

Trainer's Tip: Establish Your Personal Space

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Horses, donkeys and mules are very big animals. This may seem like an obvious fact, but it's crucial to keep it in mind any time we interact with or train horses.

Every day I get to work with these awesome creatures and teach folks how to act around them. More often than not, I find myself saying, "Protect your personal space! Defend yourself." This does not imply that horses are aggressive animals that attack their handlers, but they can be over-reactive and absentminded. If they forget you are there or simply don't care, they have no qualms about stepping on or running over you on their way to wherever they're going.

Respect within a herd of horses is established by making yourself significant to the others in your herd. For example, a lead mare establishes dominance and respect by not allowing other horses into her personal space. If one gets too close for her comfort, she will warn it by pinning her ears and swishing her tail. This might be followed by baring her teeth or threatening to kick or strike. If the other horse still doesn't get the message, she will follow up her bluff by biting, kicking or striking the horse until it leaves. Other horses quickly learn to respect her space and read the warning signs. As humans and natural horse trainers, we don't want to bite or kick our horses, but we do want to establish the same level of understanding and respect with our horses as that mare does within her herd.

Sometimes a horse will run into me because it doesn't recognize me as a significant creature. In order to remedy this, I make myself appear larger by putting my arms up in the air or gently swinging my lead rope on the side of my body. I also make a clucking or kissing noise to try and attract the horse's attention. This is essentially the same as a mare who pins her ears, swishes her tail and threatens to kick. I am trying to get the horse's attention and warn it that I do not want it in my personal space.

If the horse doesn't pick up on this cue, I begin gently tapping it with the end of my swinging lead rope, usually on the shoulders or chest. I don't aim for the face, as this is a very sensitive area for the horse and I don't want to accidentally strike it in the eye. It is crucial to follow through with this part of the training. Just as a mare's threats are meaningless if she doesn't back them up, so too are making noise and swinging a lead rope if we never make physical contact. I swing and tap the horse with my lead rope as much as I need, but as little as I have to. When the horse retreats out of my space, I stop swinging my rope and quit making noise. It may take several interactions, but the horse will figure out that clucking or kissing noises and swinging lead rope are a cue to pay attention and not get too close.

You can't train or help horses if you are injured from being stepped on or pushed into a fence, so assert yourself and act like the alpha mare. Set clear boundaries with your horses, and you will stay safe and be seen as a significant leader.