

Understanding Behavior Modification II

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When people think of behavior modification, most people think of the most basic idea of rewarding good behaviors with treats that is called positive reinforcement. A common misconception is that if the positive behaviors are rewarded, then negative behaviors should not occur, but in reality, they do. Negative behaviors need to be negatively reinforced, but negative reinforcement should not be abusive. Learning how to employ behavior modification can be easy and fun.

Scientifically speaking, behavior modification is a direct and literal translation of stimulus and response. Given a certain stimulus, a living being will respond in a predictable manner. This is the essence of communication. Communication is comprised of a lot of elements that all play an important part in the receiver's ability to understand. When trying to communicate, one needs to realize the many different perceptions that can arise from the receiver's ability to comprehend. They may perceive from a purely technical level, a scientific level, an emotional level, a physical level or any combination of a multitude of perceptions depending on their life experience. It is the same for all living creatures. Finding the right stimulus for each individual and implementing it properly is key to good communication and successful response.

When using behavior modification, one needs to take into account all the things that can make that individual a comfortable and happy individual. In the case of equines, we need to take into account the feeding and nutritional programs we use. Certain feeds can actually cause problems like nervousness and hypertension that result in an inability to be calm and receptive to incoming information. From this, evolves negative behaviors that further block the learning process.

In addition to feeds and nutrition, we need to take into account the anatomical ramifications of the way we are physically conditioning the animal. The healthiest way to condition an animal is slowly and in an order that builds muscles layer by layer and that promotes healthy organ function and a happy mental attitude. When doing this, one should allow the animal to perform freely, without constraint. When they feel good physically, they are more than half way to a good mental attitude. A program of physical exercise that is taxing and stressful may produce the appearance of the right results, but there are deeper problems that can surface at a later date.

This is easy for natural athletes, but as I said, we are dealing with individuals and not all individuals are able to physically carry themselves in good posture and perform athletic movements correctly without guidance. When they do not carry themselves in correct posture, the muscles are not conditioned evenly throughout the body causing compensation from other muscle groups that will eventually become over stressed and will give way to soreness, lameness or worse. The uncomfortable individual will begin to exhibit negative behaviors.

Herein lies the value of some restraints such as the “elbow pull” that we use in Tape #2 of my resistance-free video training series. This restraint is used to keep the equine in good posture while exercising so that all muscle groups are worked evenly throughout the body. Of course, it is the trainer’s responsibility to make sure that they are also worked evenly on both sides of the body, forward and backward, since the restraint is only addressing the posture and not the directional movement of the muscles. Ideally, the restraint should not be in the hands of the trainer, but rather rigged so that the animal himself can make the corrections during basic foundation work. An animal that does not have naturally good posture will soon give to the restraint because he will feel more comfortable than he ever had in the incorrect posture. Restraints play an important role in the hands of competent trainers, but they should only be used to “suggest” certain behaviors, then they should be “faded out” over time.

There are certain individuals who are not all that coordinated and have difficulty attaining balance in good posture. For this reason, it is important to start slow and gradually ask for more speed and more difficult movements. The balance needs to be attained at the slower gaits and with simple movements first in order for the coordination to become repetitive, habitual and comfortable. This not only pertains to the animal in training, but for the trainer as well.

Verbal communication is not exclusively for the animal to learn commands. It has a twofold purpose. For the animal, it is a way for the animal to understand what the trainer is asking when the body language is unclear. For the trainer, it is a reminder to synchronize his own body language with what he is asking from the animal. This is especially important for novice trainers and animals.

In behavior modification, we use the animal’s natural instincts and movement to assimilate the things we wish them to do so that they can be rewarded. The reward needs to be something for which the animal is willing to work for long periods of time and something that will not cause adverse, negative behaviors. In the case of equines, this is crimped oats. Equines that are “overfed” will not respond the same way.

Horses have a very strong flight reflex, donkeys have a strong freeze reflex and mules are a combination of both. All three have a strong sense of self-preservation that drives their behaviors. If you want to have an equine that enjoys his work, it is important to bolster his confidence and trust in you. This requires setting up the training environment in a safe and non-threatening manner. For instance, if you begin training a foal, or have a new equine, it would be practical to approach the animal at a time when the flight reflex is at it’s lowest...feeding time!

Of course, this is only practical when it comes to imprinting, haltering and simple tasks like brushing and picking up the feet. This also sets up the foundation for reward system training. When he has finished his grain, he will be happy to know there is an easy way to get a little bit more and will appreciate, perform and bond to the person who gives it. Chasing the equine is not an option at this stage. We want him to want to come to us of his own free will. When this is done correctly, you should never have to chase your animal to catch him. He will always be looking forward to being with you.

During this time, your equine's ground manners will begin to develop. If you are consistent with what you ask and the rewards are promptly and appropriately given, you should experience minimal adverse behaviors.

As he gains confidence, it is the equine's natural instinct to become playful. In this controlled environment, you are able to set limits to these negative behaviors in the form of non-abusive punishment. The most common expression of playfulness is to turn, buck and kick at the trainer. If a foal does this, you would simply give him a smart slap to the rump, step back and say, "No!" He might be startled, but he will turn and look at you, displaying curiosity, and when he does, you would say, "Good, Boy (or Girl)," and then offer a reward (for paying attention) and give it to him when he approaches again. We want to encourage this curiosity.

If an adult equine turns his haunches to you and threatens to kick, you would say "No," and use a whip (as an extension of your arm) and strike him smartly on the fetlocks only once for each kick, pausing afterwards to give him a chance to turn his head to you so you can then offer the reward the same way as you would with the foal. The strike of the whip on the fetlocks will not hurt him. It will only startle him as will your voice when you say, "No," and will cause a behavior in him (the turning of his head to you) that can be rewarded. Biting is handled the same way with a slap of the hand to the side of the mouth. It is well worth the fifteen minutes of training that it takes in the beginning to assure that your animal will not become dangerous later. This may literally make the difference between life and death.

The result of this early limiting of the negative behaviors of biting and kicking will pave the way for you to set limits to any other bad behaviors that may arise in the future with a raising of the hand and a firm, "No." It teaches the equine to think before he acts and in the case of mules, it might mean the difference between a real bite and a soft nudge, or a kick and a soft shove with the hind foot if he experiences discomfort. Early negotiation of obstacles on the lead line will also help engage his curiosity, help solidify his responses for reward, passively build muscles closest to the bone and will encourage trust in the trainer. Now we can safely proceed to a more open area to play and learn with our equine.

In the round pen, we will begin to use the flight reflex as a platform for reward. The equine is already comfortable with you and knows you mean him no real harm. In the round pen, he may be averse to circling and may want to just stand. If he does, raise the whip and strike the ground behind him, or even his rump. If he still won't move, back up, lower your body and shuffle your feet on the ground as you approach again and he should take off. If he is the type to take off by alone, just stand in the middle and wait until he slows and stops. When he does, say "Whoa," and offer the reward.

The same goes for the equine that had problems getting started. Then send him back to the rail again and build the numbers of rotations slowly and over time, being consistent with your rewards for the "Whoa." Learning a consistent "Whoa" will give you a safe zone from which to work and play. This will translate to trust and confidence and will temper the flight reflex to a controllable level. It can make the difference between freezing and flight when they are spooked under saddle.

The equine with this kind of training will pause and give his attention to the rider for guidance before reacting to a "spook." Any bucking and kicking while circling in the round pen should be ignored and the reward should be postponed until he has regained his composure and has done what was expected. Bucking and kicking should be allowed because many times it is merely a moment of confusion or the need for a physical adjustment on the part of the equine at this stage of training. It is rarely an exhibition of meanness.

Whether they realize it or not, most trainers use some form of behavior modification in their training programs. There is so much to learn about communication to achieve balance and harmony that one person could not possibly know it all. For this reason, it is important to know and appreciate the work of others who are giving of their knowledge every day and assess the techniques they offer that might be a fit in your training program. As they say, "You can learn something from everyone." It is our job to sort through what only works for the short term and what works best for long term success. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. It's just another way to learn. The more we know, the more we learn that there is so much more to learn.

Behavior modification is an ongoing, careful balance of communication between living creatures. It works because both parties opt to listen and learn from each other. At each stage, there are tasks to perform that need to be balanced and refined by both the trainer and the trainee. Behavior modification is not controlling. Rather, it is a guidance system by which positive behaviors are rewarded and thus, more likely to be repeated and become habitual. The parties involved are both rewarded each time they are together because each time they are together, they learn a little more about each other in an enjoyable and appreciative manner. Over time, with practice and this kind of understanding comes harmony and mutually satisfying performance. In the beginning, it may seem overly simple, but as you practice and learn more, your proficiency will increase gradually over time and the results you will witness are amazing! This is why

Behavior modification is so successful not only with people and equines, but is also the method of choice in the training and treatment of zoo animals and aquatic mammals.