

# CALMING SIGNALS of HORSES

by Rachael Draaisma

## WORTH KNOWING AND USING

This article is the first of a series. In the upcoming articles, Rachael Draaisma will discuss different calming signals in more depth and also talk about which calming signals you can use yourself around your horse.

Would you like to know more about calming signals? This article is based on the book "Language Signs and Calming Signals of Horses," by Rachael Draaisma. It can be ordered through:

<https://www.crcpress.com/Language-Signs-and-Calming-Signals-of-Horses-Recognition-and-Application/Draaisma/p/book/9781138070158>

Would you like more information about Rachael Draaisma's lectures in the Netherlands and abroad, or invite her to give one?

Her website is: [www.calmingsofhorsemagazine.com](http://www.calmingsofhorsemagazine.com)

**A** nod, a smile, saying "hello" when you pass a stranger on the street, turning away slightly to avoid looking someone in the eye; these are signals people use to let others know that they mean them no harm. It allows everyone to stay in their comfort zone and maintains a conflict-free public space. People are not alone in exchanging these signals; other animals that live in social groups use them too. Turid Rugaas discovered these signals, which she called calming signals, in dogs, and for the past three years, under Turid's mentorship, behaviour consultant Rachael Draaisma researched the calming signals in horses.

The research Rachael did consisted of an analysis of 220 videos; this was footage of domesticated horses and their interactions with people. It showed horses being saddled, groomed, released into the riding arena, walked by hand, ridden, and so forth. Rachael scrutinised facial features

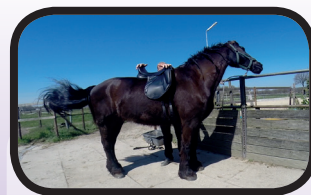
### EXAMPLES OF CALMING SIGNALS



A tractor passes by. The riders have dismounted. Vosje is standing in front. He is tongue out chewing. Orion is standing in the background. He is chewing, but his tongue is not showing. The direct stimulus causing the horses to show these calming signals is the tractor.



Vosje is making calming signals at Sybrand. You can see him blinking and tongue out chewing.



Vitske shows a neck shake when the saddle is put on his back for fitting purposes. He also flicks his tail.

as well as the horse's neck-head posture, tail carriage, and movements, not to mention the movements of any people present in the videos. The footage was not staged. No horse was ever purposefully made to feel tension. Only the signals that were observed thirty-five times or more in different situations were included so as to avoid over-generalisation of a single signal. The focus of the study was to research calming signals, but along the way, more communication signals were added to do justice to the multitude of ways in which horses communicate. Additionally, several communication ladders emerged, showing the signals and tension levels with which horses respond to our shared world. The signals on the ladders are linked to tension levels. In this article, Rachael tells us more about calming signals, which ones exist, and how we can apply our knowledge of them in our interaction with horses.

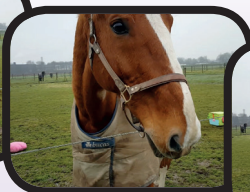
## RACHAËL: THERE ARE TWO SITUATIONS IN WHICH A HORSE CAN GIVE CALMING SIGNALS.

The first situation occurs when the horse is initially relaxed, but then a stimulus—such as a dog barking, a broom falling over, a person marching straight up to the horse, or a difficult command from his rider—causes the horse to respond. In reaction to the stimulus, the horse can give a calming signal towards it. Another signal might follow the first after a couple of seconds, after which the horse relaxes again.

In the second situation in which you see calming signals, the starting position is the same: a change in the horse's direct environment. It can be the same falling broom, or a stronger stimulus, such as a passing tractor, that the horse is responding to. The horse shows calming signals, except this time, there is no break between the signals. The calming signals occur one after the other, like a string of pearls. They are given consecutively or simultaneously. So you will see multiple calming signals in a short timeframe. If this is the case, the calming signals are a precursor to tension. The situation may then, depending on the horse, his handler, or circumstances escalate or de-escalate. In the case of de-escalation, the tension of the horse will lower, you will see more and more time in between the calming signals until the horse is fully relaxed again. When the situation escalates, the calming signals can be alternated with displacement behaviour or stress signals. If the tension rises even further, stress signals may take over completely and may lead to a flight or fight reaction. These descriptions demonstrate why 'calming signals' was chosen as an umbrella term. It describes the broader function of the signals, which is to calm both the other and oneself, this can happen in a situation of relaxation and one of tension.



Vosje looks at me, the filmer, with both eyes (binocular) as I film him.



I do not respond and keep filming. Vosje looks at me with one eye (monocular).



Vosje looks away with his eyes and begins a neck turn as a calming signal.



Vosje blinks his eyes (calming signal), while as a calming signal, he also makes a head turn



Vosje turns back to me. His upper lip extends forward slightly...



Rubs it over my arm.

BLINKING,  
LOOKING AWAY,  
HALF CLOSING THE EYES,  
CHEWING,  
TONGUE-OUT CHEWING,  
YAWNING,  
JAW STRETCH,  
HEAD TURN,  
NECK TURN,  
NECK SHAKE,  
BODY SHAKE,  
SEESAW LOWERING OF THE HEAD/NECK,  
SUSTAINED LOWERING OF THE HEAD/NECK,  
SHOWING THE FLANK,  
SHOWING THE HIND QUARTERS,  
CURVING,  
SPLITTING,  
EATING,  
IMMOBILITY,  
and SLOWING DOWN.

RACHAËL HAS  
DESCRIBED TWENTY  
CALMING SIGNALS:

RACHAËL IDENTIFIES THESE  
DISPLACEMENT BEHAVIOURS,  
AMONG OTHERS:

WHEN A HORSE SCRATCHES HIS HEAD  
AGAINST HIS LEG OR AGAINST OBJECTS,

WHEN HE BITES OR LICKS HIMSELF OR OBJECTS,

WHEN HE SCRAPES THE GROUND WITH A FORELEG,

WHEN HE SNIFFS THE GROUND,

OR WHEN HE STIRS THE GROUND WITHOUT EATING  
AND ROLLING.



These are body signals you see a lot when observing a horse. So when does a signal count as a calming signal and when does it not?

## LOOK FOR TRIGGERS

It's important to look at the context in which the signal is given. People often take a helicopter view when they describe their horse's behaviour. If the horse is spooked by a rustle in the bush next to the riding arena, people will often say, "yes, but the horse is young," or, "it's a windy day." And of course these are explanations for the behaviour, but I want you to distinguish between a cause and a trigger and look for the trigger(s). What happened just before the horse was spooked? From a distance of how many metres are you able to observe a calming signal or tension features in his face or body? If there are a number of people standing by your horse, see how many he can handle. Can he take one person? Two? Does the sex of the person make a difference? Does it matter how they stand, how loudly they talk, and what distance they maintain from the horse? When you start looking at the environment in this way, you will be able to be much more focused in analysing the stimuli your horse is responding to and take appropriate action, even at the mildest level. For instance, you will see the difference between your horse giving a neck shake because a bee is buzzing around his head—a situation that requires no appeasement—or when the saddle is being put on his back. In the latter case, you can create a practice plan on how to saddle your horse without him giving this signal. If you observe your horse at the level of stimuli, you will get to know him that much better.

## HOW DOES IT HELP YOU?

In our human world, domesticated horses are constantly confronted with stimuli. Many horses are not sufficiently socialised to deal with these stimuli in a relaxed way themselves. Some riders and handlers have become almost used to working with horses who carry tension and spook often. Frequent instances of acute stress or prolonged tension cause health risks in the horse, a negative living and learning climate, and less harmonious cooperation with people. It has both short and long-term negative effects.

## ACT UPON SIGNALS

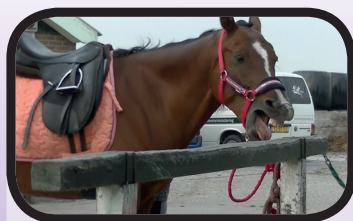
If you recognise calming signals and act on them, you have a tool to prevent high tension in your horse. In this, observing your horse regularly is key. Besides calming signals, you can also pay attention to his facial and body features. Do you see a relaxed face, with long nostrils, almond-shaped eyes, a soft chin, and a loosely-carried tail? Or is there more tension in the face, featuring wrinkles over the eye, an extended upper lip, a differently shaped nose, and round eyes and nostrils?

If you see calming signals or displacement behaviour and your horse does not calm down quickly, help your horse to recover and deal with the situation. For instance, take small breaks when you are saddling him. When you are riding, do a whole lap of slow walking on a long rein, allowing recovery to take place. Ask others to keep a greater distance from your horse if he is still getting used to people. Remove your horse from a scary situation by leading him away from a frightening stimulus. After you have ascertained what, exactly, is causing your horse's

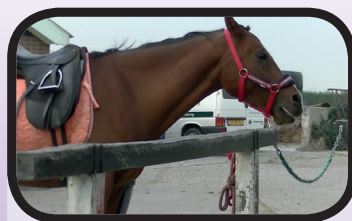
tension, make a practice plan at home to help him deal with this stimulus in the future, provided that this is reasonable and within the horse's ability."

The idea is not to remove tension altogether; this is not possible in everyday life, and it is not desirable either. Tension is a part of life. Every learning experience comes with some tension. Discovering new stimuli is necessary, fun and brings joy in life: investigating a new pasture, a cardboard box, another horse. You just have to find the right balance. Light tension from which a horse recovers quickly is good. Your horse is attentive: fine. But if the tension rises further, you should, in my opinion, stop, re-evaluate, and make a different practice plan. At low levels of tension, the horse makes positive associations and is better able to think and remember. He needs less repetition. If your horse is able to deal with new stimuli in a relaxed state on his own, then he will be healthier, more stable, show fewer flight responses, and be a pleasant cooperation partner. Who does not want that?

**IN OUR HUMAN WORLD, DOMESTICATED HORSES ARE CONSTANTLY CONFRONTED WITH STIMULI. MANY HORSES ARE NOT SUFFICIENTLY SOCIALISED TO DEAL WITH THESE STIMULI IN A RELAXED WAY THEMSELVES. SOME RIDERS AND HANDLERS HAVE BECOME ALMOST USED TO WORKING WITH HORSES WHO CARRY TENSION AND SPOOK OFTEN.**



*Protect* is showing a series of calming signals when he is being saddled. He chews, tongue out chews, then he yawns...



...and finally he shows a jaw stretch. Note: his half closed eyes, also a calming signal.



An example of a real-life enriched environment with stimuli.



Offering a new stimulus. *Orion* can decide his pace of discovery.