

TAKE A STEP BACK

Empower your horse

TAKE A STEP BACK

WORDS BY RACHAËL DRAAISMA

Ristin Olthof and Indy are on a walk. Indy decides which direction to take.



Romy Smink Photography

We all know them...those extraordinary horses who; do not bat an eye in the hustle and bustle of the human world, who do not mind being groomed by a group of giggling girls, remain calm when a cyclist with a rattling bicycle-cart passes by, and wait patiently when you are struggling to open the pasture gate. What is special about these horses, is that they are completely comfortable in our human world; with all the sounds, movements, and scents that go with it. They understand the logic behind certain things and are interested in the life they lead, and all it entails. Of course this is wonderful for their riders or handlers, but it is also important for the health and wellbeing of the horses themselves. Often at times, a programme is devised for the physical and riding development of the horse. Less common, is the creation and application of a structured programme for his emotional development, despite the many advantages of this.

For instance, a horse who can deal with all sorts of stimuli, such as people, animals, objects, scents, and being on his own without fear or a need for assistance has:

- Increased capacity for reasoning (he understands more and can cognitively follow along).
- Increased capacity for generalisation. If he understands a concept, he can connect similar concepts to this. A horse who is able to generalise and who is used to a shaggy black dog, will more quickly become accustomed to a short-haired grey dog, because he is already familiar with the concept of a dog. A horse that cannot generalise has to accustom himself to the short-haired grey dog all over again.
- Increased memory capacity. He can better remember cognitive lines of reasoning.
- Increased motivation to try new things.
- Increased tendency to seek out and maintain social relationships.
- Increased enjoyment of life and willingness to undertake activities.
- Increased impulse control.
- Decrease in fearful and aggressive responses.
- Decrease in fear in response to new things.
- Decrease in overreactions.
- Decrease in the build-up of chronically elevated stress levels, depression, lethargy and learned helplessness.

- Healthy immune system and a smaller chance at developing stress-related ailments.

WHY? The brain is malleable. It can adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of life, until a very advanced age. These adaptations and changes in the brain take place on several levels. Offering stimuli can:

- Increase the number of receptors that transmit information.
- Increase the amount of information that passes through the receptors.
- Create improved blood flow through the area in question, enabling increased cell activity.
- Stimulate the formation of new cell structures, in which neurons literally form new pathways across which new information is transported.

This is true for every horse, regardless of his mental health. If your horse suffers from some form of depression, learned helplessness and/or chronically elevated stress levels, then know that this is not a status quo. If changes are made in the horse's life, if he is treated differently, his brain will change, as will his behaviour and physical and emotional health. So how can you responsibly introduce your horse to stimuli?

BUILD ENRICHED ENVIRONMENTS

You create an Enriched Environment by temporarily placing new elements in an existing practice space, thus enriching it. These new elements can be all sorts of objects: blankets you place on the ground, cardboard boxes of various sizes, a bag full of waste plastic, a stick, an inflatable pool toy. Our everyday household objects are interesting for a horse to investigate: a chair, a kitchen step, a skipping rope, a dog leash, or a grocery bag.

When it comes to socialisation, we often think of just objects and sounds, but scents also play an important role here. A horse out on competition will, for instance, smell hamburgers, chips, a wet dog, or other horses. You can take this into account in your Enriched Environment by, for example, putting down a piece of cloth you have sprayed with a certain scent. You can eat your chips near your horse. You can sprinkle certain aromatic substances, like cinnamon, dill, or even a drop of ketchup, around the pasture. If you want to introduce a number of scents to the horse, do not use too many at once. Otherwise, the horse may start to behave evasively with regard to the scents, instead of being stimulated to discover them.

An Enriched Environment does not always need to be built specially. Sometimes it just presents itself. You just need to keep an eye out for it. For instance, when you are taking a ride in the country with your horse, you can have him stop in various places where he can explore, even if it is just allowing your horse to stop to smell the droppings of other horses, provided that there are no contagious diseases going around.

An Enriched Environment stimulates the horse to make choices and to smell, taste, and touch objects. The new stimuli offer mental stimulation and lead to a better understanding of our world and better socialisation. In addition, exploring objects stimulates the release of endorphins in the horse, which creates a sense of wellbeing.

GOLDEN RULES FOR AN ENRICHED ENVIRONMENT

The objects are safe

When you are building an Enriched Environment, make sure all the objects are safe. They should not be too small, enabling the horse to eat them, or have small parts that can be eaten off them, like the caps on bottles. Do not use bags with handles on them; the horse's legs could get entangled as he walks.

The space is big enough

In the space in which you build your Enriched Environment, you should designate one part where you place the objects. The rest of the space (about three quarters of the total space) remains empty. That way, your horse is not overstimulated, and he can choose from what distance to observe the objects and how to approach them. He can also withdraw if he wants a mental break, possibly before returning to his exploration of the objects. That is why the space in which you place the objects needs to be big, for instance, like a paddock, a pasture, or the riding arena. If you place the objects in a small stall, then your horse cannot distance himself from it. In that case, you are not giving him a choice to explore the object; you are forcing him to deal with it, possibly overwhelming him. That is not the idea.

Start off easy, small and calm

If your horse is careful about approaching the objects, make sure the surroundings are calm when he is doing his exploring. If, at the moment he is investigating a plastic ball, a kid creates a clamour by knocking something over, there is a good chance that the horse will be startled by the noise and that he will associate this negative shock with the object he was investigating when it happened, or with the entire setting. Also, do not move objects around while your horse is exploring. This can inspire fear. Introduce four objects, for instance, and once your horse has gotten used to them, replace one object at a time.

Prevent fear

You want to prevent fear. The previously discussed benefits (that stimulation of the brain increases the number of receptors and enhances the flood flow in the area in question, and that new neural pathways are formed) all happen in the area of the brain that is activated. If you overtax your horse, if you build an Enriched Environment that scares him and causes him to form negative associations, then all these changes take place in the fear centre of the horse's brain. In that case, you are not training your horse to deal with stimuli on his own; you are making him more fearful. That is why keeping a close eye on the horse's body posture and behaviour is crucial to the success of this kind of training. Earlier articles in this series, which detail the calming signals and communication ladders, are a good guide to this. This is true for every horse; you want to start and end in a calm state. As such, it is better to offer an Enriched Environment that is too easy, than one that is too hard.

The horse sets the pace of discovery; the handler follows

You can build an Enriched Environment and just release your horse into it. You can also choose to hold the horse by a long rope and to follow him.

Indy discovers the content of a bucket by herself - at first with caution (hence the hindlegs), later more at ease.



It goes without saying that you should only do this if the horse is used to it and does not respond to it with tension. The purpose of the Enriched Environment is to make the horse more independent, making him see how much fun it is to discover new stimuli, to discover that the objects he initially distrusted were not so bad on closer inspection (even if it takes five sessions), and practice how he can relax after having felt mild tension. The less you as a handler involve yourself in this process, in whatever way, the more the horse gets a chance to actually do this. Whatever he encounters and learns to understand on his own will no longer scare him. So, consciously take a step back. Do not force your horse to confront an object. Do not pull him towards it, do not command him, do not entice him with treats, and do not start jumping over objects yourself to demonstrate how much fun it is. The underlying emotion when there is compulsion is not positive. When you are forced to confront your fears, it can feed the fear, rather than lessen it. It can also increase dependence on the handler, decreasing the motivation to discover new things. If you lure him with food, your horse is (at least partially) busy coming to get the food, not discovering objects. If you talk and walk around a lot, you are distracting the horse from his own explorations. It is also true, if you turn your Enriched Environment into a touching exercise, in which the horse is rewarded for touching items.

INTEGRATE A GAME THAT INVOLVES A CHALLENGE

Another way to have your horse experience stimuli is to offer him a challenge you believe he will be able to solve. In this case, it does help to use food. For instance, you can roll a carrot into a dry or wet towel, and have your horse unroll the towel to get to the carrot. Or you can string apple slices on a rope for your horse to pull off, if he dares. Or you can put empty bottles, without caps, in a tub and add a handful of feed. The horse has to then move the bottles aside to get to the feed. Moving the bottles produces noise though, and this too can be an experience he becomes accustomed to. It is important to realise though, that the horse's problem-solving ability, his impulse control, and his understanding are only stimulated the first time, or first few times he is confronted with and solves the puzzle. If he knows the game, then playing it, is just a pastime, especially if the game is fun and passes the time well. However, the brain plasticity, socialising capacity, and problem-solving ability of your horse are no longer engaged. So, it is a challenge for the handler to keep coming up with new suitable games that do not scare the horse, but that do challenge him mentally.

PRESENT YOUR HORSE WITH OPTIONS

Self-determination, being able to influence your surroundings, having options; it produces cognitive stimulation and more intensive socialisation, it stimulates the horse's capacity to reason, and it heightens his enjoyment of life (that is true for all animals, including humans). It is important though, that when you offer your horse choices (within a safe framework), that these are real choices, and they should not be steered by the owner either. Putting a horse in his regular pasture and saying he has a choice about where he goes within it and which blade of grass he eats is not the type of choice discussed here. The choices I am talking about have to have value to the horse and reflect real differences. For instance:

- The horse is allowed to take the lead as we are walking together and to choose the path we take.
- The horse is allowed to choose the route we take when we are riding in the country.
- The horse gets to choose which pasture he wants to be let into.
- The horse gets to choose whether he wants carrots or apples (offer one in each hand and see if he has a preference) or to make other decisions about food.
- The horse gets to indicate for how long he will be groomed.
- The horse gets to indicate when he wants a break when he is being ridden or when he is receiving treatment, such as by a physical therapist.

GETTING TO KNOW A DIFFERENT SIDE TO YOUR HORSE

It is possible that your horse flourishes when he is allowed to indicate what he does and does not want that you enter a period in which you have to find a balance between his wishes and yours. For instance, you let your horse choose the path during a walk but all he wants to do is graze and no longer walk at all. When the time has come to get going, it may be helpful to use a clear signal, such as "your turn", and after that command, your horse is allowed to do certain things he wants. Then, after some time has passed, you could say something like, "enough", accompanied by a particular hand signal, and it is your turn to decide what happens again. However, certain things will sort themselves out, even without a clear signal and not cause friction. For instance, your horse could indicate



Rachaël taught Indy to follow a scent trail of footsteps - the perfect mental stimulation.

Cijis Timmers Photography

where he wants to be brushed, and you could just comply. Or a horse could walk over to the hay because he wants to eat, and you could give him some food. You can also see a different side to your horse when he is discovering Enriched Environments. On one hand, he may be braver because possibly, the inhibitory effect of the handler is absent. Or, on the other hand, you may see that your horse is more careful than usual without the support of the handler. In that sense, it is not just the horse that is discovering new things, but the handler too. And in the handler too, the stimulation prompts changes in the brain. It is truly a journey you take together. ❖