



# Claustrophobia and Horses

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The horse evolved as a constantly grazing continually moving prey species that was primarily adapted to open grassland areas. Escape was primary means of survival from predators. This caused the horse to become programmed to prefer open space. Since predators naturally use cover and hiding for hunting, horse survival depended on the ability to avoid areas where they could ambush prey. Small areas where escape is difficult, lack of room to turn around, anything that would restrict the ability to flee from danger or perceived danger all cause apprehension.

Claustrophobia is defined by the Stedman Medical Dictionary as” A morbid fear of enclosed areas. “ Restraint or restriction of movement can be added to this definition as well.

People who may be claustrophobic themselves can easily empathize with a horse going into a panic attack when confined or restrained. Level of reactivity varies between individuals as well as circumstances and previous experience. Some examples of expressions of claustrophobia include the following:

1. Difficult to load into a trailer, enter a stall or a strange barn.
2. Pull back on halter whether tie. Leading, or being cross-tied
3. React negatively to tightening of a girth or surcingle
4. Flies back out of a trailer, chute or other restrictive space
5. Becomes stiff, rigid or braced when restrained in any manner

As with most of the problems veterinarians deal with, prevention is a much more effective way of dealing with problems as opposed to fixing them. Behavioral problems like disease respond best the earlier it is recognized and proper treatment is begun. Like disease, for effective treatment to be instigated a correct diagnosis is a must. The most effective means of dealing with these kinds of problems is returning to the basics.

Horses that do not load or haul well usually do not lead well. That means the horse can be drug from one location to another as long as the equipment and the leader is physically strong enough and the



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horse is willing to go. These horses are usually reluctant to enter the trailer and are coerced by a variety of means to load. They eventually enter but are in fact escaping into the trailer. Rarely are these horses taught to unload at the same time or to be reasonably comfortable once they are onboard. Most owners are intent on getting the horse into the trailer so if it does happen they hook the butt chain or bar close the door and get down the road. They will worry about getting the horse off when they reach their destination. The other downside is the resistance or stiffness present in the horse will cause hauling problems (e.g. climbing into a manger, scrambling, kicking, pawing, etc.)

Both professionally and personally I am opposed to the use of chemical control except in emergency situations. They serve only as a crutch and do not address the problem. Most of the horses that have trailering problems have other problems as well; some may not have yet surfaced simply due to circumstances. Recognizing there is a problem offers an opportunity to evaluate the horse and reduce the risk of an unexpected later panic attack that could result in injury to horse and or humans.

“Natural Horsemanship” is currently enjoying considerable interest and lends itself well to avoiding or correcting the problem of resistance in horses. It is based on the idea of taking the brace or resistance out of the horse and developing a relationship of trust and confidence with the handler. The horse learns to yield to the lead and halter without hesitancy or resistance. They move forward, backward, sideways and to raise or lower the head on request. Horses also learn lateral flexion, to bend their heads and necks laterally upon request. Horses do all of these maneuvers naturally until people ask for it. Most horses can learn the basics of this in 20 to 30 minutes. Follow up practice over several days can result in developing a very soft responsive attitude. People protest saying they do not have time. Since the average horse has a potential useful life span of 20 or more years, spending 3-5 hours in the beginning to begin to develop a responsive attitude seems a relatively small price.

Teaching a horse to learn to load into a trailer can begin in a barn aisle way or small enclosed area. Teach them to move forward on request, and then move through a narrow space about 6-8 foot in width. Have them go both ways (i.e. right to left and left to right). When they will do this quietly at a



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walk and relaxed then narrow the space down to 4 foot or slightly less which is the width of at trailer door. Using a horse stall doorway be sure all latches are back; load the horse through the stall door. Stop it at various stages of entry and back it out. Teach it to enter stop wait and back out. Once this is accomplished lay a large diameter wooden post or a railroad tie in front of the door entrance. Teach the horse to step over the obstacle and into the stall on request. This can all be accomplished on rainy days usually in less then an hour total. Reinforce it for 3-5 days.

Introduce the horse to the trailer using at least a 12-15 foot lead rope. Stand to the side and send the horse to the trailer rewarding it for the smallest attempt to do what is being requested. DO NOT punish or discipline the horse at the trailer. If reinforcement is needed take the horse away from the trailer and review the need to move forward when requested. It is important that the trailer not be associated with punishment.