

# KNOCK ON EFFECT

I talked about stress and the affects on yard staff in previous articles but recently an incident happened which highlighted most profoundly the knock on affects such stress can have.

It was shown how the best natured of grooms, when put under unreasonable pressure to perform their daily tasks either through understaffing, inadequate equipment, long hours and poor facilities (although even the best of facilities can still put extreme pressure on people), can start to show mood swings and short tempers which often results in physical punishment for the horses in their charge.

It is all too easy for a stressed member of staff to hit out with whatever is in their hands when pushed by a horse (who is often only being a horse). They may be sweeping up the yard, just one of a million things they have to do before they can have a lunch break, and a horse is continuously kicking the door. This can wear on their already frayed nerves and as they pass the door they might swing the brush up and chase the horse off the door and into the back of the stable. Initially this may only be done as a threat but over time it becomes habit and the swing becomes a tap or dunt with the shaft of the brush, fork, shovel etc. Then it starts in the stable, the horse is dancing about as they are trying to muck out, kicking through piles of dung making it even harder for the groom to do his or her job, they smack the horse with whatever tool they have in their hands in total frustration, and so it may continue, till it is almost second nature to hit a horse soundly with brush shafts, fork handles or shovels, even grooming brushes can be used to hit a horse (especially a metal curry comb).

I witnessed just such an incident where a groom had got into a habit of jabbing horses on the quarters with a four pronged bulldog fork, albeit on their rugs, to move them around the stable. I warned her on numerous occasions that she would make a mistake one day and do this to a horse with no rugs, but as she was yard manager and I was a lowly groom at the time my warning fell on deaf ears. Then the inevitable happened. She was stressed out one day and not feeling well and one of her horses (who was supposed to stand on the concrete and not on the nicely banked straw) knocked down the banked straw as she tried to stand on the softer surface. The girl's temper broke and she struck out in anger, stabbing the horse twice on the quarters with the fork. The horse had no rug on for protection and suffered two sets of four puncture wounds to her quarters the wounds were deep and infected and required extensive medical treatment. The girl was sacked on the day and charged for animal cruelty.

Some of you may be shocked by this but there may also be some of you feeling a little bit shamefaced and guilty. I do not condone the girls actions one bit, but I know how easy it is to hit out in anger when you are pushed to the very limits of endurance. I have personally witnessed (in my younger years as a groom) a horse beaten with wooden pitchfork handle till he lay down in terror, unable to think of anything else to do. He was then punched and kicked till he got up. This was considered acceptable "discipline" behind closed doors, and may I add that both of these horses were full livery clients and the owners had entrusted the facilities with their care and welfare.

I know for a fact that this still goes on, even though it is illegal, and those responsible should know better. I can usually tell when a horse has been beaten, in my line of work I try to fix the trauma such treatment causes. Often a horse will be openly defensive and aggressive or nervous and afraid, but sometimes even I miss the small give-away signs that a deeply traumatised animal will show.

Often the affects of such treatment do not surface for many years and often it is the innocent bystander or kind owner who suffers the consequences. There are some types of horses, usually genuine characters who wish only to get along with people who suffer such abuse and, not wishing to harm anyone, will shut down and withdraw into themselves, trying to be as stoic as possible and hoping that if they just remain frozen then everything will go away. We met just such a character recently.

A client of mine was on the lookout for a schoolmaster for easy light schooling and hacking only. We saw a potentially perfect candidate advertised and duly went out to see him. My client had spoken at great length with the owner and was open and honest about her riding ability and the fact that she had a hip replacement and required a really steady and reliable character who would be quite happy plodding around.

We went to see the horse and he was a really nice guy. He was an older horse quiet and well mannered and although he had badly scarred legs he came forward with a genuine politeness and trying nature. There were little things that I did not pick up on at the time, such as he was not put into a stable but cross tied in a wash bay to be groomed. Granted there are some yards where this is standard practise and I assumed this was one. I was horrified at the tack that was put on him and the saddle was such a bad fit that I asked for another to be brought out. The girl was obliging and we found one that fitted a little better but still not well. I rode the horse and he was perfect, a real tryer, despite the fact that the tack obviously did not fit and must have been hurting him he did his best for me in all three paces without any resistance. My client rode him and was equally delighted. We decided to take him.

On arrival we noticed straight away his “shut” down stance in the stable. He would not even eat his hard feed or hay if anyone was in the box with him. It took him several days to be confident enough to nibble his hay as he was groomed and tacked up. The real indication that he was a troubled horse came when the maintenance manager was sweeping the yard past his stable and he became very frightened and ran back into the stable snorting. We knew then that he had suffered abuse. Over the course of the next few weeks the little signs were beginning to point quite clearly to the fact that at one time or another he had been beaten with yard tools. This also manifested in ridden work. Despite been assured that the horse was “fantastic at the beach” when the owner took him down to the river the horse was so afraid that he panicked and unseated the rider and ran back to the stables (bearing in mind that this rider is a lady with a hip replacement who was looking for a schoolmaster!) Full marks to the owner for persevering with the horse and in his defence he was a gentleman in the school and on hacks (unless you took him near water!).

The grand finale came when he took a panic attack in the stable (this is where we figured out he had been beaten specifically around the head and front legs). I went in to skip him out with a fork and skip bucket, the same way I had been doing for weeks, and this time he was standing in such a way that the only way I could get in and past him was to duck under his head. He had been wary of the tools but had coped up until now if you moved quietly and carefully and kept passive and stayed around his quarters when working and he would move willingly out of your way. He moved away from me in fear, making it impossible to duck under his head, so I took the opportunity to do a little advance and retreat to help him understand he did not need to be afraid. I followed him around until he stopped moving then I stopped and just as I was about to back away and take the pressure off he panicked and swung towards me, trying to get his head to the other side of me. Unfortunately for me (and him) he didn't lift his head high enough and clunked me quite severely on my head (didn't knock any sense into me of course). I simply remained quiet and shrugged my shoulders, brushing it off as just one of those things as the horse stood at the far end of the stable shaking with fear and waiting for the inevitable beating. I simply started to muck out then noticed something odd, I looked at the blood pouring onto the shavings in total confusion for a moment before I realised that it was me that was bleeding. The horse had been in such a panic that he had split my head open in his desperation to get away from the fork, purely bad luck. So, eight stitches later (and none the wiser!) we discussed with the owner the best course of action.

It was a genuine mistake on the horse's part and he is such a great guy that we both agreed that although he is clearly a remedial horse with a lot of hang ups that need to be addressed and not the quiet schoolmaster that he was advertised as, he is worth the effort in trying to help.

I explained to the owner the type of abuse he clearly must have suffered and explained that often abused horses (like humans) go through different stages of recovery. It is clear now that he had been shut down and had withdrawn from the world due to his handling and his fear of the punishment that was regularly meted out to him. This type of horse, when handled with sensitivity and care, can react in several ways. They can begin to try to ask for help by showing what they are afraid of (like this horse) but sometimes they almost try to goad or provoke a reaction from the handler in order to illicit the abuse they have been used to. This is almost like a “victim” syndrome. They may be so conditioned to abuse that they cannot cope with or deal with being handled in any other way and will behave in a manner that would normally cause them to be physically punished. Sometimes this type of horse will eventually come round and begin to respond to kind handling and begin to regain their confidence and trust in people again, however, sometimes they cannot and in this instance it is kinder for the horse to be put to sleep.

It is a huge responsibility for the new owner to decide the best course of action. Fortunately for the horse and his new owner, they are stabled on my yard and I feel that this horse is such a genuine character that he can come through this successfully. The owner knows that the journey may be a long one and that it may get worse before it gets better but we are all willing to give the horse the chance to be himself again, with no fear and not shut down, only time will tell.

So, the knock on affect of that simple break of temper by a groom or owner, that simple action can start a chain reaction that may go on for years, building in the horse until it is finally released, often with devastating affects. Like a stone thrown into the pond, our actions create ripples that fan out over time. Positive actions create positive ripples that strengthen the bond between human and horse. Negative actions create negative ripples that serve only to destroy such bonds and drive our species apart. What ripples do your actions send?