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## BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

Owners will recognize that horses and ponies all have different personalities, with varying temperaments, willingness to please and responses to environment and handling. With the exception of some of the miniature breeds, they are bigger and stronger than their handlers. Many behavioral problems can be due to the fact that they have managed to get away with minor misdemeanors and the problem grows from there. In other situations vices and bad behavior may be responses to boredom, environment or management practices.

Crib-biting, windsucking, weaving and box walking are also known as stable vices. They are repetitive actions which appear to serve no useful purpose. They are habitual and may be related to a release of endorphins in the horse's brain, creating an addictive behavior.

**Cribbing** involves chewing wooden structures in the stable or paddock. In some horses there may be a dietary reason, but in most it is just a habit probably developed to relieve boredom.

**Wind sucking** involves biting onto a door, feed manger, fence rail or other wooden surface and appearing to gulp in air. This habit can lead to colic or failure to thrive with some horses developing a pot bellied appearance. Most windsuckers will stop this behavior if a special collar is applied tightly around the throat. An operation to cut the throat muscles used during windsucking is sometimes performed on persistent cases but this is only successful in some and should be considered a last resort. Wind sucking horses are more prone to certain types of colic.



Windsucking

**Weaving** is the habitual swaying movement performed often across the stable door or along a fence or wall. It is sometimes caused by boredom or anxiety. Some horses will stop if a 'V' shaped grill is placed on the stable door.

**Stall walking** involves repeated episodes of aimless walking either around the stable or along a wall. Attempts to control this behavior include supplying the horse with toys to relieve boredom or placing obstacles such as rubber tires in the stable to impede progress. In the case of both weaving and box walking, horses tend to be worse if upset or unsettled.

### **Bucking, rearing, refusing**

These behavioral problems are sometimes due to pain. You should ask your veterinarian to examine your horse if it suddenly develops such behavior. If there is no obvious clinical problem, it may be helpful to test dose with an analgesic drug, such as phenylbutazone, for a few days or weeks to see if the behavior improves. If improvement occurs, further investigations, including examination of the teeth, neck and back, and inspection of the horse's tack, are indicated.

Horse-rider incompatibility is sometimes a cause of such abnormal behavior. The horse should be ridden by another, competent rider to see if the abnormal behavior continues. If a change of rider or of location alters the behavior, there is not likely to be a clinical cause. If a clinical cause is found, appropriate treatment can be given. In other cases it may be worth enlisting the help of an experienced horse person or someone who specialises in difficult horses.



### **General handling problems**

Many of these problems, such as pulling away when being led, biting, pushing the handler up against a wall, etc. are usually a result of the horse being allowed to take the upper hand. It is important to be assertive at all times when handling horses. Horses quickly recognize a nervous or apprehensive approach. If they learn that they can misbehave in this manner they can become uncooperative, unusable and dangerous. It is usually best to put the horse in the hands of a professional trainer to reeducate the horse.

### **Young stock and orphan foals**

When handling young stock, in particular, it is important not to spoil them. Orphaned foals can become so 'humanized' that they lose all respect for their human handlers and can become extremely difficult to handle when they become older. "Foolish" behavior can be cute in a baby, but dangerous when the baby grows up. It is always best to try to foster an orphan foal onto a foster mare or to provide it with a horse or pony companion. They need the company of other horses to learn to behave as horses and seldom thrive unless they become properly socialized in a herd. Normal handling and training should proceed as usual.

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