hrs after lights out until 01:30hrs the following morning. Compared to a silent night the riding school horses spent significantly more time eating and lying down catching up on important REM sleep, suggesting that the music has a positive impact on the stabled horses' welfare. This is probably because classical music has a calmative effect, this has previously been reported in kennelled dogs and elephants, and because the music drowns out external noises that might otherwise startle the horses causing more motivation to be vigilant rather than to rest.



Greening, L. and Hartman, N., 2019. A preliminary study investigating the influence of auditory stimulation on the occurrence of nocturnal equine sleep related behaviour in stabled horses. *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*

Case Study

9 year old Irish Cob gelding presenting for aggressive behaviour (bite threats and lunging) towards the female owner's male partner, friends and visiting equine professionals. This behaviour only occurred when the horse was stabled or tethered on

the yard outside the box – never in the field or when ridden out. The lady owner did not have to be present.

The horse had a history of being very quiet and introverted prior to purchase. On purchase the owner and horse bonded slowly over a period of months when the horse's fear of the hosepipe and clippers were gradually rectified and the horse's confidence grew. The onset of the aggressive behaviour coincided with the horse's increased bond with the owner and his growth in confidence.

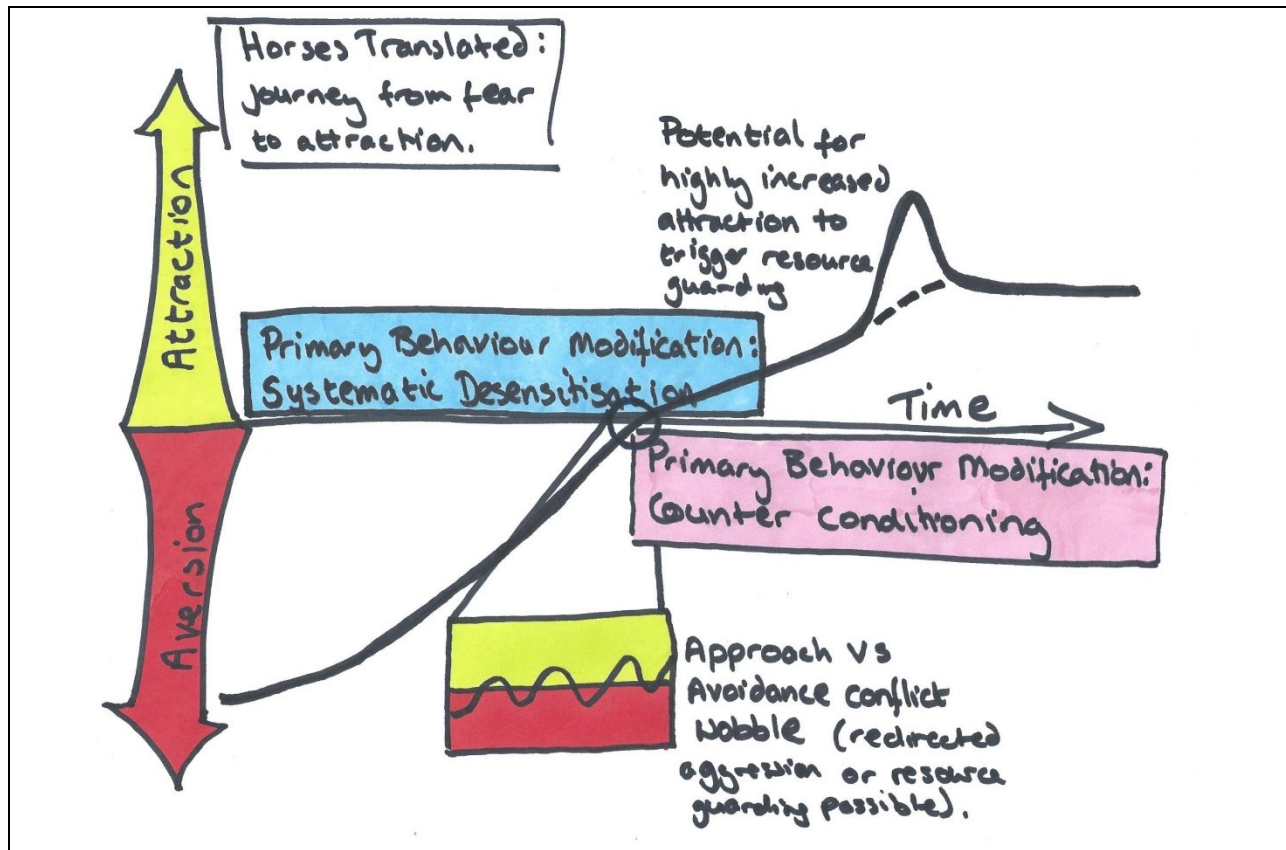
The horse was motivated to distance himself from the targets, which he could only do by using aggression, given he was effectively cornered when tethered or in the stable. The underlying emotional state was fear.

Picture for illustration purposes

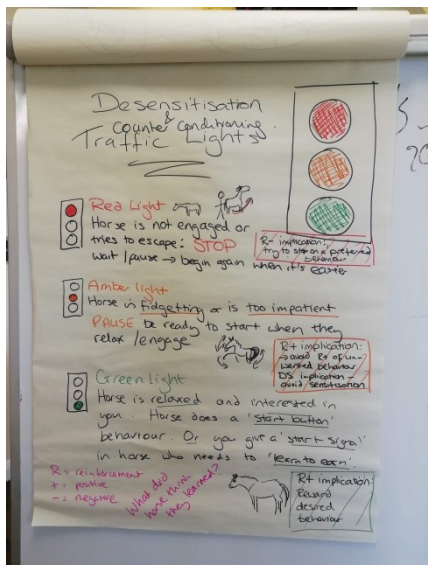


It's highly likely that the horse was fearful prior to the aggressive behaviour emerging, but was behaviourally inhibited due to lack of confidence and supporting social bond, now provided by his owner. Secure social bonds and utilisation of positive reinforcement based strategies such as those used by the owner to train cooperative behaviour with the hose and clippers enable withdrawn horses to become less inhibited. This is normally beneficial for their welfare. Given that the aggressive behaviour occurred when the horse was stabled or tied up, it is most likely that he had formed a classical Pavlovian association between those contexts and feeling afraid. Now instead of withdrawing as the conditioned response, he had become disinhibited and was able to respond with aggressive behaviour instead. This was far more functional because it was very quickly effective, and had become habitual by the time of the consultation.

Treatment was combined “*systematic desensitisation*” and “*counter conditioning*”. The partner and friends approached the stable as far as could be tolerated without provoking threatening behaviour from the horse. The horse was then rewarded by petting and/or food reward followed by the retreat of the “stooge” while still consuming the reward. The approach of a person began to signal the onset of a reward, and slowly the emotional valence is shifting and the aggressive behaviour decreasing. At this stage the owner fully appreciates that her horse is a work in progress.



Horse Welfare



Over the past 18 months I have had the pleasure and privilege of going back to my roots and working with some of the most progressive equine welfare organisations in the UK. I started my career 20 years ago, rehabilitation training rescued horses and ponies at the Blue Cross Equine Centre in Burford, Oxfordshire. I was one of the very first equine welfare employees to be applying ethology, animal welfare science, and learning theory to the work that is carried out in an equine rehabilitation centre. Last summer I spent time at both Blue Cross and SWHP prior to its merger with Redwings, contributing to the training of some very fearful ponies and coaching the staff in their equine training skills. Since February this year I have been

providing monthly CPD and clinical equine behaviour sessions at the Horse Trust in Buckinghamshire. In September I gave a demonstration of low-stress handling for an injection phobic pony at Llest Horse and Pony Trust's open day by invitation of equine manager, Dionne Schuurman who has recently achieved the Horse Trust's equine

welfare qualification, one of only two people in Wales to have this Lantra accredited qualification. I find this another very positive move for Llest Horse and Pony Trust; a high quality equine welfare organisation providing a crucial service for needy equines in South West Wales area.



CPD Provision

Last year I attended London Vet Show to give a presentation on the social behaviour of horses and how our management and handling practices impact on their welfare. This was really well received and the audience provided some very good questions and discussion points. I gave the same presentation as a webinar for the British Veterinary Behaviour Association and a follow-on which was more in-depth for the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors which now has a growing presence of equine behaviour professionals amongst its membership.

This year I'm continuing my CPD provision with an article on behavioural first aid for the equine vet team scheduled to be published in The Veterinary Nurse.

I am also very happy to announce training for the veterinary team: utilising learning theory and ethology to handle horses more safely during veterinary procedures:

Look out for my **Behaviour Bites** short videos on social media: Facebook: Jenni Nellist – Horses Translated. Twitter: @JenniNellist and YouTube channel: Jenni Nellist.

I can deliver a **free 45 minute presentation** in the early evening for veterinary practices in South, West and Mid Wales and the Border Counties.

For those who want to get more hands on, I offer **half day workshops** on Gower with my willing guinea pig horses and a selection of feral ponies.

Please email me for further enquiries and to book.

A screenshot of a presentation slide titled "Bolshey" overconfident horse? by Jenni Nellist. The slide lists four bullet points about defensive behavior and includes a photo of a horse and a diagram of a horse head with a plus sign and a carrot.

- Some defensive behaviour is offensive
- It can become a habitual response
- It's still an escape and avoidance behaviour
- It's still malleable to training

