An angry or very unhappy horse

This horse is not happy and wants you to stay away or go away. A horse may give a series of warnings if they are angry and want you to stay away or go away. If you ignore these they may bite.

1. Mildly annoyed horse:
   wrinkled, elongated nostrils, ears held slightly back.

If you do not go away

2. Mid-scale threat:
   wrinkled, elongated nostrils, ears back towards top of neck, head raised and turned towards target.

If you still do not go away

3. Severe threat:
   wrinkled, elongated open nostrils, ears laid flat against neck, head raised and horse may lunge at target, whites of eyes showing, mouth open showing teeth.

Kick threat:
You should avoid approaching a horse from behind. If you do they may warn you if they are angry and want you to stay away or go away. If you ignore this, they may kick.

Horse is lifting a hind leg and may wave it, tail may be clamped down or swishing, wrinkled, elongated open nostrils, ears laid flat against neck, head raised, whites of eyes showing, head turned towards target, horse may squeal.

Understanding your horse’s behaviour

What to do if you are worried about your horse’s behaviour

As well as recognising and understanding your horse’s body language, it is also important to be aware of any changes in their behaviour.

To spot any changes it’s important to spend time watching and interacting with them and learning about how they usually behave. If your horse’s behaviour changes, it could mean they are distressed, bored, ill or injured. Some other signs that your horse may be suffering include aggression, avoiding people or other horses (e.g. standing or lying apart from other horses in a field), loss of appetite, excessive rolling which may indicate colic (a veterinary emergency), or performing repetitive patterns of movements called stereotypies (crib-biting, wind-sucking, weaving, box-walking).

If you have any concerns about your horse’s behaviour and how they are feeling always speak to your vet first and, if necessary, they can refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist.

For further information about finding a vet and/or clinical animal behaviourist, visit the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist or www.rspca.org.uk/findavet
RECOGNISE AND UNDERSTAND YOUR HORSE’S BODY LANGUAGE

How is your horse feeling?

Just like you, your horse can experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, fearfulness and anger. It’s important to understand which emotions your horse is feeling so that you can take any action necessary to make sure they are happy and healthy.

Your horse’s body language can give you signals about how they are feeling. All horses are individuals and they will all have differences in their behaviour, so it’s really important to spend time watching your horse, in order to learn what is normal behaviour for them.

A happy horse

This horse is relaxed and happy.

Alert, relaxed horse
Horse is standing with a relaxed body posture, resting one hind leg, alert with ears up and facing forward, eyes open showing no white, muzzle is relaxed with oval nostrils and closed mouth.

Dozing, resting horse
Horse is standing with a relaxed, long and low head, neck and body posture, resting one hind leg, ears held low and pointing sideways, eyes open, half-closed or closed, muzzle relaxed with oval nostrils, lower lip may be hanging low. Horse is dozing or resting and may be startled if you approach suddenly.

A worried horse

This horse is telling you they are uncomfortable and don’t want you near them.

Anxious, in pain horse
Horse is standing with raised head, ears held back or pointing in different directions, eyes open with tense muscles above eye making an upside-down v-shape (see inset), tense muzzle with square nostrils, tense cheek muscles. Horse may be anxious or in pain.

Fearful horse
Horse is leaning back with head raised and turned to face alarming object, ready to flee, ears held back, whites of eyes showing with tense muscles above, tense muzzle with square nostrils. Horse is about to run away.

A horse which does not react on being approached when awake or which shows little interest in their surroundings may be showing learned helplessness – a response to long-term poor welfare.