

Can an Abused Horse Be Saved?

Part 2: Tips to regain trust and start the rehabilitation process.

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The word around town is that the horses on a certain ranch are abused, so Corrie decides that she wants to rescue one. She selects the horse that seems to have the most need and makes an offer. It is accepted, and she takes the fearful, shaking horse to her property. She puts him into a large pasture with a couple other babysitter horses that immediately make him feel at home. A few mornings later, and at the same time every morning after that, Corrie brings a chair into the pasture and sits and reads. Within a few days, the new gelding starts circling near her. She keeps reading quietly. After a couple weeks, he stands a few feet away for several minutes at a time. She begins reading out loud but still doesn't try to touch him. After a month or so, the gelding allows Corrie to pat him and later to work with him on the ground. Before the year is over, she grooms him, gives him vaccinations and deworms him without using a halter or other restraint. After one year, Corrie shares a great relationship with her horse based on trust, mutual respect and consideration.

In Part 1, we examined what it takes to help a horse with a rough past and asked the tough questions a horse owner must answer honestly before committing to an abused horse. This month, we move on to some tips for gaining trust and starting the retraining and rehabilitation process.

But first, it's vital to reiterate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will work with all abused horses. Some common denominators include consistency, patience, knowledge and time, but each horse will need an individualized approach.

Building Trust

When working with this type of horse, building trust is vital, and isn't something you attain once and then never think about again. Maintaining the behaviors that your horse sees as trustworthy is imperative.

If there's one thing an abused horse needs, it's consistency—behaving the same way under each situation.

"Inconsistency in humans is very damaging for horses, especially when the human wavers between the extremes of being buddies with the horse and later getting so mad or frustrated that the horse is yelled at, hit or worse," says Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara, MSW, animal behaviorist and social worker specializing in animal-assisted therapy for clients with abuse and trauma history. "Our inconsistency results in a horse that becomes very distrustful and can lead to some very unpredictable behaviors."

"Years ago, I worked with a lot of wild horses," says Mark Rashid, Colorado-based trainer and author who has worked with dozens of abused horses over the years. "Being dependable really helped them start to trust humans. We began by feeding, watering and cleaning pens at the exact same times every day. Then over time, we handled the horses in the same consistent way. For wild and abused horses, and especially for those that are pretty far around the bend mentally, this absolute dependability is very important for them."

"When animals have been with people who use a dominant style of training, where demands must be carried out immediately and without question, and they are later placed with people who are less demanding and less consistent, their potential for explosion is much higher," Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara says.

Change Your Mindset

Horses live in the present. To help them the most, we need to do the same. Constantly thinking back to the pain or mistreatment our horses experienced does not help them move on to a better future.

"If we start changing the terminology for horses with rough pasts from 'abused' to 'mishandled,' think how that changes our context," Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara suggests. "When we work with a mishandled horse, it puts the requirement on us to be consistent and fair, rather than sorry and pitying."

"It's also important to recognize that a horse generally isn't acting a certain way—spooky, for example—because he's being silly or 'testing' us," says Linda Tellington-Jones, trainer and creator of the TTouch and TTeam methods of working

with horses. "He has a valid reason for his behavior, and we need to recognize that there's something really going on for the horse."

"I treat abused horses the way I do all my other horses," Mark Rashid says. "Everything I do is with their best interests in mind, but I don't tiptoe around them because of their past. Doing that may worry them more than if I just go about our work in a calm and matter-of-fact way."

Meet the Experts

Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara has a degree in animal behavior and is past president of the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association. She's currently a doctoral student at the University of Denver studying the potential of animal-assisted therapy for trauma survivors.

Dr. Patti Klein Manke is the staff veterinarian for the Hooved Animal Humane Society in Illinois and cares for the horses and other animals that come to HAHS. www.hahs.org

Mark Rashid is a respected trainer and author who has successfully rehabilitated dozens of abused horses for the ranches he's worked on and in the clinics he teaches. www.markrashid.com

Linda Tellington-Jones is known around the world for her ground-breaking TTouch and TTeam methods of nonhabitual work for horses, which help them learn new ways of responding to fear. www.lindatellingtonjones.com

Set Rules and Boundaries

Just as it's important to move on from the past, it's crucial to establish expectations for what is allowed and not allowed.

"Just because a horse had a tough past doesn't mean he can step on our toes or walk over the top of us. I think a lot of people get abused horses and then make excuses for behavior because of what they've been through. The person thinks that making a correction will be overwhelming to the horse," Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara says.

She adds, "The real issue is how you will respond if the horse doesn't do what you ask. Will you become totally unglued, unpredictable and punish or scare the horse? No, you'll just quietly ask again that the horse stand still or pick up his foot or whatever, without anger and without taking it personally."

Let Go of Expectations and Timeframes

"Some of the horses we get in are nearly feral or have very little handling," says Dr. Patti Klein Manke, veterinarian for the Hooved Animal Humane Society. "To help them start trusting, we feed at very consistent times and use food in a way that connects the human with something positive. Trust is earned eventually, little by little, and it can't be rushed."

She adds, "Volunteers might sit in a horse's pen, quietly, with no expectation that the horse will come up or allow the person to touch him. Putting the horse in charge of the interaction helps to build their trust."

People who have had horses before may wonder why their abused horse may be taking so much longer to learn something than their previous horses did. "I tell them that there's just no set time frame," Mark Rashid says. "If we can remember that it's up to the horse, things go better."

When the chestnut warmblood arrives at the rescue he's been bashed in the head with a shovel. By the time Rachel adopts him the only evidence of his past experience is that he's extremely head shy and doesn't want hands, brushes or halters anywhere near his head. Rachel uses approach and retreat, each day rubbing and petting closer to his face, then moving back to a spot where he's comfortable. After about three weeks she is able to halter him and lead him, and after a year the pair is enjoying the local trails together.

Training

"You can't rely on just a few techniques when working with abused horses," Linda Tellington-Jones says. "You need to think on your feet and be able to adjust what you're doing to what the horse needs."

Stay Safe

"You have to stay safe and your horse has to stay safe," Mark Rashid says, "and at the end of the day, everyone has to feel a little bit better than they did when they started, and feel good about what they worked on together."

If you feel overwhelmed, frightened or out of your comfort zone, seek the help of an effective and compassionate trainer who is experienced in working with troubled horses. It is not worth you being injured trying to help a horse.

Forego Dominant Training Methods

“Although it’s decreasing, we still hear that notion about ‘you’d better be the boss, because if you aren’t your horse will take over,’” Linda Tellington-Jones says. “That’s an attitude of creating submission that I think can certainly be abusive, and it’s sad because it’s not necessary. When we give horses a chance to understand what we want of them and we’re clear, they can trust us to be consistent. Then a relationship develops that’s like a dance.”

Adds Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara, “I think another source of abuse is this trend nowadays of trainers labeling an animal as dominant. In the study of animal behavior, dominance is a rank; it’s not a behavior. Dominant animals use dominant and submissive signaling, but often when you label a horse as dominant it’s giving people permission to be more coercive than they should be.”

Do Different Things ... Or Not

It might seem obvious that if a horse has had a bad experience doing a certain thing, such as tying or going into a trailer or wash rack, we probably don’t want to continue doing that activity. However, it’s not that simple.

“If a jumper is terrified of the poles because he’s been punished for hitting them, we may start working the horse on the ground with poles set very far away and using food rewards to help him overcome the flight response,” Linda Tellington-Jones says.

“Or we might take all the tack away that a horse may associate with a bad experience,” Linda says. “For a jumper, maybe we’d remove his bridle and martingale and let him jump in a neck ring.”

“If, for example, a horse had horrible experiences jumping, then I probably wouldn’t jump him,” Mark Rashid says, “but I may not do a lot of flatwork with him either because he might associate that with jumping. So, I might get him completely away from that environment and see how he does on trails. The tricky thing is that if jumping is all he knows, he might be really frightened out on the trails. You just have to see what the horse needs.”

The young black and white pinto pony stands not more than 10 hands as he cowers in the corner of the pen at the local horse sale. Every bone in his body is prominent, and his hooves are so long they curl up. After a few days in his new home, his owner starts working with him, first stroking the air around him because he can’t stand to have human contact. Before long, however, he enjoys being touched, groomed and loved. His owner trains him and finds him a new home at a therapeutic riding center where the children cherish him.

Predicting the Future?

Are there any fail-safe ways to figure out a prognosis for a mishandled horse and discern whether he will recover to become a useful member of equine society? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

What Are the Expectations?

While a horse may not be able to do what he was originally trained or bred to do, perhaps he can be happy and successful doing something different.

“I think successful rehabilitation depends on the situation,” Maureen Fredrickson-MacNamara says. “For example, if you have a horse that’s extremely noise sensitive, and he’s in a suburban area [with an inexperienced handler], he may not do very well. But if he can be placed in a quiet rural area with an experienced, quiet rider doing primarily trail riding, he probably could be saved.”

“For me, as long as there’s try, you’ve got hope,” Mark Rashid says. “It’s when the horse is shut down to the point he isn’t interested in even trying to work with you that the situation doesn’t look so good.”

Are You the Right Person for This Horse?

Many of us can only have one or two horses due to time, space or money constraints. If a particular horse isn’t working out, there’s no shame in admitting that.

“While this horse may be able to be helped, it may simply be that you’re not the right person to do it,” Mark says.

“I think it’s good to remember that we are not always the best person for a particular animal,” Maureen

Fredrickson-MacNamara says. "We like to think we are, but sometimes another person will have exactly what that horse needs in terms of experience, personality and interests. It's not personal, it's just life."

Other Options

Sadly, some horses can't be aided back into productive members of equine society. They may have such horrific pasts that they will always be unpredictable and untrusting, and perhaps dangerous as a result. Or they may have permanent soundness issues.

"If we're dealing with physical issues and the horse is unable to be ridden, he may be able to be pasture sound and can be a wonderful companion or pet," Dr. Klein Manke says. "Horses that come to HAHS and are not adoptable are essentially retired here. We make them as comfortable as we can. We don't give up on them, but we don't allow suffering either."

Other options are retirement on acreage, preferably with other horses. However, don't assume that a horse wants to be turned out and forgotten. Many horses still enjoy positive human interaction, and they want to be valued. Turning them out with no contact can be torture for some horses.

In some cases, horses truly are mentally unstable. If this is the case, and the horse is also dangerous on the ground or with other horses, we must take a hard look at the life we can offer the animal and what sort of life he is likely to have. Sometimes, the most compassionate outcome is euthanasia.

Moving Ahead

Rehabilitating an abused horse is a long-term project but can be extremely rewarding. While physical issues can be resolved relatively quickly, emotional and behavioral traumas will take time to overcome.

"Over the years, I've seen horses that I thought we'd never get through to," Linda Tellington-Jones says. "They were so shut down and so afraid. But often in a week of working with them, there would start to be a glimmer. So much will depend on the amount of time you can spend with that horse and giving him the attention he needs."

"If you can be consistent and trustworthy, and say what you mean and mean what you say, your horse has a good chance of recovering and being fine," Mark Rashid says.

The author thanks those who contributed true stories for this series (although names and situations were changed to protect identities), and thanks all who continue to help horses lead better lives.

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