

Dealing with difficult mule behaviour- A guide to mule training

Evolution has not equipped domesticated mules to be creative problem solvers; after all, their ancestors both donkeys and horses have survived for millions of years by running away from everything that was likely to cause them harm. When a mule is faced with a problem or difficult situation their first method of solving the problem is to run away as their mother the horse would do. When the ability to run away is removed by physical barriers such as fences, gates, stable walls, or through the use of a lead rope, the mule must use their other natural behaviours to solve the problem that they face. Hence, the mule will use kicking, biting, rearing and even avoid being caught in an effort to solve their problems. When working with a mule that displays an unwanted behaviour it is important to think with the mule's brain rather than using our own human perceptions to judge the animal's behaviour.

Mules have many of the best traits of their parents. They can withstand extremes of climate, perhaps due to the origins of the donkey from Africa and Asia. Faced with a dangerous situation mules will choose either a flight or fight response depending on individual circumstances compared with a horse that would always prefer to run away. This tends to make the mule very calm and steady which is why they were so popular with the armed forces for carrying explosives and ammunition. They were less likely, than horses, to panic in dangerous situations and could carry much more than donkeys.

Unfortunately, the activities that mules find a problem are often the ones that are essential to their care in domestication. Activities such as, being tied up, hoof care, grooming and treatment by the farrier or vet, can all present mules with a problem. So why do some mules tolerate all of these elements of domestication calmly, and other mules find the most basic routine care impossible to accept?

The most common causes of behaviour problems include pain, medical conditions, evolution, genetics, previous learning, environmental factors, training and human interaction.

The three most common reasons mules display difficult behaviour are of pain, fear or because they do not know what is required of them. It is important at this point to dispel the myth of mules as stubborn creatures that deliberately do things to annoy humans. The act of getting pleasure from human discomfort or anger is an extremely complicated mental process and one that it is unlikely that any equine would be capable of performing. If mules were capable of deliberately deceiving us, why then do they carry heavy loads and suffer the burdens of hard work in so many countries? The fact is, that the true nature of mules, as a species, is to be compliant and adapt to the requirements of domestication. If this were not the case we would not have used them throughout history to carry heavy loads and serve in wars and conflict, in fact it is said that America was built on the back of a mule. Mules can kick harder than we

can, bite harder and run faster, they do not have to comply with humans at all, yet in the majority of cases they willingly do so.

It has never been scientifically proven that equines are capable of deceit, in fact the only group of creatures that have shown an ability to deceive others are the great apes and of course human beings. Perhaps because we judge mule behaviour based on our own capabilities, we tend to perceive any unwanted behaviour from mules as stubborn or deliberately difficult. When we blame the mule for its problems, our patience disappears along with our ability to change their behaviour. When we accept that mules are not just being naughty and that their behaviour is caused by pain, fear or lack of knowledge we remain fully responsible for the solution to our mule's problem.

The mules' legendary reputation for being stubborn is born out of their enormous sense of self preservation meaning it is very difficult to get a mule to do something that it perceives to be dangerous or difficult. Hence, once a mule has received bad treatment or experienced a scary situation it is often very difficult to retrain the animal.

The possibility of pain or a medical condition should be eliminated by a Veterinary surgeon before proceeding with any training. This is not always easy as mules are very stoic animals and do not exhibit pain as readily as other equines. If a mule's behaviour changes suddenly or if their behaviour is good in every way apart from one specific activity, it is highly likely that pain is or has been the causal factor in their difficult behaviour. Removing or controlling the pain may lead to a rapid improvement in behaviour.

In general the more nervous or lacking in confidence a mule is, the more likely they are to develop problem behaviour. Fear is the most common cause of problem behaviour and the most misunderstood. Again the difficulties arise when we judge the mule's behaviour based on our human perceptions of the situation. We understand that the farrier and the vet treatment are beneficial or that there is no danger posed by us or by simple routine treatments such as grooming or hoof care. With this knowledge we see the mule's attempts to avoid such activities as unreasonably difficult. Yet how many people are fearful of hospitals or dentists? We too have our fears such as, spiders, heights, flying, small spaces and rats. If we imagine our own reaction to being forced to deal with our fears we understand the motivations of our mule's behaviour more fully.

Fear produces a flight response from the fearful stimulus, if the mule cannot use this flight mechanism to escape they use their fight response instead. Fear can be caused by previous experiences. Mules that have been roughly handled in the past will still initially show fear even to new more patient and understanding owners. Anything that has been associated with previous fearful experiences can then produce the same response. Hence the mule becomes afraid at the sight of the farrier, vet or even the head collar. A change in human behaviour and body language can also trigger the fear reaction.

If a mule does not know what is happening or what they should do during handling, they are likely to try to solve the problems that they face by either running away or if they cannot run away, by defending themselves.

Mules' behaviour often goes through the same pattern when faced with a difficult situation. They may initially use their horse mother's flight mechanism to try and escape the situation. Once caught and held they adopt the nature of their stoic donkey father and if scared too much or pushed too far they will revert to their mother's flight instinct leading them to panic suddenly and try to escape. This fluctuation leads to much misunderstanding of mule behaviour and to potential risk of to the mule handler if they are not ready for this sudden change.

Mules communicate with each other through the use of body language such as threats to bite or kick, and running away is normal, acceptable behaviour. It is therefore normal and natural for a mule to use these behaviours to communicate with humans. After all we humans, quite naturally want to use our normal method of communication, talking, as a way of trying to communicate with mules, even though mules do not talk. In essence behaviours that we consider to be difficult or bad are often considered by mules as good or successful.

Difficult behaviour is simply communication in the normal language of the mule. We must view their behaviour in this way if we are to help mules with their problems. The way we perceive the behaviour of the mule determines our own behaviour towards the mule's problems.

There is always a reason for a mule's difficult behaviour and if the behaviour is continuing then a reason still exists. The current behaviour may be getting the mule what it requires. If the mule kicks to prevent their feet from being handled, and if their feet are not handled then the mule learns that kicking is successful and kicking continues. If a mule does not want to be caught because they are fearful of the vet and they are trapped and caught for the vet, then the mule learns that being caught is a bad thing and the behaviour of running away continues.

Mules that do not like to be groomed fidget and stamp their feet until the grooming is finished and they are released. The mule does not understand that grooming has stopped because we have finished, but rather they believe that fidgeting and stamping their feet worked so the behaviour continues the next time they are groomed.

Changing behaviour

Whatever behaviour we are trying to change the same basic principles apply. Having ensured that the unwanted behaviour is not related to pain or a medical condition, time must be taken to investigate the most likely motivation for the behaviour.

Create a safe environment

Safety should always be the first concern during training. Neither the trainer nor the mule should be in a position where either could become injured. Controlling the environment means making sure that there are no obvious physical hazards. Where possible restrict the size of the working area. It is obviously better to work in a stable or small yard rather than a three acre field or large barn. Ensure that anyone else involved is fully aware of what is going on and any unnecessary distractions are removed. Make sure that all other mules are suitably restrained or if mules are closely bonded that they are near enough to the animal in training so that no distress is caused.

Take the time to do the work correctly the first time

Often it is tempting to rush the training and to try to do too much too soon. It is important to progress only at a rate which is suitable for the mule. Rushing training causes mistakes and accidents. It is important to build a good foundation of behaviour before moving on to more difficult areas. The mule which does not like their feet picked up should be completely happy to be groomed before training to pick up the feet begins. Each mule is an individual and the speed at which they progress will depend on factors such as previous experience, individual nature, skill and confidence of the trainer.

Create a shaping plan

A written plan is essential to create good training. Shaping is the process of breaking down the final required behaviour, such as calmly picking up feet, down in to small manageable steps. So a written shaping plan breaks down the required behaviour into small achievable steps which can be used to plan training sessions and stay safe.

If a mule has a habit of kicking, it is dangerous to attempt to pick up their feet. However, picking up the feet can be broken down into smaller safer steps such as grooming over each and every part of the mule, then progressing to standing still while each part of the body is touched with the hand. These steps then progress to the mule standing while the top of their leg is touched. As the mule becomes more comfortable with this contact then the trainer can reach further down the leg until the foot is lifted for a split second and this then increases to two seconds and then five seconds etc.

Shaping helps the mule to deal safely with their fears in small easily achievable steps. As a result of shaping the mule will be less fearful and will learn more easily. Shaping the mules behaviour in this way also helps the trainer to regain any lost confidence before progressing to more challenging stages of the training.

Help in formulating the shaping plan is available from the Training Centre.

Mark good behaviour as a priority

For a mule to change their behaviour, the required new behaviour must be communicated to the mule. We can do this by rewarding good behaviour. Rewards for mules may include scratches, grooming, general attention as well as food rewards. Food rewards do not cause mules to bite if they are used correctly. Food rewards should never be given for any behaviour that could be considered mugging, pushy or aggressive in any way. The mule that accepts being caught, may be given a food reward and then released, this will increase the chances of the mule being caught again in future.

The other way of marking correct behaviour is scientifically known as negative reinforcement. If something that the mule considers to be negative is removed in conjunction with a new behaviour, then it is likely that the mule will perform that new behaviour again in the future. If the mule does not like being groomed, then they will find the pressure of the brush negative and will want it to go away. The mule will try to remove the pressure by moving or even kicking. During this unwanted behaviour the brush should stay in contact with the mule. However, once the mule stands still the brush can be taken away for a few seconds to teach the mule that standing still is more effective at getting rid of the brush than moving or kicking.

A mule that kicks as attempts are made to pick up their feet is trying to remove the negative stimulus that they feel from the hand. If the trainer can continue to gently rest a hand anywhere on the leg and this hand is removed only when the mule stands still, the mule will learn that kicking does not work as a way of removing negative stimulus, but standing still does and it will begin to offer more standing still.

Always finish on a good note

Finishing a lesson on a positive note is very important. Any behaviour that has improved from the start of the lesson can be used as finishing place. This reinforces the correct behaviours for the mule. If we were to finish the lesson because we ran out of time and the mule happened to kick, then the mule would learn that kicking out works if you want to get rid of a the trainer. It does not matter how small the improvement or that the final goal was not reached only that the session finishes with some improvement.

Behaviour gets bigger before it changes.

When a previously learnt behaviour no longer works, a mule will try harder to see if previously effective behaviour will work again. If a mule has learnt that kicking prevents their legs from being touched and then the trainer becomes more

persistent in trying to pick up the feet, the kicking behaviour is likely to become worse as the mule tries harder to avoid having their legs touched. This increase in behaviour is only temporary and must be worked through. By showing the mule that something else works, such as standing still, the kicking behaviour will naturally diminish. It is very important not to stop the training session during this increase in unwanted behaviour as the mule will learn to perform their problem behaviour with new force or for a longer period of time.

Stretch the mule's comfort zones

As a mule learns to deal with activities that they previously found a problem they may feel fearful. This is similar to the discomfort we might feel if we are forced to deal with our fears or phobias. The levels of tolerance for this discomfort can be termed comfort zones. This is what we see when a mule begins to perceive danger or fear. They look nervous or anxious and may change their body language a little, by swishing their tail or moving away. While we want to work slowly and carefully it is also important that we expand the mule's comfort zones during training, as this expansion of the comfort zones is what creates learning and helps build confidence. If every time the mule looks nervous training is stopped they will never learn to deal with the problems of domestication. Care should be taken not to overreach the mule as this could lead to more problem behaviours.

Steps to working with behaviour problems

- Have a Vet check the mule for any pain or underlying medical conditions
- Establish possible causes of behaviour
- Seek advice from the Training Centre if required
- Study and research the behaviour problem
- Create a safe shaping and training plan
- Create a safe environment in which to work
- Allow plenty of time for training
- Take small steps and do not rush
- Reward good behaviour
- Listen to the mule's body language
- Expect behaviour to get worse or increase before it changes

©The Donkey Sanctuary.

FONDAZIONE ONLUS