

A letter to Professor David Morton in answer to his question “how can you tell if a horse is happy?”

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF A HORSE IS HAPPY?

What a very interesting question! If you had asked me this 10 years ago, I daresay I would have mustered a few thoughts on the topic. But not anything like the number I now have, after studying horse's reactions to fear and pain in the last decade. As you will be aware, short questions can require long answers. Short good questions (like yours) require a book-length answer! On reflection, I have already written such a book. So I will post you a copy straight away! The book is called, “Metal in the Mouth: the Abusive Effects of Bitted Bridles.” But to avoid you thinking that this is unlikely to provide you with the necessary wide overview on your question, let me first make some general observations.

One criterion on which you can make a judgment is, I suggest, body language, ie., behaviour. The quality of life encompassed by the concept of ‘happiness’ can be identified by asking another question, “Is the horse exhibiting normal behaviour?” If its behaviour is normal its a happy horse. The criterion, of course, prompts another question, “What is normal behaviour?” Here, I would stipulate that the assessment of behaviour should include both behaviour at rest and at exercise. The observational period on which a conclusion is based should also be longitudinal rather than vertical. A five minute ‘biopsy’ at rest and at exercise may not be sufficient to expose abnormalities of behaviour. Ideally, the exercise should be varied and observed under many different environmental conditions.

Our problem, as veterinarians, is that we have spent most of our lives observing abnormal horses. By this I don't mean just our patients, who – by definition - are (probably) already diseased or defective in some way. I mean that our concept of normality is based on a fundamentally abnormal (domesticated) animal. Our standard is skewed and we define an abnormal horse as normal. Just as the majority of equine veterinarians will currently examine a deformed hoof and describe it as normal, so will the same mistake be made with regard to an assessment of behaviour. Even the resting horse is mostly an imprisoned, immobilized (i.e., stabled) example ... a horse that is being kept in solitary confinement, 23 hours out of every 24. Such horses are being fed an abnormal diet at infrequent intervals and are eating with their heads erect rather than at ground level. Many are depressed and suffer silently but a veterinary student on her rounds may, nevertheless, report that they are ‘bright, alert and responsive.’ In most cases, we fail to recognize and document the more subtle signs of abnormality (unhappiness). Others have remarked on the fact that the horse, a prey animal, is stoic about pain and has evolved to disguise its suffering as much as possible. If the horse was refusing to eat, sweating, kicking at his belly and rolling we would recognize that he was not ‘happy’ but this degree of sensitivity in our observation is inadequate. We need to look much more closely and carefully.

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Even behavioural scientists in the equine field may limit themselves to the observation of herd behaviour and do not wish to get involved with commenting on behaviour ‘under saddle.’ They, like many equine veterinarians, may even regard this as outside their remit. They may not themselves be riders, and therefore feel uncomfortable in commenting on these matters, preferring to defer to the rider/owner as the expert.

Similarly, many veterinarians defer to farriers on the foot and to linemen on the mouth. Most veterinarians would not think of commenting on the art of biting and many would think twice before arguing with a farrier. Though the shoe is hugely ‘abnormal,’ a major cause of lameness and loss of life (see www.thehorseshoof.com and many other websites), most veterinarians regard it as normal and ‘necessary.’ In fact, it is neither. It also transpires that the bit, in my experience is responsible for many diseases currently classified as idiopathic (e.g., dorsal displacement of the soft palate, epiglottal entrapment, headshaking, and pulmonary haemorrhage) and for many accidents to horse and rider, some fatal. Sadly, I am the only person – as yet - to have studied the bit's effect on the physiology of exercise, so my work has not been checked by others. As a profession, we have been blind-sided by something so common that we accept the bit without question and regard it as ‘normal.’

I hope that the above does not sound like a rant. I can give you chapter and verse to back-up my comments if you wish.

A happy horse is one that enjoys the five freedoms. The quintessence of a happy horse is an unshod, unharnessed, ‘empty’ (riderless) horse galloping at liberty on the plains (or in a large paddock!) with grace, balance and beauty. It is the dream of every rider to recapture this poetry of motion under saddle, yet very few achieve their dream.

A happy horse is one that is free of fear, pain, distress, disease, defect, hunger and thirst. Being a herd animal, a requirement for happiness is that it should be in company with other horses, in the open air, and at liberty to move. It should be able to graze eight hours a day and to benefit the health of its teeth, feet and cardiovascular system by having its head at ground level for this same length of time each day. In summary, I suggest that a second and even broader criterion for happiness than ‘normal behaviour’ is a horse that is allowed to live (and work) in an environment that is compatible with its normal physiology. This is the criterion that I selected as the title of my abstract¹, a copy of which I attach. Normal physiology encompasses normal behavior if one adds a caveat. For example, it could be argued that for a given stimulus, it is perfectly normal behavior for a horse to take fright and flee. This is a survival reflex evolved by millions of years of evolution. But such bolting (‘normal behaviour’) becomes inconvenient if it is being ridden at the time. So the trick for rider and driver is to

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avoid triggering such dangerous ‘normal ‘ behavior. The foundation for necessary avoidance is to stop frightening the horse and causing it pain.

In the last ten years, I have become aware of the frequency and degree to which a bit frightens a horse and causes it pain. The shoe and the saddle are other sources of pain. But unlike the bit, the shoe and saddle cannot be removed overnight and the horse exercised the very next day in order that the before-and-after effect can be clearly demonstrated. So removal of the bit (a painful method of communication) and its replacement by the crossover bitless bridle (a painless method of communication) represents a natural experiment that has now been repeated on thousands of horses over the last eight years. It has been a most demonstrative and compelling series of natural experiments. I believe it to be the nearest we can get to a controlled experiment, as the rider and the horse are the same, as is the territory over which the horse is exercised. The only significant variable is the method of communication. Added to this equation, the rider is the person most familiar with the usual behavior of her horse and, therefore, the most qualified observer of any changes. Riders are critical folk and not given easily to enthusiastic endorsement of a new product, especially one that challenges a three thousand year tradition. Yet a rider who has been using a bitted bridle for many years on a particular horse will often, on the evening of the very first day on which she has used the bitless bridle, write me a long and effusive testimonial. If you want to read descriptions of happy horses (and deliriously happy riders), please go to my website (www.bitlessbridle.com) and select ‘Users’ Comments.’ Users describe, for example, a certain change in the horse’s eye, a pricked ear and many, many other improvements in attitude, behaviour, and performance. Horses that owners had long assumed to be inherently and permanently flawed in their characters, undergo a transformation. ‘Hot,’ nervous and spooky horses become calm and compliant. Horses that fight, argue, pull, rear, buck and bolt become a pleasure to ride. I have now documented 120 problems that the bit causes both horse and rider. I expect to discover yet more.

If the experiment is reversed and the bit re-instated, the ‘unhappiness’ returns.

If you select ‘Articles’ on my website, you can download a trilogy of articles with the title “Fear of the Bit.” The third part of this trilogy includes a ‘Behavioural Profile Questionnaire’ that lists the 120 problems. It is installed as a separate item in the collection of articles and, for your convenience, I am attaching it to this email. Here are 120 signs of unhappiness. Some of these signs can also be triggered by pain from the shoe or saddle, as they are not all specific to the bit. A further collection of signs of unhappiness could be compiled for the shoe and saddle. It would be interesting to do this in order to identify those signs specific to each source and those common to all three.

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Your question, David, has opened the floodgates. I hope that what I have written will answer your question. There is much more on the website and in a few days you will have the book.

Robert Cook
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