Positive reinforcement training and behavioural modification

What is positive reinforcement training?



Positive reinforcement means giving a reward when a desired behaviour is performed, so that a positive association is formed. For most horses we use a food reward such as treats or a lick. The reward is paired with a clicking sound so that the animal learns to expect a treat when they hear the click, allowing us to mark the moment they give the correct behaviour. This is why positive reinforcement is often called "clicker training".

In the veterinary setting, clicker training is useful to manage horses which are difficult or dangerous for procedures such as injections, lifting feet or giving medication. This approach reduces the stress and fear associated with these procedures, making them easier and safer for everyone involved.

How can we help?



If you have a horse, pony or donkey who is nervous or needle shy, please let us know when booking your appointment so that we can allow plenty of time to work at the horse's own pace. All our vets have experience using clicker training to reduce stress around procedures and can use this on the yard. Our nursing team can also offer clicker training appointments where they can begin the training process and show you how to continue working with your horse. It is really important to be consistent in training, so that your horse understands what is expected of them. Most of our patients improve significantly after just one session, and with repetition between visits we aim to reduce the anticipation and stress associated with each visit.

Managing difficult behaviour:

Horses do not behave badly because they are mean or being deliberately unkind, but in response to a negative stimulus. Pain is a common cause of changes in behaviour, especially when ridden, which is why we always recommend examination if your horse is showing these signs. Horses can also form associations between actions or places and pain, for example having the saddle put on a sore back and can take time to become comfortable with these things even once the pain is resolved.

If pain has been ruled out, there are medications we can use to help reduce anxiety allowing horses to experience new situations without panicking.

Summerleaze Equine Vets
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Box rest:

If your horse has been prescribed box rest for an injury, there are lots of ways to help keep them entertained and prevent them climbing the walls!

Examples include:

- Stable toys, especially those which dispense food
- Stabling a companion within sight, ideally close enough for contact
- Mirrors can help to trick a horse into feeling they are not alone
- Natural enrichment ideas such as picking grass, herbs, branches etc and "bringing the outside in"
- Spending time with your horse grooming and bonding
- Playing music or radio



In some cases, it may be appropriate to create a small stable-sized paddock outside, depending on the weather conditions and individual horse temperament. We can also use medications to help relax the horse if keeping them in is causing them significant distress.







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