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JULY 2012 21 June – 18 July

Horse

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LOSE
THE
FEAR



THE EXPERT
Sue Palmer

Equine behaviourist Sue Palmer is a recommended associate of Intelligent Horsemanship and holds the Monty Roberts Preliminary Certificate of Horsemanship.

Take control

Horse comes to the rescue of reader Alison Ward, who is so frightened of her gelding Storm that she won't go into the stable with him

Not all confidence problems involve riding – many people are scared of handling their horse on the ground.

Alison Ward, from Nottinghamshire, wrote to *Horse* asking for help with her 16.3hh, eight-year-old gelding who she described as “intimidating”.

Alison has known Storm, a Cleveland Bay X Thoroughbred, since he was born in the field where she keeps her horses.

She fell in love with him and decided to buy him. But once he started to

grow, and use his height, weight and strength to get his own way, Alison's fear set in.

As yet, she has not been able to ride Storm and struggles with many aspects of handling him.

She even feels sick at the thought of going into the stable with him. Rather, she puts Storm's headcollar on over the stable door, and pushes him inside when it is time to go in.

“He pulls me about, and because he is so strong willed I end up letting him get away with everything,” Alison confesses.

“Last time I took him into the schooling area, it was all I could do to stop being sick to the stomach. He is so strong and bolts off with the lunge rein flowing behind.

“He is willing and a fast learner, but I need someone to help me overcome these fears and teach me how to show him that, actually, I am the boss and not a quivering mess.”

We asked equine behaviourist Sue Palmer to visit Alison and offer her some help.

Here is Sue's report of her session with Storm and Alison...

COMMIT TO OVERCOMING YOUR FEAR

According to Sue, there are many ways of overcoming nerves, but it is essential the person really wants to work through it.

"Confidence is not something that returns overnight – it takes time and dedication to rebuild," she points out.

"I also tell people that how they approach solving a problem is up to them and they shouldn't bow to peer pressure. Just because another person would choose a particular route to work with a horse does not mean it is the right one for you.

"Look at things from your horse's point of view. Ultimately, horses are looking for access to food, water and a safe place to sleep. As long as you are providing these, they have what they need – riding is not a part of their evolutionary requirements."

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

1 An in-depth discussion with Alison reveals there was no particular incident that led to her developing such a deep-seated fear.

Alison's first priority is to develop the confidence to go into the stable with Storm;

her second is to be able to do some basic groundwork in the schooling area.

She shows me how she waits for Storm to bring his head over the stable door so she can put his headcollar on and lead him out of the stable. Then she demonstrates how she unclips him outside the stable door to let him back in.

Alison may be afraid of her horse in the stable, but I think her methods of taking him out of the box and putting him back in are actually leaving her at more of a risk than if she does it in the conventional way.

When I go into Storm's stable to judge his character and reactions for myself, the gelding is friendly, although a bit pushy.



Alison puts the headcollar on over the door...



...and unclips Storm before letting him back in the stable

SETTING ACHIEVABLE GOALS

2 One of the most important techniques for overcoming any difficulty is to break the problem down into achievable goals, and to set yourself up for success with each one.

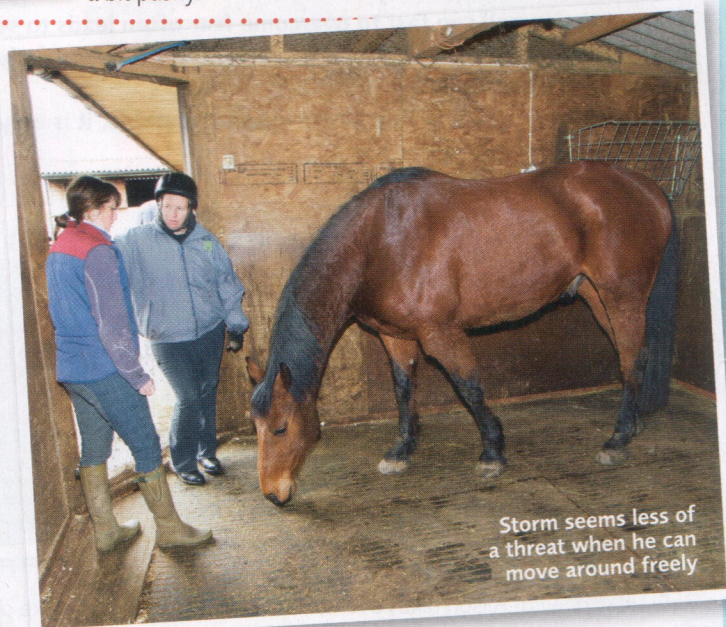
For Alison, the aim we set for the session is to lead Storm into the stable and take his headcollar off.

For that to happen, we need small, realistic steps. The first is for Alison to put one foot inside the stable, while I make sure Storm doesn't try to push his way out.

But Alison struggles with this, so to make things even easier, I hold her hand.

"It was your confidence around Storm that drove me on," Alison remarks to me.

Having the support of someone you trust can allow you to put your confidence in their advice and follow it through – even if you are quaking inside.



Storm seems less of a threat when he can move around freely

UNDERSTANDING HORSE BEHAVIOUR

3 Before long, Alison is inside the stable. I allocate her a 'safe place' to stand, near the door but not in the doorway.

Alison is worried the horse could crush her against the wall, which has happened in the past when he was tied up on the yard. But I tell her he behaves differently in the stable.

The reason Storm might 'squash' Alison when he's tied up is because he is trying to walk about, but his head can't go anywhere, so his quarters swing around. Alison is inconsequential to him and is pushed against the wall.

Loose in the stable, Storm doesn't have this restriction, so when he wants to move, he can.

Alison soon begins to realise the gelding is not about to maim her, but if he comes over to her he is just looking for fuss. "I need to get the 'what ifs' out of my head," she says. Understanding a situation is key to overcoming fear.

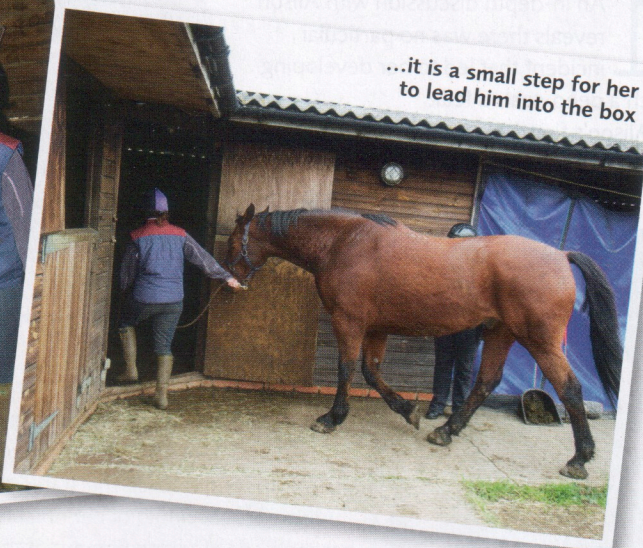


Reaching small goals builds confidence

WIDENING YOUR COMFORT ZONE



Once Alison is happier around Storm...



...it is a small step for her to lead him into the box

4 Initially, Alison's feet are rooted to the ground or heading for the door, but gradually we progress to her being able to move around the outer edge of the stable, then towards the middle to give Storm a hug.

I stay in the box to offer support, but the essential component is increasing Alison's comfort zone bit by bit.

Pushing yourself too fast to overcome fear often leads to setbacks. There is no 'prescriptive' timescale and it is much better to work at the right pace for you and your horse.

Once Alison is able to hug Storm inside the stable, it is only a small step to lead him in and out of the box.

GAINING CONTROL

5 Finally, we move on to Alison's second priority, basic groundwork in the schooling area.

Again, I work with Storm first, to work out what I can reasonably ask of Alison, and to show her he can behave as she would like him to.

Once I know the gelding is safe to work with, Alison takes over. She walks around the paddock, asking Storm to halt at various points and circling to the left and right.

At intervals, I ask her how confident she is feeling on a scale of one to 10. This helps her recognise how her confidence is developing.

Soon she is happily leading Storm, and giving him the direction he needs, rather than fearing he is going to hurt her. Through the groundwork



At first, Alison is nervous (below) but she soon has Storm doing what she wants



she learns how to take charge of Storm's feet, rather than letting him control hers.

"When Sue asked me to use a number to explain how I was feeling, it made me understand how scared I was," Alison comments after the session.

"I also drew confidence from the fact the number was getting higher as we did more groundwork."

Putting into words how you are feeling, how you would like to be feeling, and what steps you are going to take to reach that point, helps to focus the mind and the body towards achieving your goals.

Sue says...



"To start with, I told Alison how the situation looked according to Storm, so she could understand his behaviour and come up with goals.

"My own confidence helped Alison's develop, and I explained what I was doing as we went along. I also asked Alison how she was feeling throughout.

"This was important for Alison to be able to repeat the exercises on her own after I had gone.

"Once she understood the need to set small, achievable goals, she was able to begin completing her targets.

"Success breeds confidence, and before I left we put together a plan for Alison to follow.

"This will build on what she learned in this session – leading Storm into the stable and taking his headcollar off, and standing in the stable for longer amounts of time.

"The next step is putting the headcollar on in the stable – Alison gets frightened if Storm puts his head up, and she needs to work to overcome this."

Alison says...



"Considering I was such a bag of nerves, since Sue's visit I have managed to go into Storm's stable and take his headcollar off, scratch and fuss him, then leave.

"I then went one step further and walked into the stable, shut the door and stood in my safe place for a few minutes, before leading Storm out without him trying to get ahead of me.

"I feel brilliant after managing to do this. Yes, the nerves were still there, but I just got on with the matter in hand and think I have achieved a good deal.

"My confidence with Storm has increased and I believe it can only grow over the next few weeks. I am a lot calmer around Storm and this is rubbing off on him." **H**