

## Calm Assertiveness

By Vicki Jayne Yates



## My definition of assertiveness in relation to horsemanship:

Assertive behaviour is about calmly, confidently communicating your message using open dialogue and equine communication. This is without disregarding or threatening the rights of the horse. It is not about dominance or not considering the horse.

It is not submissively permitting the horse to ignore your conversation. It is a state of mind, how we feel and how we act.

Being assertive involves taking into consideration both your own rights, wishes, wants, needs and desires, as well as those of the horse. Assertiveness means listening to your horse, taking in their opinion, views, wishes and feelings, in order that both parties act appropriately.

Assertiveness is about listening, understanding and honest open dialogue. It is learning to see eye to eye, treating your horse as a partner.

Assertiveness is about being flexible and willing to compromise.



There are times you should choose to be passive and times it is essential we are assertive. There is a scale of passive to assertive it is like fine tuning what you need at any given moment.

Watch how members of the herd use assertiveness in their communication. All in the herd will use assertiveness in their communication. Some horses more than others. You will see this behaviour is characterized by calm confident clear statements without using aggressive behaviour.

A harmonious herd has assertiveness as part of its language along with passive language.

At times you will see some aggressive behaviours this is usually related to resources.

Watch closely and you can learn a great deal about herd etiquette and social interactions between individuals.

Notice how members of the herd who are calm, use assertive and passive language are often the individuals that enjoy friendships and close bonds within the herd.

**People often confuse assertiveness with aggression.**

**Here is my personal definition of aggression:**

Aggression, in its broadest sense is behaviour that is forceful, hostile or attacking. It is an intention to cause harm or an act intended to increase relative social dominance. Aggression can take a variety of forms and can be physical or be communicated verbally or non-verbally.

Aggressive people do not respect the personal boundaries of others (human or equine) and thus are liable to harm others while trying to influence them.

Aggression is a natural behaviour in horses and can involve bodily contact such as biting, kicking or pushing, but most conflicts are settled by threat displays, body language gestures and intimidation that cause no physical harm.

Horses may use aggression to help secure territory, including resources such as food and water. Aggression between males often occurs to secure mating opportunities. Aggression may also occur for self-protection or to protect offspring. As attack is the best form of defence.



## Passive Behaviour.

Passive people tend to comply with the wishes of others at the expense of their rights and self-confidence. Many people adopt a passive response because they worry they will be disliked or will upset others (humans or their equine friends). They place greater weight on the rights, wishes and feelings of others. Being passive they hand over responsibility.

There are times it is appropriate to be passive with horses. It is part of their language and etiquette. An essential skill to master, when to be passive to allow the horse to communicate freely.

Horses find comfort and safety by knowing you are the reliable, safe and consistent. So it is worth pondering in times your horse is needing help or guidance do you need to be passive or assertive? Each situation is different.

In some situations you need to be assertive to help your horse. Especially if your horse looks to you for guidance, reassurance and confidence in difficult situations. At these times being passive may not help your horse. The horse could revert to instinctive behaviours, flight, fight, freeze, etc...

Passive people have trouble in saying no and setting boundaries. Passive behaviour is often linked to poor self-confidence and self-esteem. So it is worth pondering if we need to do inner work to examine ourselves.



## **Manipulative Behaviour.**

You will come across manipulative behaviour much more with humans than horses. In humans manipulative behaviour is about hidden agendas or motives. It is often very subtle and may be easily overlooked, buried under feelings of obligation, love, or habit. It is often controlling in nature and intent.

In horses manipulative is very rare in the herd. However the behaviour can be learnt. For example the horse can learn to manipulate its' human. A horse can train and manipulate its' human. Many horses I get called out with behavioural problems have effectively trained their human and manipulated the relationship to their advantage.

This is because the horse lacks a respected, trusted, calm assertive partner. I also see humans trying to control their horse by using manipulative behaviours. In terms of the language of the herd and desirable human behaviour using manipulative behaviour is not healthy in any relationship.

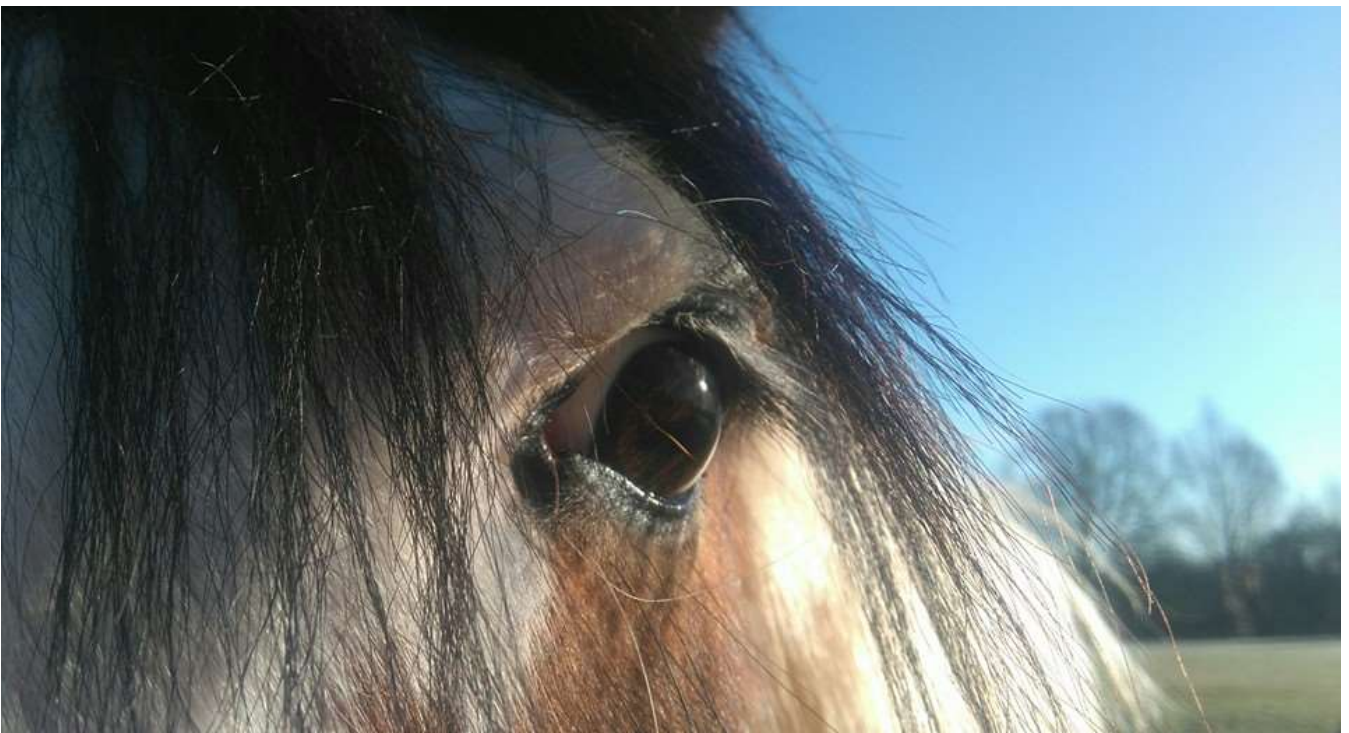


**In horsemanship I do not see it as a question of dominance and submission.  
To me interactions must be a two-way process.  
Open dialogue, not monologue.**

## Did You Know Assertiveness Helps

- Control our anxiety...as anxiety and assertiveness are polar opposites
- Build confidence and self-esteem
- Create clear boundaries
- Increase awareness of personal rights and rights of others
- Be appropriate, as you will know the difference between passive, assertive, aggressive and manipulative behaviours.

Most of us are not raised to be assertive. Many struggle to know what assertiveness means, what it feels like, sounds like and looks like. Assertiveness is a skill you can learn. It is about learning both verbal and non-verbal assertiveness skills within our own language and species. As well as understanding assertiveness in terms of the language of the herd.



## Assertive behaviour in horsemanship includes:

- Being open in expressing wishes, thoughts and feelings and encouraging your horse to do likewise.
- Listening to the views of your horse and responding appropriately, whether in agreement with these views or not.
- Accepting responsibilities and being able to delegate responsibilities to your horse.
- Regularly expressing appreciation of what your horse have done or are doing.
- Being able to admit to mistakes, it is part of learning, apologise and move on.
- Maintaining self-control.
- Behaving as an equal with your horse.
- Putting the relationship first.

Assertiveness is a communication style and strategy. It is about how you deal with and view personal boundaries, your own and those of your horse. In horsemanship being a calm assertive partner is about setting clear ethical boundaries. This is along with being able to say no to your horse without feeling guilty.

A small inner voice may know what is going on with your horse is about you setting boundaries and saying no, but because you lack assertiveness you find it impossible to put it into practice. It is often hard for people to say no to the ones they love, this includes their horse. Remember it's not your horse you are rejecting, or not loving your horse. With calm assertiveness you will have acceptance and love in your heart.

**Calm assertiveness is open to feedback and criticism from their horse.** As horsemanship is open dialogue. Learn from what your horse tells you. It is dialogue not monologue. Listen to understand your horse's communication.

Many people are paralysed by perfection. You will make mistakes, so will your horse. When you get it wrong, listen to the criticism from your horse it as an opportunity to grow.

Some people I go out to, are out their depth and don't understand the feedback from their horse. Getting help, practical advice helps with how to do things differently. Think about your horse as a resource in helping you to develop.

Calm assertiveness in horsemanship builds confidence in both human and their equine partner. Giving your horse positive feedback, target and reward with positive reinforcement the things you liked / wanted. Help your horse to learn new skills, or change behaviours. Focus more on the positives and be generous with praise.



**There are assertiveness techniques you can use with your horse.  
Here are a few examples.**

### **The Broken Record**

This is one of calm persistence of repeating the same horsemanship message again and again to your horse, without becoming angry or irritated. Consistently and calmly repeat the request, do not up your energy or engage in argument. Stay calm, clear and keep the message simple. You are able to compromise using the broken record technique. For example the smallest try for what you are looking for can be rewarded lavishly. Often the smallest try will be the first step in happily achieving the outcome you are looking for.

### **Fogging**

Fogging is a useful technique when dealing with horses that are upset, angry or aggressive. Rather than arguing back, fogging is about giving a minimal, calm response. It's about letting the horse express himself. We remain centred and calm, not arguing or being defensive or agreeing with the horse. You allow the horse to throw his arguments into a wall of fog that absorbs and has no bounce back. By not providing confrontation often it enables the horse to cease the behaviour and calm down. Then you are best able to look for the truth in the situation and suggest to the horse an appropriate direction to take.



### **Take Your Time**

Very few things in horsemanship are emergency situations. A great assertiveness technique is to stop, centre yourself and take your time. This is a great tip, especially if you are feeling too emotional. It's ok to time out and come back to things when you are calm and composed. It enables you to come at the communication more thoughtfully.



## **Calm Escalation**

This type of assertiveness is sometimes necessary when your reasonable and ethical requests that your horse understands, is capable of doing are being ignored.

I use low grade irritation, just like if you get in a car and try and drive away without fastening your seat belt the car pings at you until you fasten your seat belt, then rewards you by going silent once you comply.

With horses I use a bridge noise that equals low grade irritation is coming. (Just as in positive reinforcement / clicker training a horse can learn a noise = yes they can learn a different noise = no) This an in-depth topic and there is a FREE download on my website you can access on Positive Reinforcement. There I gift you how to get started with positive reinforcement and the difference between a positive and a negative reinforcement. And what types of negative reinforcements are ethical.

Let us think of what horses naturally find irritating and tickly flies are top of the list. So a low grade irritation can be as tickly a fly. Timing is essential when using this method, as well as care in its application. However once a bridge noise is learnt often touch is not required. As soon as the horse complies reward generously. If you choose this technique please ensure you have professional guidance.



## **Empathy and Compromise**

With assertiveness it is essential we recognize our horse's views the situation. If the horse is having problems, listen to understand and the path of the middle ground will open up before you. Humans tend to have all or nothing thinking and there is nearly always some middle ground that is the stepping stone to longer term success.

**Please use what I gift here alongside support from a professional of your own choice. This resource is not a replacement for accessing professional help when working with equines.**