

How Much Poison Would You Give Your Horse?

If there is stress in the relationship, there is poison in the cup.

That all depends on how quickly you want your horse to die. Just a little at a time may not kill him. Poison interrupts health and life. We humans will sometimes take a perfectly healthy body and mind and by way of input chart a course of self-destruction.

The interesting thing is, if you saw me put poison in your coffee there would be no amount of money that could motivate you to drink it. Why? Because the damage would be done quickly and you aren't ready to die. We won't step in front of a train but we'll slowly kill ourselves because we can keep on living while we kill ourselves.

The relationship we have with our horses (or should have) is a living entity. We can nurture and protect it or we can neglect and poison it. There are many reasons relationships turn sour, get sick and die. Some people and some horses do not belong together. Some horse-human relationships are toxic but by reason of time and numbness of heart, the toxicity seems normal.

The world of competition frequently contaminates the way humans relate to their horses. There is nothing wrong with the pursuit of excellence. It all depends on what is sacrificed on the altar of competition. I have heard people gloat over alienating friends because they beat them in a show. I've heard people whine because the judge likes pretty girls. The farrier and/or the trainer get blamed for a less-than-perfect showing. There is the father who mercilessly scolds his daughter because she didn't win the class. I could go on and on. Toxicity, numbness of heart, inflated egos and a twisted sense of values all go together to steal the joy that would be available but gets poisoned into oblivion.

This "all-about-me" syndrome bedevils horses, too. In their natural state they want to do what they want, when they want, where and how they want. They have no personal interest in our

agenda or in maintaining a relationship with us. The horse is an animal that is wired to dominate if he can and submit if he must. We have pulled him into our world for our own reasons. Therefore, the burden is on us to create, manage and protect our relationship with him.

A major part of that responsibility is to detect and identify poisons and be clear in our understanding of the damage they do. If we really believe that poison exists, we will be motivated to discover those poisons and their antidotes. Sometimes we struggle in this relationship because we do not have a picture in our mind of what it could or should be. This ongoing struggle becomes normal and we settle for much less than is available.

When we allow our horses to misbehave and control us, we are actually poisoning the relationship. Our lack of leadership allows the horse to actively poison it by way of his willfulness. We are confused and the horse is willful. Horse and human poison each other's coffee and then drink a toast to their health.

How do we know if our relationship is free of poison? If our horse will do what we want, when we want and how we want and do it quietly and deliberately, all is well. His eyes, body language and willingness (or the lack thereof) to obey will signal the absence or presence of poison in his mind.

Bad behavior is always a sign of poison. We horse owners can get quite creative in the ways we excuse bad behavior in our horses. A few of us even want some degree of bad behavior so we have an excuse not to ride. We like horses and want to own one but for one reason or another we are afraid to ride. If the behavior problems were fixed we would no longer have an excuse. In a strange sort of way, we actually want an unhealthy relationship. We create our own reality with a warped outlook and breaking loose

will take a slap in the face (wake-up call).

Doing what we want to do instead of what we should do is a universal struggle for both horse and human. Getting on the road to doing what we should do will bring conflict to our world view. The horse that has been introduced to human expectations and requirements is now conflicted. There are those constant clashes between the old behavior and the new. Each clash is an opportunity for the human to clarify to the horse the reason for the existing problem. Then the human has to give the horse a reason or motivation to obey. The problem is the poison. The solution is the antidote.

How should this be done? Here is a real can of worms. There is no divinely inspired book that we can read to learn the exact and only way to rightly relate to our horses. The new horse owner launches his or her own search for horse-handling knowledge and quickly discovers conflicting opinions on everything. New information says one thing. Old wisdom says something else. New Age thinking brings a different view. Farriers don't agree. Vets don't agree. Trainers don't agree. Natural hoof trimmers don't agree. What a mess. Everywhere a person wants to step, you don't know if it's a solid rock or a cow pie. There's round penning, triangle penning, hot shoeing, cold shoeing, no shoeing and on and on. Where is the truth? Upon what premises are these concepts based? Good shoeing is good shoeing, cold or hot. Good training is good training, regardless of pen shape or a trainer's personal preferences of techniques.

A horse doesn't care if his shoes were red hot at one time. The important thing is good hoof preparation, shoe shaping and solid nailing. Training techniques are like telephones. A horse doesn't care what color or shape it is. His only concern is whether or not there is reasonable and usable information coming out of the phone.

If somebody claims that only red phones will work and you like red, well, I guess that's the way you should go. You alone can decide if you care what somebody puts in your coffee. I have watched fads come and go. I have watched novice and intermediate horse owners get talked into something by a good sales pitch only to realize later that they had been bamboozled.

We are often victims of our own sincerity. We want to do what is best, but with no previous experience with a particular issue, we have no way of deciphering new information. Most of the time, making a mistake is not bad or wrong. We all do it. It is one of the ways we learn. Some mistakes have more poison in them than others. Some mistakes have lingering effects. A few mistakes are fatal in this business of owning and using horses.

When we allow horses to dominate us, we are letting them poison the relationship. If we allow them to keep bad behavioral traits, we are enabling them in their toxic endeavors. Back in the '60s I went to an occasional horse show. Some of the craziness I saw there was regarded as skillful riding. The only requirement was to be in haphazard control of a gyrating horse. Both horse and rider were poisoning each other's coffee. The horse was stuck with human nonsense and the human had no idea what poison-free coffee tasted like.

If your horse won't stand for the farrier, stand still for mounting, is resistant to riding cues, fearful, distrusting, disrespectful or has any other trait that is problematic, there is poison in the coffee and horse and handler are drinking out of the same cup. If a horse is capable of standing quietly and relaxed with his pasture mates, he is capable of quietly cooperating with humans. If there is a difference, that difference is the presence of poison in the coffee.

The three most common poisons are fear, entitlement and confusion. If there is a struggle with bad behavior or a refusal to cooperate, the first thing we do is remove the cause of the fear in the mind of the horse. The second is to remove a sense of entitlement from the horse's mind. Thirdly, we clarify our expectations and then make sure they are followed.

Only a relationship that is free of contamination can reach its potential. I suppose no relationship will be perfectly free of contamination but if we value it we will say no to every type of poison that we are aware of. If that becomes a way of life, we will learn to recognize the signs of poisoning and we will take immediate action to clear things up.

For what it's worth, — Warren Bengtson