

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TRAINING



A SCIENCE-BASED SYSTEM FOR CREATIVE EQUITATION

OVERVIEW

NERVOUS SYSTEM'S GONNA NERVOUS

The nervous system is the gateway between the horse's outer and inner worlds. Work with it rather than against it.

TRAIN WHERE YOU CAN AND NOT WHERE YOU CAN'T

Setting up the training space with the horse's comfort in mind will ensure training sessions are more effective.

IT'S REALLY NOT ABOUT THE FOOD

While food is used as a communication tool, how it's used makes an enormous difference in training success.

HOW YOU DO SOMETHING IS HOW YOU DO EVERYTHING

R+ training is fairly simple, but not necessarily easy. Mastering a few basic skills helps training progress smoothly.

WHERE SCIENCE MEETS ART

Recognize your and your horse's individuality, and make a flexible training plan.

This is by no means a comprehensive tutorial on positive reinforcement as a whole, or even the basic information described. It's impossible to account for every situation with regard to safety and efficacy, so as always whenever working with horses, please use your judgement and don't take big risks. Experimenting is great, but there's really no reason to take risks in a regular training session.

NERVOUS SYSTEM'S GONNA NERVOUS

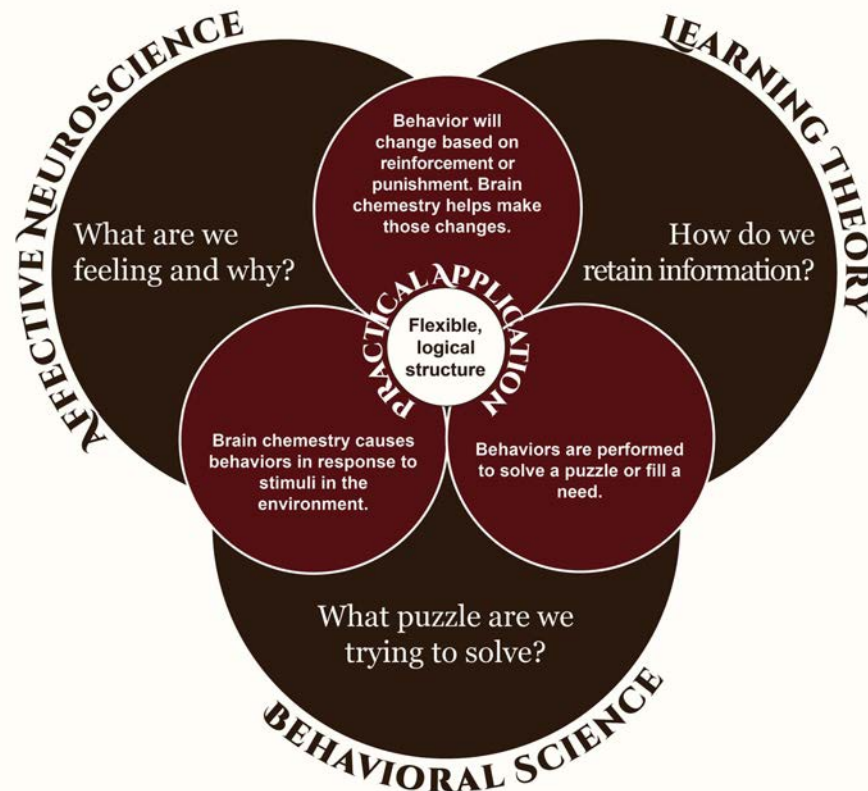
BEHAVIOR, THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, AND ENVIRONMENT

Behavior is always a result of **input to the nervous system from the environment**.

We are in the **same body**, with the nervous system, **no matter what we're doing**.

The nervous system produces **basic emotions that all mammals have** in common.

Understanding and working with the nervous system **serves both horse and human**.



THE 7 AFFECTIVE STATES

Emotions have evolved in a **feedback loop** between our environment and ourselves. They started as chemical reactions and grew into hardwired experiences caused by combinations of brain chemicals.

The names are all in all caps because they describe **specific neurochemical profiles common to all mammals**. They are responsible for **unconscious, instinctual feelings** and are the basis for secondary and tertiary emotions in humans.

Depression, anxiety, psychopathy, etc. happen when these chemicals are **inappropriately triggered** and/or **fail to be released** into the body.

FEAR
CARE
GRIEF
LUST
RAGE
PLAY
SEEKING

FEAR

- Norepinephrine, adrenaline, cortisol
- Escaping predators
- Reacting to unfamiliar or sudden stimuli
- Causes spooking, bolting, bucking, etc. (and whatever this is -->)



CARE

- Oxytocin, endorphins
- Maternal and other prosocial behavior
- Often expressed through touch (mutual grooming)
- Perversely, this state is also responsible for riot/mob behavior - oxytocin creates bonding, which happens when a group feels connected to one another. Could be political affiliation, a sports team, a murderous mob, those mean high school girls, etc.
- Opioid addiction in mammals happens because opioids artificially create a sense of belonging and euphoria, something social animals need to survive.



GRIEF

- Cortisol, norepinephrine
- Separation anxiety/mourning
- Can be expressed as anything from being a little “sticky” under saddle to being distracted while working to running and screaming
- When chronic, it becomes depression
- Happens when a horse is separated from their herd, or when someone dies



LUST

- Testosterone/estrogen, dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin
- Can be an obvious problem for stallions, but also for:
 - Mares who have strong reactions to other horses, or who have undiscovered reproductive problems
 - Good ol' geldings don't have as much of a problem, but if one is gelded late or is cryptorchidic they can behave like stallions



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RAGE

- Adrenaline, norepinephrine, dopamine
- FEAR can be a precursor to RAGE, especially when we're pushed beyond our threshold from escaping to fighting
- Fight for life or resources
- Allows a predator to expend the energy necessary to kill its prey
- Responsible for aggression, also chasing behavior in horses (cutting horses)



PLAY

- Dopamine, endorphins, norepinephrine + adrenaline
- Helps develop social skills
- In effect when playing physically
- Also in effect when dreaming
- Involved in creativity and problem-solving



SEEKING

- Dopamine, endorphins
- Fundamental to all other affective states
- Crucial to curiosity and learning
- When suppressed it causes difficulty learning, retaining information, and the appearance of “shutting down” (contributes to learned helplessness)



WHAT IS POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TRAINING?

When a **behavior** happens, what happens immediately after (the **consequence**) will change the likelihood of that behavior happening again. This is **learning theory**.

With positive reinforcement, we are **adding something pleasant (food) to make a behavior more likely to happen again**, because something pleasant happened as a result of performing the behavior.

Food is a **primary reinforcer** - almost all living beings need it. It **engages the SEEKING system** in the brain, encouraging **exploration, curiosity, and learning**.

Positive Reinforcement, or R+

positive
add a stimulus

appetitive
something appealing

reinforcement
makes a behavior more likely

Adding something pleasant makes it more likely.

Positive Punishment, or P+

positive
add a stimulus

aversive
something unpleasant

punishment
makes a behavior less likely

Adding something unpleasant makes it less likely.

Negative Reinforcement, or R-

negative
remove a stimulus

aversive
something unpleasant

reinforcement
makes a behavior more likely

Removing something unpleasant makes it more likely.

Negative Punishment, or P-

negative
remove a stimulus

appetitive
something appealing

punishment
makes a behavior less likely

Removing something pleasant makes it less likely.

WHY USE IT?

R+ is a **precision** tool for communication. The **marker signal** (“click”) tells the horse **exactly** what they did **right**. Behavior is **shaped using the smallest steps** necessary, making learning **easy** and **thorough** while **managing fear and frustration** thresholds.

R+ **improves** your **timing**, your **ability to read** the horse and **recognize good** moments, and your ability to **set the horse up for success**.

Every R+ interaction builds a **pleasant reinforcement history** between horse and human, creating **trust, resilience**, and a strong **relationship**.

R+ is the **least invasive, minimally aversive** approach to training, and therefore the **most ethical**.



WHY NOT USE R+ & R- TOGETHER?

“But nobody’s life is 100% positive! Horses use pressure on each other all the time!”

The domestic environment is unnatural and leads to unnatural behavior that’s far less common in the wild. Both domesticated and wild horses do also positively reinforce each other frequently.

The difference between R+ and R- is in **how the behavior is taught**, and what effect it has on the brain (SEEKING vs FEAR systems).

It isn’t that R- doesn’t work, but it has to be **escalated enough to be aversive** to get behavior at first, so it has the ghost of P+ (FEAR) in it.

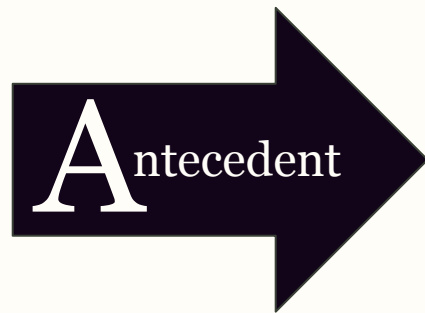
R+ is taught as a **sensory cue**, no escalating pressure is used.



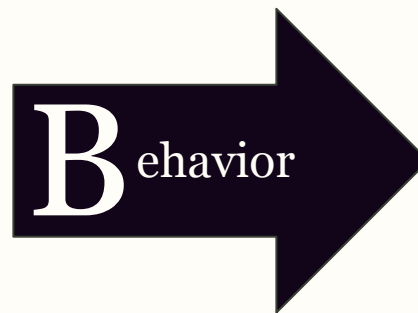
TRAIN WHERE YOU CAN, AND NOT
WHERE YOU CAN'T

STRUCTURE OF BEHAVIOR

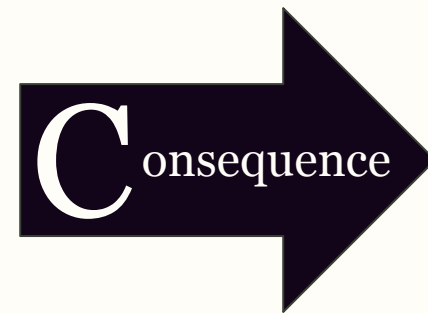
Behavior is shaped by environment, and it's part of an overall pattern of events. The first part of the pattern, the **antecedent**, is **everything that has happened until the present moment**, experiences, and both internal (mental/emotional) and external environments. The **behavior is the action taken** based on the antecedent. The **consequence is the purpose or goal** of the behavior.



Antecedent: comfortable area, at liberty, stay under threshold, use food effectively, prevent competition, protected contact.



Behavior: stand still/face forward, touch the target.



Consequence: food reinforcers, other reinforcer options.

COMFORTABLE AREA

Begin where your **horse is comfortable** to ensure that they're **able to focus on you** and won't be distracted or worried.

Stay **out of reach of other horses**, though it's perfectly acceptable to **be near them if that's where your horse is most comfortable**.

For the initial sessions, you can start in a **smaller area** such as a stall or small paddock, or even in the barn aisle.

At some point **in the future**, you can and should **challenge your horse** in different places, but that should not be the focus to start.



Fiona is stationing on a mat as a target in her pasture, where she's very comfortable working.

AT LIBERTY (IF POSSIBLE)

Tack can be a **conditioned cue to limit behaviors**, which isn't helpful when trying to teach new behaviors. Have your horse **at liberty, with no halter or lead**. If this isn't possible or practical, leave the lead loose and **allow your horse as much freedom as you can**.

Allow your horse to move away if they want to. That is **important feedback** for the training process.

Use your judgement regarding what is safe for you and your horse.



I'm working on applying eye ointment. Siri is free to leave if she finds the process too aversive. It's then my job to find a way to make it tolerable for her.

STAY UNDER THRESHOLD

Keeping your horse **below their individual limit of fear or frustration** helps ensure they're mentally and physically **ready to learn**.

You can **build resilience** to stress, and **better recovery** time after a stressful incident, by **reinforcing calm moments**.

If you build a **strong positive reinforcement history** with your horse, **they associate you with things they like**, and with **feeling safe**. They will be much more likely to **be comfortable with you in new situations or with new objects**.

If there are other **stressful environmental factors**, those absolutely **need to be addressed first**. Training is only part of **ethical horse-keeping**. Always **consider the horse's needs and emotions** before training.



If your training sessions (or any interactions with your horse) look like this, your horse is over threshold. Like, *really* over threshold. It's best to go back to the beginning and find out why this is happening and what you can do to fix that, first. Changes in management can solve so many perceived problems with training. Pants might also be a good idea. Maybe shoes, too.

IT'S REALLY NOT ABOUT THE FOOD

USE FOOD EFFECTIVELY

Plan to have your training session after your horse been fed a meal. If your horse **hasn't eaten shortly before a training session**, and then they have to earn food, they can become very **frustrated or overexcited**. This can **lead to aggression**, or your horse could **refuse to participate** in training.

Similarly, **select food based on how interesting it is** to your horse. Too much and it **becomes the focus**, not enough and your horse **won't want to train**.

You may want to **have water and hay available**. Food can be dry and will make a horse thirsty. Having hay will help **ensure your horse is interested in training and not just eating**.



Fiona is... not thin. She has access to free-choice hay most of the time, which has helped with her resource guarding as well as being calmer around food during training. However, I need to be mindful of what kind of food I use for training so I don't contribute more than necessary to her chonkiness.

PREVENT COMPETITION

Expect that other horses will want the food.

Resource guarding (competition) causes frustration, which **can be dangerous**.

Even if there is no direct competition, sometimes **the presence of another horse is enough** to cause frustration.

If your horse is **anxious when separated** from their herd, **work as far away as possible**, but close enough to **keep your horse calm**. You can **add distance as your horse becomes more comfortable**.



Fiona is often aggressive around food, and that interferes with Siri and I when we're working. Putting Fiona in a separate area, where both mares can see each other, helps Siri feel safe and not worry about Fiona pushing her away from me.

PROTECTED CONTACT

Protected contact is **where you and your horse are separated by something solid**, like a stall door, round pen panel, or wood fence. **You have the ability to step away** if your horse is too assertive or frantic about the food.

Use a feed pan and toss the food into that. Eventually, your horse will understand that the click that means food is coming, and they can relax and wait for it to be delivered. You can **start feeding by hand when that is safe** to do.

If you're **still having trouble with aggressive behavior**, you may have to **consider other factors** that may be stressing them either acutely in a training session or chronically in their environment. **Consult your vet.**



I've put Fiona on the inside of the arena, where we can both control the distance between us. She has the whole arena to go to if she wants, and I can stay safe from any behavior she may direct at me because of frustration until she learns those behaviors aren't necessary in order to get the food.

FOOD REINFORCERS

1. **Timothy pellets.** Long chewing time, fewer calories. Fairly cheap in bulk. The smaller size can be harder to feed, especially from the saddle.
2. **Roasted salted peanuts in the shell.** Cheap, a good size, and don't contain sugar. Contain fat and protein, can be an acquired taste for some horses.
3. **Carrots.** Easy to find, adjustable size. Have to cut into pieces, usually WAY too attractive, expensive in large quantities, wet pockets.
4. **Manufactured treats.** Easy size and shape to feed, long chewing time. Expensive, usually WAY too attractive.
5. **Starlight mints.** Easy size and shape to feed, long chewing time. Have to unwrap individually (takes time), usually WAY too attractive, lots of sugar, could have toxic artificial sweeteners.



Each of these foods has a different value (according to the horse's taste), and a different length of time it takes for them to chew.

FOOD BAG

You will need a container in which to put your food. Most often, people use a pouch or bag. **What you choose will influence your training.** It needs to be easily accessible, portable, and hands-free so you can just reach in and get a reinforcer **without taking a lot of time or moving a lot, which could be distracting** to your horse.

It's helpful if you can **rotate it to either side** of your body so you can **access it with either hand**, as well as **make it less accessible, and less tempting, to your horse.**

It needs to be large enough to hold enough food for a training session. Washable is good, or at least lineable - high-value reinforcers like carrots and apples can be messy.



This is a bag meant to be for dog training, but I find it works well for me with the horses. It has a loop in the back so it can be attached to a belt, and I can have hands-free access to food all the time. I put the low-value reinforcers in the large area, and the high-value ones in the smaller area in front.

ELITE
K-9

FEED TUB

The **feed tub** is often used as a “**stationary target**,” since the horse is likely to stay wherever the food is. Most horses already know that food shows up in the tub, so they’re more likely to try that sooner rather than later. Because of that, it’s useful as a **place for a horse to get food that is not your hands**, which makes the process of teaching a horse to take food safely go faster.

Having different sizes gives you more options for training. Small tubs are easy to carry around, and multiple ones can be placed strategically for movement-based behaviors, as well. Large tubs are easier to toss food into, easier for a horse to access, and they’re harder to tip over by enthusiastic horses.



OTHER OPTIONS

There are many, many other food options available. If your horse gets **grain or pelleted feed every day**, you can even use that, at least for part of a session. Even hay chaff. There just has to be lots of whatever food you use, so if you're using a meal, you **may need backup reinforcement**.

Scratching can also be a reinforcer for some horses, especially foals. If your horse has a lot of insect bites or an itchy skin condition, this may not work because the relief from the itching becomes too important, just like really interesting food.

Sometimes, **another behavior can be a reinforcer**. This can happen after you've trained a number of behaviors. Your horse may enjoy a particular behavior so much they find it **fun and reinforcing in itself**.



I'm using food reinforcers for this session, but am also periodically incorporating scratches as another reinforcer.

TARGET

A target can be just about anything. Many people use a **pool noodle** because it's generally **not associated with anything aversive** to a horse, like a whip would be. You can have several **different types of targets** for different uses, and even use your hand as a target, as well.

The **target directs a horse's attention**. It's used **to show the horse how and where to position themselves** for behaviors like lining up at the mounting block, where to station (stand and wait) for things like hoofcare, vet care, or grooming, moving specific body parts like legs or head/neck, getting from one side of a jump to the other, loading into a trailer, and **many other more movement-based behaviors**.



I made this very cool target from a broken dressage whip, part of a pool noodle, and gorilla tape. It may not be possible for you to make a target as amazing and gorgeous as this one, but whatever you come up with should be fine. The majority of the time, I use my hand as a target, but having a longer target that's further away from my body means I have more options.

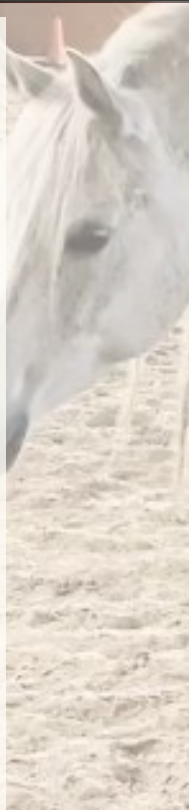
HOW YOU *DO SOMETHING* IS
HOW YOU *DO EVERYTHING*

BASIC SKILLS

Basic skills such as **the mechanics of how you move and the tools you use**, are **worth a significant investment** in the time it takes to learn them. These simple skills are the **building blocks for everything else** in R+ training.

Training basic skills is a way to teach the concept of **stimulus control** (do something when cued, and not when not cued) **for your horse**, but **also for you**. The **more you become fluent, the easier communication will be** between you and your horse.

For the horse, learning to **stand still and face forward**, as well as **touch a target**, become vital **default behaviors** for everyday events. They are also especially helpful in stressful situations.



Here, I'm using my hand as a target for Siri to touch. I can use this to position her whole body or just her head and neck, to lead without tack or even when I do have a halter or bridle to lead without pressure.

“CHARGE” THE CLICKER

“Charging” the clicker means **teaching the horse that the reinforcer always follows the click**, and the click **marks the behavior that gets reinforced**. It shows the horse the pattern you’ll use for communication.

This pattern establishes **reinforcement history** with your horse. Think of it as **zillions of super-thin layers**, one over the next, that **form the foundation** for you and your horse to work from.

This process **develops your mechanics** as well (feel/ability to read the horse, timing, rhythm, and speed of physical movement), which are very important to effective training. Learning **good technique here will make you a great communicator**, with the ability to be very subtle in your body language.



I don't actually use a clicker with my horses. That's why I haven't mentioned it. Many people use a tongue-click as a hands-free marker signal. I came to R+ through a backdoor, and I had already been using the “kiss” sound as a cue to come to me for treats, so I stayed with that. What you use is less important than being consistent.

TIMING

Timing is a **fundamental element** to any kind of training, and is **harder than it looks**. You may find that you have to **move sooner than you think**. In the beginning, you're waiting only a half-second to toss food into the tub; only as long as it takes for the horse to pick up the food and get chewing. That timing will **make it easiest for your horse to go back to the tub for food** rather than search your hands or pockets.



Antecedent
Toss food into tub.



Behavior
Horse lowers head to tub to get food. Horse lifts head slightly to chew.



Consequence
Toss more food.

SPEED

The speed of your movement (**distance** covered in a specific amount of **time**) will affect how your horse moves, as well as how easily you can respond to your horse's movement. **Physically slowing your movement** can make you **more accurate** with your food placement, it will make your **hands less attractive** to your horse so they don't get into the pattern of looking for food there, and it will help **direct the horse** to the tub.



Antecedent

Toss food into tub.



Behavior

Horse lowers head to get food, then raises head slightly to chew. Wait until horse is almost done chewing. Watch for head to start to move toward a middle position.



Consequence

Toss more food.

RHYTHM

Once you have a number of repetitions, you **start to develop a rhythm**. If you're **accurate with timing and speed**, the pattern will be **easy to learn**. Your horse will **more quickly learn** what to do, you have **many opportunities to reinforce the behavior**, and you can **change the rhythm slightly** by starting to prolong the time, a **fraction of a second at a time**, in between clicks.



Antecedent
Toss food into tub.



Antecedent transition to behavior
Head has come up from tub and is somewhere in a middle position, facing forward. Click.



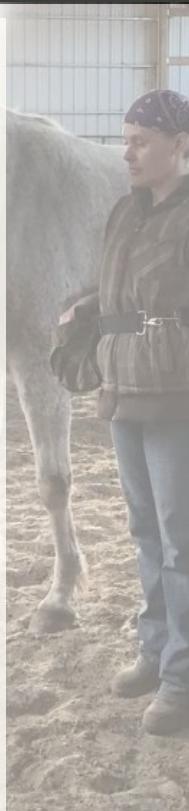
Consequence
Toss more food.

STAND STILL/FACE FORWARD

After you've built the pattern of **feed, horse raises head, click, feed**, you can “**capture**” the **stand still/face forward** behavior they happen to be doing as a result of the pattern. Immediately following the click, start presenting the **food to your horse's muzzle so they don't have to move to get it.**

Feed where you **ideally want your horse's head to be**, the neutral position. You can **increase duration slowly**, and **eventually add criteria** such as movement around the horse and even handling feet.

If your horse **has trouble standing still, consider what else is happening** that may be causing some distress.



Even if you never use R+ for anything else ever, your vet, farrier, bodyworker, saddle fitter, etc. will thank you for putting this one single behavior on a cue. It's the basic skill upon which everything else is based.

EXIT STRATEGY

When you've gotten a handful of **good trials** and **your horse gives you a really great one**, give them a heap of food (known as a "**jackpot**"), and give them a break while they eat it.

It's best to **walk away and leave them** for a period of time (depending on how easy this is for you and your horse). This also **signals the end of a session**, so the horse knows not to be waiting for a click/feed. Walking away **without an end-of-session signal can be seen as negative punishment** to the horse, which means they're less **likely to want to work** in the future.

You can then come back later and do another few repetitions, or call it a day after a good session. A few five-minute sessions are better than one hour-long marathon.



I was working with Siri in a separate area after I worked with Fiona. I had given Fiona a jackpot and ended our session, but she was clearly not done playing with me so she needed to make her point by rearranging the furniture.

SHAPING

Shaping is the process of using the sequence of steps your horse needs to understand what you want. It's done a step at a time, called **successive approximations** or **trials**. This process is how training progress is made. It's also the most creative part of training. And, **assuming what you're training isn't scary or painful** (NO training should be used that disregards fear or pain), it has **almost unlimited potential**.

In traditional training, the phrase “**reward the slightest try**” is often used. **With positive reinforcement, this is literally true**, because you give a reward when your horse does anything even slightly resembling what you want. You are looking for an **indication that your horse is thinking** about and working out what you want them to do.



Fiona and I are shaping the “pantherwalk” (like the Spanish Walk, but with the intent of using as much range of movement as possible to develop proprioception, shoulder freedom, and thoracic sling lift for healthy riding). I’m inviting her to use her shoulders more by asking her to touch the target with some part of her front leg, usually the knee.

LOOPS

A loop is a unit of training based on the ABC sequence. Having a “**clean**” loop means **each part of the sequence is successful**, and you can move on with the shaping process by **raising criteria** (what you’re asking for).

Within the loop are decision points, opportunities to make small changes. Is there **latency** (it looks like the horse doesn’t understand) or **hesitation** (the horse understands but is reluctant) or even **refusal to participate**? Did you get **just the cued behavior** and no extraneous behavior, or did you get **everything but the behavior** you wanted?

Once you have a clean loop, you can take advantage of **where you place the food in the ending position as a good place to start the next loop.**



Antecedent arrangement/Cue: horse is loose in arena. You present hand as target.

Behavior: does the horse look toward you, or look at your hand, touch it with their nose, or seem oblivious, or...?

Decision point: *Is the horse ready for you to start? Do they understand the task?*

Consequence/Reinforcement: did you move away, click precisely and feed, or does the horse get frustrated, or...?

Decision point: *Did it work well enough to move on, or do you need to change it?*

TOUCH/TARGET

Using a **target** introduces **cues**, and is another default behavior to help **develop confidence** in challenging situations.

Make it very easy to start by presenting the target just a few inches from the horse's nose. As the response gets stronger, you can make it a little more challenging by moving further away, as well as asking the horse to take a few steps toward the target.



Cue (antecedent)

Horse is standing still, facing forward. Hand is presented as a target.



Behavior

Horse reaches forward slightly and touches the target hand with the nose.



Reinforcement (marker and consequence)

Click. The horse is reinforced, with food in the same position they will start the next loop.

FLUENCY

When a behavior (horse or human) becomes **easy and predictably available, it can be called “fluent.”** A fluent behavior happens when the **desired behavior is performed confidently with no latency or hesitation,** and it can be performed in at least one context.

Fluency also happens overall in the sense of **learning how to learn, and learning to generalize** or build on basic skills. Everything a horse learns contributes to the fluency of current and future behaviors. The **same is true for people** as well.

The flip side to fluency, or where it is taken to the extreme, is **training something so strongly that you can’t build on it or modify it** to train a new behavior or train in a different context. Fluency should be fluid enough to be adaptable.



The more you work together, and even fumble around in the beginning, the quicker the two of you develop your own language. It’s taken some time, but together Siri and I have shaped the action of lifting her thoracic sling and shifting her weight back, two things needed for healthy riding. She’s very fluent with this behavior, and it’s one of her favorites.

RESPECT THE “NO”

Give your horse the option to decline to do a behavior. They **always have a good reason**, even if you don't see it. Sometimes, they just need some time to process, and you may find they've got it after a bit of time or in the next few training sessions.

Many horses, **once they learn they don't have to “work,”... won't**, especially if they've had training that was stressful, painful, or even just unpleasant. It's probably the **first time in their life someone has listened to them**, and it may take some time for them to learn that **they won't be pushed** beyond their comfort zone.

The more you **respect your horse's “no” when training is not important**, the more likely **your horse will say “yes”** not only most of the time following, but particularly when it really counts, like in an emergency.



I've asked Siri to position herself at the mounting block (a hay feeder made with corral panels), and she's decided to stand a few feet away. This is her way of declining to be a riding horse. From experience, I know she's uncomfortable in some way and riding would be unpleasant for both of us. Next time, she may very well volunteer for a ride.

WHEN IT'S NOT WORKING

If you're getting lots of unwanted behaviors or repeating one unwanted behavior, it may be a problem with **timing**, and you may need to click sooner in the loop. If you're getting latency, hesitation, refusal to participate or flight behavior, your **criteria** may be too high, and you may need to make it easier for the horse. If your **rate of reinforcement** is too low (how often you're clicking/feeding), you could get "mouthy" behaviors, unresponsiveness, or disengaging completely, and you may need to adjust your timing and criteria so you can maintain a high rate of reinforcement.

Consider how you can **change what you're asking for**, or **how you're asking for it**. Set up for **success with one loop in mind** rather than the whole behavior. **Back up a couple of steps**, and see if that helps.



This didn't work for me. I wasn't feeling well, and wasn't able to react quickly enough to changes in the environment (poor timing). Siri had a lot of energy and was more reactive than usual to sounds (criteria too high). Because of all that, I couldn't get a good loop to hold her attention and keep this from happening (low rate of reinforcement).

WHERE SCIENCE MEETS ART

THERE'S ALWAYS MORE

Once you have some default behaviors established, you can **build on those foundations to create more complex behaviors.**

The more **creative** you can be about your training, the more likely it is you will progress somewhat quickly. It's up to you to arrange the **environment for success**, and to **notice when your horse is doing the right thing** so you can **use that as an opportunity** to click/feed. Not only will **your observational skills and your feel** for your horse develop, but you'll start to see your horse's patterns in **more detail**, and you'll find ways you can **change one small thing and get a different result.**

Making a **shaping plan** and being aware of **variables and constraints** will **help you decide where to go** with your training.



You can see by her expression that she has feelings about the canter, but she did volunteer it. As it goes with R+ I had to stop **exactly** when it got good! But good it got, and I couldn't be happier with the first real bridleless canter of this duration and quality.

MAKING A SHAPING PLAN

A shaping plan helps you see the situation overall, as well as providing the information and steps you need to achieve your goal. By making a shaping plan, you decide:

What do you want your horse to do? Having a specific goal helps you know when we're successful, and also gives you a way to measure progress and make changes that keep you aligned with what you want to do. Literally define what your target behavior looks and feels like.

What have you already got? How can you arrange things to solve the problem? Can something be done differently, or something about the environment be changed, so that a problem behavior does not occur in the first place? What can be done to increase the occurrence of a replacement and/or desired behaviors? What behavior does your horse already know that could serve the same purpose as the problem behavior, i.e., provide the same consequences?

What does your horse need to do? What behavior does the horse need to learn? What, if anything, does your horse need to learn before you can teach the desired behavior? How are you going to teach that behavior?

What do you need to do? What behavior or skill do you have to learn? How are you going to learn that skill or behavior?

VARIABLES & CONSTRAINTS

A **variable** is **anything that changes** or that **we can change**. A **constraint** is **anything that is fixed** or that **we want to set a limit on**.

Variables and constraints **can be interchangeable**. Sometimes we decide them, and sometimes they are decided for us.

Time and distance are fundamental, universal elements that can be both variables and constraints. For instance, something can **take longer or go faster**. You can **increase or decrease physical distance** between objects, horses, or people.

Others include:

- Location
- Presence or absence of other horses
- Different people
- Equipment/tack
- Emotions
- Weather conditions
- Reinforcers
- Nearly anything else you can notice

Awareness of these elements gives us **things to try or to focus on** when making a shaping plan, or during a training session.

THE PATH IS THE PATH

While there's a structure to learning and to positive reinforcement, **there's no single path to success. Every horse is different**, and a lot of horses are different **on different days**. Flexibility is one of the most unique and useful aspects of the structure.

R+ is an **eye-opening** experience, and you **can't unsee** what you learn to see. As **you become aware of the subtleties** of what it looks like when a horse is uncomfortable, you may look back and regret some actions you've taken in the past. You may also **struggle a bit** to create and maintain a mindset that **allows the horse to have a larger voice** in training, and you may go back to using pressure in a stressful situation or at a time when you yourself feel pressure to perform. **Acknowledge these things, and let them go**. They are **opportunities to make changes** in your training that benefit both you and your horse.



I came to R+ through a backdoor because I had a horse I couldn't help any other way, either physically with his soundness or emotionally. Because of Baylee, I now have a vision of creating an R+ lesson program that also incorporates a strong focus on bridleless work, the horse's autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-organization in movement.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT ME

I'm a failed traditional horsewoman. I understand traditional skills and methodologies, and how and why they work, but have not had success putting them into practice after thirty years as a horsewoman. My life experiences with neurodivergence and chronic illness have given me a jaded perspective on the Puritan work ethic and bootstrap mentality, and the one-size-fits-all approach to learning in American culture. I would like to see the individual taken into account - as Susan Friedman says, we're all a "study of one."

I've also been a photographer for twenty years. More than anything, that has helped hone my timing and ability to see details in behavior and movement.

I'm working hard on my ego/insecurity, not being competitive with other people, especially trainers. Having been a musician when I was younger, I'm trying to re-frame this by seeing everyone as a musician, and their training as their music. The more music, the better.



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