

Do you have a horse that could benefit from behaviour modification?



At The George Equine Vets we do a lot of work using behaviour modification techniques and we see great results in the following areas:

- Handling
- Clipping
- Loading
- Administering medication (e.g., worming, eye drops)

What is it?

Behaviour modification involves using a variety of techniques to reward (reinforce) behaviours we want to see and therefore increases the likelihood of those behaviours being offered. We can also help to change the horses perception of certain things or activities to being more positive.

Why do we do it?

Did you know the average equine vet sustains somewhere around 7-8 significant injuries during their career by the horses that they are treating?

The horses' behaviours that lead to injuries are normal responses to stressors (such as needles) when avoidance and flight are not possible.

With some simple techniques, we aim to change the horse's perception of veterinary care to a less stressful or even more positive one .

Learning theory

The techniques we use are based on how horses learn, 'learning theory'.

Some definitions:

- **Reinforcement:** Increasing the likelihood of a behaviour being displayed again.
- **Punishment:** Decreasing the likelihood of a behaviour being displayed again.
- **Positive and negative:** Addition or removal of something.

- **Positive reinforcement:** Addition of something pleasant following a desired behaviour; e.g. giving a scratch or treat for touching a target.
- **Negative reinforcement:** Removal of something unpleasant following a desired behaviour; e.g. removing pressure on the reins when the horse slows or stops.
- **Positive punishment:** The addition of something unpleasant following an undesired behaviour; e.g. hitting a horse when it rears.
- **Negative punishment:** The removal of something pleasant following an undesired behaviour; e.g. removing feed when the horse bites you.

Most horse owners will be using negative reinforcement every day when leading and riding their horse with pressure and release.



Some common issues arise when horses follow their handlers around rather than responding to pressure signals. These will then become evident when a horse is fearful of following or standing still. A common example would be loading – the horse may display flight or freeze behaviours when asked to follow the owner onto a box, the owner will follow up with pressure on a head collar but the horse won't respond because these signals haven't been regularly used. The horse will commonly lean into the pressure or may turn away and attempt to flee or rear, if the pressure on the headcollar is released at this point then the horse will have achieved negative reinforcement for the flight or rearing behaviour. This, as we know, will increase the likelihood of them displaying this behaviour again.

Re-teaching in hand signals for moving forward and stopping- and not the horse following your feet- will be the key to correcting these behaviours. Equally, the value of teaching your horse to stand still cannot be underestimated!

Using negative and positive reinforcement together for developing desired behaviours is really valuable and that's what we will generally be doing when we are clicker training your horses for veterinary procedures.

We aim to build up in gradual steps (called "shaping") to what we are trying to do. For example, if we are working with a needle-shy horse we will start by simply putting a hand on the neck and instantly rewarding the horse when they stand still by taking our hand away (negative reinforcement), and by giving a treat (positive reinforcement). We then progress through small steps towards the end, desired procedure – the horse benefits from gaining some predictability and control over the situation and because of this they remain much calmer.

We often use a clicker during this combination of negative and positive reinforcement to mark the exact response/behaviour that we are rewarding. This is because horses need this to be marked within 0.5 seconds of the behaviour to connect the reward with the response.

If you would like to learn more about this or feel your horse would benefit from some behaviour modification sessions, then do not hesitate to get in touch with the office or any of our vets. Some excellent resources to get you started are the video series on YouTube entitled 'don't break your vet'.