

Getting a Rescued Horse to Trust You

Gaining the Trust of a Rescued Horse

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Horses are rescued for many reasons, including neglect, abuse and lack of handling. Each horse will react to life changes in his own way, yet there are basic steps rescuers take to bond with these special equines.

The following was adapted from British horseman, Henry Blake's excellent book, *Talking With Horses: A Study of Communication Between Man and Horse* (Trafalgar Square; Reprint edition, January 1992).

To begin, the new rescues are isolated for both quarantine and training purposes. A safe, roomy box stall or substantially fenced small pen with indoor/outdoor elements is ideal.

For 30 days one person provides the horse's every need. He's given free access to grass hay and water and fed appropriate amounts of grain or treats from a pan, hand-held as soon as he'll allow it, at least twice a day.

The caretaker (and no one else) spends at least 30 minutes each day quietly speaking or crooning to the newcomer while scratching or running hands over his body. If a day is missed, the 30-day bonding period begins anew.

Slow and easy movements are the rule. The horse's caretaker approaches his shoulder—not his head—gazing at the ground, speaking or singing, hands at sides, until he accepts the person. First touch is a gentle withers, shoulder or chest scratching. As he allows it, his caretaker strokes the hands across his body until a bond is established and he fully relaxes.

But remember: Abused or frightened horses sometimes react tooth and heel. Plot an escape route and don't let the horse cut you off. Stay alert! It takes just seconds for a terrified horse to run you over or an angry one to attack.

Halter aggressive horses. If attacked, that halter will afford you control and protection. Use a breakaway halter, always.

Never move quickly. Don't rush, and don't grab. And never raise your voice.

Don't expect overnight miracles. Some horses respond in a week, others demand months of patient handling. If you persevere, eventually the horse will bond with you.

Further Reading

Retraining the Rescue Horse

The author keeps a small herd of horses on her Arkansas farm, including several rescues.