

Negotiating objects on the trail

By Suzanne De Laurentis and Allen Pogue, *Imagine A Horse*, 2015

Imagine being on a trail ride and an animal unexpectedly darts across your path. Your horse shys and takes a big leap to the side. Your blood is pumping and you tense up causing your horse to react even more. Well, now imagine being able to quickly get his attention back on you with one simple movement, bringing calm and focus to the situation.

Acclimating your horse to new situations is about establishing his trust in you. To help establish trust, always come from a positive and encouraging position.

When a horse is surprised or startled on the trail, stay calm and be proactive. Your behavior will shape his. If we change his focus for even a few seconds, with a familiar exercise or default behavior we can usually deflect the flight mechanism and regain his attention.

So here are the tools you will need

Your regular riding tack

Enough room to ride a 12-15 foot circle

Treat pouch and his favorite flavor of treats. We like Manna Pro's Bite-Size Nuggets or Start To Finish Horse Treats

We use a default behavior that keeps him focused on you rather than the situation. We'll teach him a cue so he can understand what's coming next. It's the **expectation** that he will be rewarded with a treat that moves his focus back to you.

In the teaching phase, we'll ride a small circle and stop to reward him at the half way mark and again on completion. Use a pre-cue word like "**circle**" to tell him what he is going to do.

Practice riding and rewarding enough times that he immediately recognizes the cue and implied reward.

Once this sequence is established, you can omit the halfway mark reward. So next time you are out on the trail and a scary situation occurs, get his focus on you by using the pre-cue "circle", riding the circle, and then giving him a reward at the end which could eventually be a verbal "good boy" or a pat on the neck.

So remember:

Train yourself to be proactive not reactive in a surprise situation

Default behaviors build trust because he can stay relaxed with your guidance

Practice riding the circle enough times that he instantly recognizes it

Never punish him for being afraid

Sensitizing a horse to the behavior you would like is a great idea. This is NOT the same as desensitizing.

