

Using Positive Reinforcement Techniques to Rehabilitate “Needle Shy” Horses

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Abstract: Equine veterinarians often encounter patients that have become fearful or averse to receiving intravenous blood draws or injections which can result in added risk of harm or injury to patient, handler, and veterinarian alike. Additionally, needle fears and aversions can have a negative impact on the relationship between veterinarian and horse. This project explored the use of positive reinforcement training to reduce fear, anxiety and stress (FAS) associated with jugular venipuncture in five horses known for having “needle shy” behavior. Attempted jugular venipuncture was performed by the horses’ regular veterinarian and filmed for assessment of FAS scoring using Fear Free’s FAS Scale for Horses both prior to and after positive reinforcement training. Three of the five horses had a reduction in FAS to 0 post-behavior modification when positive reinforcement of learned steps was performed before needle insertion. One of the five horses had a reduction in FAS from a 4 to a 3 post-behavior modification when positive reinforcement of learned steps was performed before needle insertion. The last horse had no reduction in FAS post-behavior modification. The behavior modification plan designed for this study may be effective in reducing the FAS experienced by horses that are already compliant for jugular venipuncture, but is not sufficient for reducing FAS or rehabilitating horses that experience high levels of FAS or noncompliance toward jugular venipuncture.