

Chill Out!

by Hannah Mueller, DVM

Most of us associate the word “sedative” with chemicals. Here are some alternative relaxation tips and techniques to try when your horse gets over-excited or stressed.

Most of us feel our hearts pound with excitement when we see a herd of horses run across a field. Even if we spend every day with horses, it never gets old! But sometimes this endearing quality can cause your equine to injure himself, or you. For example, the herd is running and playing in one field, while the horse with the bowed tendon in the paddock next door is leaping in place because she wants to join in. Meanwhile, you’re madly trying to put a halter on to calm her down so she doesn’t reinjure herself. Some horses have trouble controlling their excitement level and flight response, and this can be a serious matter.

Environmental Factors

Take a holistic look at your horse’s environment. If your horse is so amped up every time you take her into the arena to ride that you have to lunge her for half an hour before it’s safe to get in the saddle – and she’s kept in a 12’x12’ stall with a 12’x24’ paddock the rest of the time -- then it’s not your horse’s fault. It’s yours!

Horses are meant to have turnout, to be in herds, to play and to graze. They need this for their emotional health. Yet so many horses are kept inappropriately, then worked too hard to compensate for their excess emotional energy. This leads to injuries and lameness, and masks the underlying problem.

This *must* be the first thing you address if you are having behavioral issues with your horse! With that said, there are times where horses have medical problems requiring quiet stall rest; needless to say, those cases are often the most difficult to manage.

Emotional Roller Coaster

Much of this unwanted behavior can be prevented or minimized with proper training and handling. The key is to prevent the “switch from getting flipped”, beyond which horses stop using their rational thought processes and simply react through emotion. Through the work I’ve done with Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), I have found the same is true of people. When we reach a high level of anxiety or excitement, our brains shut down and we often can’t remember the details of what happened or what was said. The key is to lower the level of excitement to a point where the brain still functions rationally.

Another pearl of wisdom from EFL is that horses can sense our emotional state. They react to it either by mirroring it or becoming agitated. For example, your horse is on stall rest and you’re afraid to take him out for his 15 minutes of “controlled” hand walking because you think he’s going to try to run you over and get away. You pretend you’re not afraid even though your heart is racing - and sure enough, he’s already dancing before you even get the halter on.

A better approach would be to stand in front of the stall and acknowledge that you're nervous about taking the horse out. Tell him you're worried about it, then take a deep breath to let the fear go. Wait until your heart rate has dropped, then walk confidently into the stall to catch him for the walk. Your own emotions should be taken into consideration any time a horse is acting out through over-excitement or anxiety.

Touch for Relaxation

You may also want to try a few bodywork techniques to relax your horse. Use caution and only do what your horse seems to like and respond to. When horses are agitated they can act out unexpectedly, and doing bodywork can put you in a vulnerable position.

Learning various massage techniques can help your horse relax and feel good, as well as strengthen your mutual bond (check out *Horse Lover's Guide to Massage: What Your Horse Wants You to Know* by Megan Ayrault). Facial massage is a good place to start because it can be soothing and it keeps you in a safe place by the horse's head. Try gentle pressure and massage over the temporal (forehead) region, or gently rub around the eyes.

You may also want to try incorporating a few acupressure points into the relaxation massage. Some effective calming points are HT-7 (at the back of the front leg just above the accessory carpal bone), GV-24 (at the start of the mane under the forelock), and GV-20 (at the highest point of the poll behind the occipital crest). To learn more, check out *Equine Acupressure, A Working Manual* by Nancy Zidonis.

What Comes Naturally

If you've worked on any training issues and have addressed your own emotional state, yet your horse is still upset, then you're probably simply dealing with his natural, normal response. Rarely are horses truly "crazy" even though you may think yours is! Understanding this is important, because your horse isn't trying to be "bad". He's reacting the way all horses do -- some just react more than others! Reprimanding him for being "bad" won't solve the problem and often leads to insecurity, which makes the problem worse. However, establishing and enforcing appropriate personal space boundaries (e.g. not letting your horse run you over) is essential. This is why some horses are good for beginners, and some are not. Making sure you and your horse are a good fit is essential.

Herbal Help

The next step in dealing with the problem is to try a safe and natural remedy to help mellow your horse. There are a number of natural calmers on the market made up of herbs, flower essences or nutritional supplements. Common sedating herbs include:

- Valerian
- Chamomile
- Passion Flower
- Hops
- Vervain
- Lemon Balm

- Gotu Kola
- Ginseng

The herbal formula I have the best results with is called Tranquility Blend, and contains organic valerian, skullcap, oat flower, passion flower, vegetable glycerin and distilled water. I like this formula because it is a liquid tincture that's easy to administer to patients prior to medical procedures like dental floats or surgeries.

A number of other dry herb formulas can be easily added to a horse's daily ration (Chava Naturals' Harmonius Horse or Hilton Herbs' Temperamend, etc.). These formulas are safe and work well for most horses depending on the level of calming needed. Herbal formulas tend to calm and take the edge off, but are not as strong as chemical sedatives, although valerian root is the one herb that can cause visible sedation when given as an overdose.

Other Calming Remedies

Flower essences work on an energetic level. If they are given in the right combination, they are very effective; if not, they seem to do nothing. Working with someone experienced in flower essences and trying out a few different formulas can help determine the best combination for your horse.

The most widely recognized formula (and one of the most effective) is Rescue Remedy. Dynamite has a similar product called Relax that I like to use as well. Rescue Remedy or Relax are must-haves for your first aid kit. I also like to use essential oils like lavender for additional calming support.

Other natural calmers on the market contain the amino acid L-Tryptophan (Calm & Cool), magnesium (Quiessence), and B vitamins (SmartCalm). These products are safe and work well for many horses. Be sure to check show regulations if you are planning on using a natural calmer at an event.

When Pharmaceuticals are Needed

When the natural approach doesn't work, it may be time to consider chemical sedation. However, these medications must not be abused and should only be utilized as a last resort or in serious medical situations (e.g. a horse with a serious injury on life-or-death stall rest), not for clipping or training purposes. The main chemical sedatives we use are Reserpine, Acepromazine, Xylazine and Dormosedan.

- *Reserpine* is a long acting sedative that is herbal in origin (the drug is isolated from the root of *Rauwolfia serpentina* and *Vomitoria* plants). It can be used for long-term lay-ups. It does have a number of potential side effects. It can cause diarrhea, colic, depression, ulcers and sweating. Because it is long acting, the side effects can also be long lasting and serious. It is important to start with a small trial dose first to help determine your horse's level of sensitivity, before using a full dose.
- *Xylazine and Dormosedan* (most commonly used for dental floats and minor surgical procedures) are α_2 (alpha2) adrenergic agonists. These drugs are short acting (one to two hrs) and should be used only under direct veterinary supervision.

- *Acepromazine* is a phenothiazine sedative and is fairly safe. It causes mild sedation for a few hours, so is often used for situations like safely getting through the fourth of July. It is not good for long-term use.

Each horse responds differently to alternative sedation and relaxation options. Experiment with the safe and natural options so you know what works with your horse. In more extreme situations, be sure to talk to your veterinarian about the appropriate use of chemical sedatives. In many cases, chemical sedatives can be avoided by taking a holistic approach.

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Dr. Hannah Mueller is a 2004 graduate from Oregon State University College of Veterinary Medicine. She has loved, cared for, ridden and trained horses most of her life -- they are her passion. She started her own mobile veterinary practice in Monroe, Washington in December of 2004 and offers full service equine veterinary care including acupuncture, chiropractic, advanced dentistry, sports medicine and more. Find out more at www.cedarbrookvet.com.
