



Which Hat Are You Wearing Today? by Lara Neighbour, National Instructor

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Over the past year I have had the pleasure of meeting and teaching lots of students with an ever widening knowledge of equine behaviour and training. This training provides students with a great advantage in that it improves their understanding of how a horse learns and their ability to read equine body language. However, on many an occasion I have seen students struggle to accommodate what they have been taught in their equine behaviour / training courses with what we ask of them in Equine Touch. Students attempting to wear both hats - that of the Equine Touch practitioner and that of the Equine Trainer – simultaneously can bring about confusion in their communication with the horse and inadvertent changes to their integrity and intent.

Communication

Horses are wonderful, genuine creatures. With an ET session horses have no expectations. No horse has yet to say to me, “Now, I’ve had this problem for fifteen years, I’ve seen 50 specialists, spent X thousands on therapy and it’s down to you to fix me in the next hour.” Horses’ responses are genuine and instant; no horse has said, “Well, I’ve got this major problem but I shan’t tell you where it is: let’s see if you can find it and I’ll tell you if you’re right” at the end of the session.”

A huge joy of ET is the communications that you *do* have with the horse, during the moves or during observation times. For example: moving towards you, which could be translated as “Oh that was fab, dunno what it was but I like it”; nudging you in the back as if to say, “Two minutes, schmoo minutes – get on with it!”; moving their bums towards you, “Do my bum again, please, now”; as you open the back, “Bad saddle, oh bad saddle”; or after you’ve popped the cap, “BERLIMEY! What was that?!” At the end of one session I did with a horse she put her head on my shoulder and sighed very contentedly in my ear: it was the best “thank you” ever.

So, what if the horse moves towards you, telling you it loves ET and you, but then you remember that horses should respect your space and so make it move backwards? You’ve just lost a lovely “thank you”. Granted not all horses will be saying this and some horses are the type who walk over people or is always fidgeting and, quite rightly, he needs some training. However the question is, “is it appropriate to carry out behavioural training in the middle of an ET session?”

What if, in a most perplexing manner, your horse that usually stands still and is well behaved, starts walking away from you? Has he forgotten his training? Does he need an emergency lesson? Or is he communicating, along the lines of ‘Usually I’d stand still but that move was in an area that was a little bit sore’? So if you carry out a bit of ‘emergency-standing-still-training’ will he be inclined to ‘talk’ to you again and have you lost an opportunity for discussion?

You should be able to read a horse’s expression, judge the degrees of response, the gnashing of teeth, tail swish and foot stamp. I try to take these as communications and comments from the horse. All he is saying, in pure Horse, is “That hurts. Go away”. These communications should not be corrected, dare I say it, ‘punished,’ during in an ET session: after all you invited them.

Integrity and Intent

From the minute you decided to book on an Equine Touch course you were showing your intent to help the equine. On your Level One course, and in all subsequent courses, we speak of A.I.I. (Accuracy, Integrity and Intent) that are key to your approach with ET. You have the intent to help; you will perform ET with integrity and to the best of your ability and accuracy. We also speak of A.I.I from the horse's point of view; which is the horse's *awareness* of your integrity and intent.

My thesaurus gives 'honesty' as an alternative word for 'integrity'. How honest are you if you begin an ET session then half way through change the rules and stifle a horse's genuine response and reaction?

Ask yourself what change has occurred in your intent. You probably started with the intent to body balance your horse, give him some quality time and let him respond and ultimately relax. Yet if he gives you a response you interpret as a behavioural fault your intent changes to a training one. And what if you end up putting lots of little training sessions during the body balance? Integrity and honesty has long gone and the intent is very muddled.

Other Peoples' Horses

You may be asked to do ET on other people's horses, and those horses behave in a manner that you wouldn't stand for with your own. Has a client booked you to carry out an ET session on their horse or have they asked you to pass judgement on their horse, retrain their horse or sell your method of training to them? At that time it is not your prerogative: remember the task in hand! Diplomacy is a wonderful skill that we all need to master. And remember that you should only ever give advice that you are qualified to give.

Respecting the Horse's Reactions

Horses often like to move around, look at parts of their body that are feeling tingly, itchy, hot, or just downright weird. Should we insist he stands still, head to the front and all four square? You've all had some work done on you as a part of your training. How many of you felt sleepy, woozy, tingly, needed a sit down with a glass of water, rubbed the back of your neck or across your eyes? As an Instructor I'm certain I respected your response, rather than saying "Pull yourself together, stand up straight and concentrate on the next bit".

Let the horse be himself. Let him respond and express himself as the ET inspires him to do so. Let him peer around, stretch, scratch, wander around his stable, have a drink, stamp his feet and swish his tail. Don't pull his head to the front, walk him backwards, throw a lead rope across his hind legs or smack him on his nose. Not one ET manual has these moves in it and yet I have seen all of these done to horses during an ET session.

The Caveat

My caveat to this is the extreme negative response from a horse that endangers you as a practitioner of ET. I'd not like to hear of anyone saying, "Well, he was stamping on my head but I respected his chance to tell me that the moves on his neck hurt him." As with everything there are degrees of responses and reactions! Remove yourself from a dangerous situation rather than continue or attempt to correct that response. Some training may be required before you are able to approach a very scared or aggressive horse in order to deliver ET where it is most definitely needed. *But be reasonable and above all make your response appropriate!*