

## Safety Tips for the Horse Handler

‘Bomb proof’? ‘Powder keg’?. Which phrase best describes your horse? Horses not only come in a variety of sizes, they possess a variety of temperaments and personalities. A horse's age, level of training, breed, feed, as well as many other factors including the handler's experience level and abilities, can affect the horse's demeanor and behavior. Regardless of which term portrays an accurate description of your horse, it is important for the handler to understand what makes your horse ‘tick’ and to practice proper handling techniques to decrease the incidence of risk to you and/or your horse.

The horse's initial response to frightening stimuli is ‘flight’. Many dangerous situations can arise as a result of their natural response. While it is not possible to prepare the horse for every frightening stimulus it may encounter, being alert to the surrounding activities will help you anticipate a possible reaction. Maintaining a calm demeanor and reassuring the nervous horse by either petting or talking to him/her in a calm voice can help control the situation.

Another natural behavior of the horse is the establishment of a dominance hierarchy or pecking order among a group of two or more horses. Pecking order should be considered when moving horses into and out of the group. To remove or replace a subordinate horse of the group, it is helpful to have an additional person restrain the dominant horse to prevent fighting or prevent a horse from escaping out an open gate. When handling a less dominant horse while still in the herd setting, be aware of the movements of the dominant horse(s) as they may move closer for attention or to threaten, bite, or kick the subordinate horse. If additional help is not a possibility, catching and removing the dominant horse first will reduce the potential for problems.

Whether you are catching a herd horse in a pasture or a single horse from a confined area, following a few simple steps will make the process safer and more efficient. Use equipment that is strong and in good condition; a halter that fits with a strong lead rope of ample length. Have the halter and lead rope organized before you are near the horse. Never startle the horse by approaching from directly behind him/her; approach the horse from an angle. Initially, loop the lead rope over the horse's neck to capture the horse. Now the handler can take the necessary time to apply the halter safely without giving the horse an easy opportunity to escape; learning a bad habit. Avoid getting fingers tangled or caught in the halter, rings or loops. When returning the horse to the pasture, lead him/her to an open area away from the gate, turn the horse to face the direction you came from, and release the horse by reversing the haltering procedures. (Halters should not be left on the horse in a pasture.) Avoid letting the horse bolt away from you when released. Although a spirited release may seem exciting and fun at first, it can quickly develop into a dangerous habit.

Leading the horse can be a challenge for the novice horseman or even for an experienced horseman leading a spirited horse. When leading the horse, control the horse by holding the lead rope six to twelve inches from the halter. In your free hand, drape the excess lead rope back and forth in a figure eight motion. A rope looped in a circular motion will tighten around the fingers if the horse pulls away, eliciting a high amount of pain to the handler. Make the horse walk beside you with your shoulder being even with the area of the horse's neck and shoulder; not running ahead or lagging behind. To slow a fast moving horse, circle the horse in a tight circle toward you, being sure to keep your

feet out from under his/her feet, avoiding another potential for pain. When tying the horse, secure the horse to a solid object (hitching post, tie ring, etc.) in a large, non-cluttered area with solid footing. Tie the lead rope (not reins) with a quick release knot, allowing for easy release if the horse becomes scared and tries to pull away. The lead rope should be tied at wither height with one to two feet of slack. If the lead rope is tied too long or too low, the horse may get a leg caught over it, or if tied too high the horse may get the lead rope dangerously wrapped around its neck.

Similar to leading a horse, working around the horse can be intimidating to the new horseman. Consistency, confidence, and calmness from the handler will typically result in a more relaxed response from the horse. The handler should require a designated amount of space from the horse. As they are often much larger than people, a small push or friendly head butt from them can easily toss a person in to a wall. If a horse crowds into the designated space, immediately move him/her over or back to a comfortable distance. Since the horse is constantly learning, no response from the handler will indicate to the horse he/she is not doing anything inappropriate and a bad habit may start to develop.

Horses can be fun and exciting to work with, but can also be dangerous if not handled properly. By gaining an understanding of the natural behavior of the horse, the horse person can learn to anticipate how the horse may respond to the activities within its surroundings. Regardless of whether you are a novice horse person working with a 'bomb proof' horse or an experienced horse person working with a 'powder keg', practicing safe handling techniques will help decrease the incidence of harm that may occur to you or your horse and enhance your time together.

J. Liv Sandberg  
Equine Extension Specialist  
UW-Madison  
Dept of Animal Science  
287 Observatory Drive  
Madison, WI 53558  
sandberg@ansci.wisc.edu