



10 Insights Into Learning Theory and Horses

What if we had a better way to communicate with our horses? A system that reduced horses' fear and increased safety during handling. We do! Learning theory is the conceptual framework describing how knowledge is absorbed, processed, and retained during learning. Applying learning theory to horse training is changing the way we interact with our horses and challenging long-held training traditions and beliefs. As researchers investigate how horses learn, we all gain an improved understanding of equine intelligence and capability. Are you ready to find out more? Here are 10 research-based learning theory insights to get you started.

Researchers have found horses learn tasks more quickly if their handlers use treats to positively reinforce wanted behaviors.

1 Horse training should involve the correct use of what is known as learning theory. Its main learning processes are habituation (becoming accustomed to things), sensitization, shaping, operant conditioning (positive and negative reinforcement), and classical conditioning (using predictable signals). [TheHorse.com/36474](https://www.thehorse.com/36474)

2 In one study, Scottish researchers found notable improvement in horses' cooperation with veterinary examinations and treatments when veterinarians, technicians, and other handlers applied learning theory during the visit. [TheHorse.com/29918](https://www.thehorse.com/29918)

3 An Italian-American study found that although only 34% of the respondents gave correct answers to definition questions about learning theory, more of them actually understood how to apply the learning theory with horses. Still, riders able to apply learning theory correctly represented the minority. Their responses indicated that 41% knew how to use a whip correctly and 39% knew how to use their leg correctly. [TheHorse.com/37936](https://www.thehorse.com/37936)

4 Positive reinforcement involves rewarding the horse for a desired behavior. Reward examples include treats, verbal praise, petting, and wither scratching. [TheHorse.com/36895](https://www.thehorse.com/36895)

5 Negative reinforcement relies on the use of pressure and timely release of pressure to train horses. It's only called "negative" in a mathematical sense because something (pressure) is taken away during the training process to reward the horse for a correct behavioral response. **TheHorse.com/32501**

6 Punishment is doing some action with the goal of decreasing the likelihood of a behavior reoccurring. This is opposed to positive and negative reinforcement, which are techniques meant to increase the likelihood of a desired behavior reoccurring. **TheHorse.com/35334**

7 French researchers have shown that, at least in horses, stress seems to consistently impair learning. And the degree of that impairment depends on training method and the individual horse. Additionally, they found horses with fearful personality traits tended to be more impaired by stress when learning a task. **TheHorse.com/37778**

8 Positive reinforcement with food rewards appears to help horses in training learn better. French equine behavior researchers believe this is because the horses are paying more attention to their trainers. **TheHorse.com/32101**

9 One significant shortcoming of punishment is that it only provides feedback about incorrect behavior but doesn't give the horse guidance about what it should do instead. A handler reinforcing a horse's correct responses can have a more direct and effective result than punishing unwanted behavior. **TheHorse.com/37325**

10 Researchers at Massey University in New Zealand found that fewer veterinary students entering degree programs have prior experience with horses than in the past. As a result of their study and to improve the welfare of veterinary school teaching horses, the researchers recommended learning theory instruction for all veterinary students. **TheHorse.com/39389**

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