



Mindful Connections®

LEARNING CENTER

Going with the Flow

by Nicole Birkholzer

When I was 11 years old, all my dreams came true. I was offered a free lease of a horse. Her name was Burton Candy.

“Cindy” was a New Forest Pony — dark brown with a chocolate brown muzzle. She belonged to a family in town whose daughter, Sylvia, owned a pony named Rocky.

Sylvia and I became fast friends and spent every waking hour we were not in school or doing homework with our horses. Every day after school we mucked and fed and rode, and on weekends we filled our fanny packs and took off for the day.

Looking back, every time I hopped on my bicycle to go and see Cindy, my mind was focused on nothing but Cindy, and when I turned

the corner and saw her standing in the pasture my heart expanded. Every. Time.

When Sylvia and I brought the horses in from the field, we loosely tied them to a hitching post and got to work. If it was mud season we’d grab a rubber currycomb and, with some elbow grease, clean our horses. If the weather was warm and the horses were clean we’d grab a little bucket and two sponges, one to wash our horses’ faces, the other to clean the teats

and in between, and any dried manure stuck to their behind.

On rainy days we brought the horses into the stalls adjacent to the tack room and sat in front of the stalls, under the covered roof, to clean our tack. Cindy’s



and Rocket’s heads would be hanging out over the Dutch doors, releasing shuddering breaths, deeply relaxed in the company of their humans.

It’s the gift of our younger selves, the ability to go with the flow — to assess a situation and come up with a plan that fits the circumstance. It didn’t matter what we did, as long as we did it with our horses. We decided from our heart, not our head.

That flow gets interrupted when we

eventually decide to become more formal in our horse adventure. Once we get serious about lessons, showing, and competing, we arrive at the barn with a plan. And, as we get older, our lives are more complicated and we have more on our mind.

We’ve a preconceived notion of what we want to accomplish, and we most likely are not paying much attention to what our horse is experiencing while we plot and plan.

Often the result is that both horse and human feel not heard and seen, leading to a misunderstanding that creates a riff in the relationship. We may go through the motions of horse ownership without the heartwarming effects that drew us to horses in

the first place.

Mud and Mayhem

Sandra got a pony at age seven, graduated to a horse at 12, gave up riding when she went to college, and reconnected with horses when she turned 40. Inspired by the boarders at the barn, she bought Duke, a 15-year-old Quarter Horse, so she could join the others on trail rides.

As the vice president of a local bank,

Sandra's time with her horse is limited. When she arrived at the barn one weekday afternoon, with less than an hour to groom, tack, and ride, she took one look at Duke and sighed. Duke's right side was covered in dried mud. From the edge of his eye socket to the dock of his tail his flea-bitten gray coat was murky brown.

Frustrated, Sandra pushed the halter over Duke's ears, marched him to the grooming area, and got to work. One eye on the clock, Sandra curried, brushed, and wiped, working up a sweat. Duke, sensing Sandra's rush, got antsy himself and stepped forward until he hit the end of the cross ties. Sandra pulled on the halter to have Duke step back, to which he responded by stepping forward again. After Duke repeated the behavior twice more, Sandra was tired of the dance. She eyed Duke, decided he was clean enough, skipped the hoof picking, grabbed the saddle, quickly tightened the girth, switched the halter for a bridle, and went into the arena to ride for 20 minutes before she had to head out for a meeting.

At the mounting block Duke refused to step up. After pulling the reins left and right a few times Sandra had him positioned close enough so she could mount.

Sandra's ride was utterly dissatisfying. Duke spooked a few times in the corner where the jumping poles are stored, and when Sandra asked him to trot, he seemed choppy and somewhat distracted, so much so that Sandra retreated to walking only. Sandra was annoyed because she had planned to work on improving her extended sitting trot.

When she got off Duke she was frustrated with herself and with Duke, and wished that she had spent the last hour in the office preparing for her upcoming meeting. She brought Duke to his stall, took off his halter and left. Driving down

the driveway she hoped her next visit would be more gratifying.

Stems and Serenity

Mary, a part-time clerk at the town office, married with ten-year-old twins, went to the barn the same day as Sandra. When Mary arrived at the pasture, her horse Callie, a Morgan, looked like a hot mess. Rolling in her pasture, Callie had picked up a bunch of goldenrod stems that were



now skillfully woven into her tail hair. Mary called out to Callie, "Girlfriend, what did you do to yourself? We better get you

However, if we meet our horse in the now, just as we did when we were younger, with all the realities that encompass that very now, we're literally guided to the best outcome possible.

cleaned up before you get chased by your own tail." She took the halter off the fence hook and asked Callie to place her muzzle

into it so they could walk up to the barn together.

In the grooming stall, Mary took a deep breath and realized that riding was certainly out of the question until Callie's tail was free of debris. A tail covered in foreign objects could easily turn into a predator-like experience for Callie, especially if she was in her hot-to-trot mode.

With only an hour before she had to pick up the twins at school, Mary surrendered to the notion that she might not have enough time for a ride, but at least she could spend the time removing the sticks and hang out with her mare. She squeezed some detangler out of a tube and got to work.

As Mary brushed out strand by strand, Callie dropped her head, blew out a few deep breaths, and cocked her hind leg. Mary noticed, and realized the debris stuck in her tail had stressed Callie more than she had let on. Mary was glad Callie was able to release some of the tension through the repetitive motion of the brush.

Once Callie's tail was flowing, Mary grabbed a rubber curry comb, one of Callie's favorites, and let her mare sniff it. Immediately Callie moved her head up inviting Mary to curry the underside of her neck. After the little massage Mary took the curry to the underside of Callie's belly, and that caused the mare to wiggle her upper lip, showing how good it felt to be curried. Next, with a soft brush, Mary put on the finishing touches. As Mary gently followed the direction of the cowlick on her forehead, Callie nuzzled Mary's hand in reciprocation.

When Mary reached for the hoof pick, Callie lifted her left front hoof ready for the picking. One, two, three, four . . . once the hooves were clean Mary looked at the clock and was surprised that she still had 20 minutes before she needed to leave the barn. She didn't have enough

time to tack and ride, but she could hop on Callie bareback to take a spin around the farm.

As they approached the mounting block Mary took a deep breath and Callie followed suit. At the mounting block Callie stood like a statue, and when the two of them arrived at the path in between the pines, Mary felt so connected with Callie that she forgot about the fiery trot her Morgan mare usually displayed and eased into a beautiful extended trot without losing her balance.

After their short but sweet ride, Mary brought Callie back to the pasture, gave her a little scratch under the chin, and

told her, "See you tomorrow." As Mary headed down the driveway, she realized that, as short as it was, this had been her favorite ride on Callie.

These two examples show that horses are energy sponges. When we stress because something is not going according to our perfectly hatched plan — inclement weather, a muddy horse, a lost shoe — our horse not only picks up on it, but is affected by it. When, instead of going with the flow we resist what is, our horse becomes resistant, too.

However, if we meet our horse in the now, just as we did when we were younger, with all the realities that encompass that

very now, we're literally guided to the best outcome possible, as Mary and Callie showed us.

Nicole Birkholzer is on a mission to understand the logic behind our horse's behaviors and share her findings with equine professionals and horse owners. To learn more, visit horse-logic.com.



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Want to understand a horse's new and/or undesired

BEHAVIOR?

Why's he rearing in hand and under saddle?

Why's the pony hunter fighting with a paddock mate?

Why's the halter champion refusing to enter the trailer?

Why's the steadiest lesson horse balking at the arena door?



Whether you're a veterinarian, trainer, or horse owner, you've probably experienced how seemingly out of the blue these behaviors start. Is it a health issue? A training issue?

The truth is, very often it's neither. Instead it's behavioral issue related to outside circumstances. Most behavioral issues displayed by horses are due to stress-related events or environmental circumstances. The answers can be found through Horse Logic.

For two decades, I've helped equine professionals and horse owners understand the logic behind a horse's unexpected — and often undesired — behavior. I've provided successful solutions and suggestions to bring the horse back from distress to well-being, and with that back to good behavior.



To book a consulting session, go to horse-logic.com/book-online or email Nicole Birkholzer at nicole@horse-logic.com.

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