

Safety: Protected Contact and Body Extensions

There is no rule that says we have to be in the same space as our horse. If we feel anxious about our safety in any way, we need to heed that feeling.

Chances are good that the horse is having similar worries about being in the same space as an anxious handler.

Possible Solutions:

1. PROTECTIVE CONTACT: For some situations, a protective barrier between you and the horse is easiest to manage. You can be on the other side of a gate or a safe fence or a stall guard. Ideally, the horse is at liberty and can choose to interact or not. It is a good way to get to know each other and to introduce clicker training with a nose target. If the horse knows about electric fencing, it can be used (not turned on of course!) to set up an area where each party stays on their side of the fence. To establish or improve a relationship, we can take a chair and sit just outside the horse's enclosure to read a book or meditate without worry of being intimidated. An anxious horse will also find this less intimidating than your presence on his side of the fence.



2. TYING UP: In some situations, it makes sense to restrict the movement of the horse by tying him up. Especially if we are working alone, it can be the safe option. However, we have to keep it the safe option for the horse too, by never leaving him tied up unattended. Once the horse knows about stationary nose targets and mat targets, we can teach him to stay 'parked'. Ground tying by dropping the end of the rope is also useful for the horse to know.



3. BODY EXTENSIONS: Horses find our body shape peculiar and hard to read. A body extension (BEX), correctly used, allows us to be as tall as the horse and as long as the horse. It can mimic friendly grooming teeth or biting teeth. It can be a horse's neck used for blocking, a front leg for striking or a hind leg for a warning that a kick may follow. It can become a 'kick'. It allows us to use body language that the horse understands because it resembles what horses do.

If we always carry our body extension it is seen as part of our body. Most of the time it will be in a relaxed **neutral** state. When we use it to give a signal, or to accentuate a signal, we can easily activate it.

Depending on what I'm doing, I may use a stick&string combination, a dressage whip, a longing whip, a couple of long swishy twigs, a driving whip with the long lash part removed or the end of a rope. Sometimes I use several different body extensions in one session, whichever one is best suited to what we are doing.*

* James, Hertha. (2013, 2nd ed.) *Natural Horsemanship Study Guide*. Powerword Publications; Palmerston North, NZ, Ch 6.

Body Extensions.....continued

There are six important concepts about using body extensions (BEX). Most of these come named as dressage whips, stick&string combinations, lunging whips, training sticks, arm extenders, wands, and reeds. Some are amplified with a plastic bag or cloth at the end and called 'flags'. I sometimes use a swishy twig taken from a tree or shrub. Body extensions can also be swinging strings or the end of our rope.

Whatever the nature of the body extension, we have to first be sure the horse sees it as harmless. We have to practice with them away from the horse to become dexterous and adept at keeping them in neutral unless we want to use them to show our intent or clarify a signal.

The horse will appreciate our being able to handle the body extension in both hands and to change it smoothly from one hand to the other hand as the situation requires. Just as we have to teach the horse everything on both sides of his body, so we have to become smooth with our signals on both sides of our own body.

We can use the body extension to:

- Encourage movement from behind
- Encourage lateral moves
- Encourage movement of individual feet
- Provide touch signals from a distance via rope/rein pressure on the halter/bridle
- Block a movement which is unsafe (e.g., surging ahead)
- Block a move that is not what we asked for (i.e., clarify by using an inhibitor)

We can also use a body extension for the horse to target with either his nose or his knee.

The main body extension we use is probably our halter and rope or our bridle/hackamore and reins.

Whenever we put any sort of pressure on the rope/reins, we put direct pressure on the horse's head. A neck rope is a more subtle body extension. Saddles and pads are body extensions that put pressure on the girth area and the spine.

Some people use bits and spurs as body extensions. For an animal as sensitive as a horse, who can feel the smallest fly landing on his body, these seems rather extreme. They are shortcuts to get what we want without taking the time and trouble to build a strong two-way communication with the horse.



Our horses will love it if we develop good body extension skills before we get to them.



99% of the time our body extensions will be in a 'neutral' position.



The rope is a communication link. When not sending a signal, it needs to be in 'neutral' too.