

Clash of Two Leaders

by Nicole Birkholzer

I often refer to horses as “energy sponges” to describe how horses take in — and often hold — energy and stress from their environment.

At a recent farm call it was once again confirmed that horses not only feel what goes on around them but that the reactions to those feelings can affect both their own and their owner’s lives.

A Change in Behavior

Secret had become aggressive seemingly out of the blue, according to his owner Emily. During a recent vet exam Secret had reared up and twisted on the cross ties. On his way down he bumped Emily, who fell to the floor, landing on her back looking up at the soles of Secret’s hooves. Fortunately, Emily was not trampled, but her bruised back reminded her of the incident for days.

A few days later on a trail ride, Emily’s dog, a regular visitor at the barn, trotted out of the woods. Secret reared up again; this time so high that Emily’s face collided with his poll. Emily’s lower lip was bruised but thankfully she didn’t lose any teeth.

As the days went on it became increasingly challenging for Emily to take Secret out of his stall and up the path to his pasture. The 17-hand Thoroughbred danced and reared on the lead line to the point where Emily had to put a chain over Secret’s nose to feel somewhat in control and safe.

For Emily, an accomplished horsewoman, this was devastating. She’d acquired Secret 11 years earlier, retrained him, added Madi, a companion Quarter Horse mare, a few years later, and had planned to live with both happily ever after. She just couldn’t figure out what had changed Secret’s behavior so dramatically.

Anxiety and Power

It was late afternoon when I arrived at Secret’s barn and the horses were in their stalls. As I entered the barn aisle, Secret immediately stuck his face over the stall door, ears pricked forward, his

eyes soft. I took a deep breath and took in the scene. Madi occupied the stall next to Secret on the right, a chestnut pony gelding was on his left. Across the aisle from Secret and Madi was another mare.



Secret appeared curious, even playful. He sniffed my hand and nuzzled my jacket, but the moment I lifted my hand to place it on his neck Secret’s eye grew concerned. When I moved my hands closer to his poll his eye became leery and he moved his head away from me.

Emily shared that her horses had recently moved to this new barn. During the day, Secret and Madi were turned out together in their own pasture, while the pony and the other mare were together in another field.

Emily explained that Secret was the leader of his herd of two and that it was the first time since she’d had him that Secret was exposed to another gelding on a property.

When I concluded my initial assessment, I explained to Emily that a lot of horses hold tension in the area between the ears, especially horses in a leading position. Horses with a lot of herd responsibility think a lot, which can cause a headache-like sensation around

the poll area. I asked Emily if I could go into the stall. “Of course,” she said. “But, be careful. He’s unpredictable these days.”

As I positioned myself next to Secret’s shoulder he grew a little more agitated. He moved away from my hand and started to attack the metal stall door with his teeth so I removed my hand and retreated. Standing quietly next to Secret I was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of heart-pounding energy. It was a mix of anxiety and tremendous power that almost knocked me off my feet.

Leadership Struggle

I breathed deeply to stay grounded and asked Secret to share, or show me, what affected him so deeply.

As I explained my experience to Emily, Secret tried to get my attention. He repeatedly looked aggressively toward the pony in the next stall and then moved his head up and down. His behavior spurred Emily on to share one more piece of information.

Initially, Madi was in the stall Secret was now occupying. But Madi had attacked and chewed the wall that separated her from the pony gelding, so Emily had concluded Madi was not compatible with the pony and moved Secret into that stall. This was a vital piece of information.

Still affected by Secret’s energy, I wanted more space between us and left the stall. Standing out in the aisle next to his door I brought my hand close to his head and offered some healing, but Secret turned his head away from me again.

I wasn’t surprised. Horses that are strong herd leaders often refuse attention to an area that is in crisis. Revealing any vulnerability can put their leadership positions in jeopardy. In order to help Secret I needed to override his defensive behavior. Only then would he understand that help was available.

I explained to Secret that we needed to get to the bottom of this. I asked him to please put his nose into the halter, which he did, and holding his halter loosely but firmly enough to defend any nipping motions, worked my hand slowly closer to Secret's poll. There was a fiery energy cruising along the ridge of his neck, between his ears, down toward his forehead. I held my hand steady, breathing deeply, looking for Secret to soften his gaze, lower his head, or show any other sign of relaxation.

He couldn't relax and continued to evade. I invited him again and asked him to drop his guard just a little so we could understand what was going on and how to help him. In that moment, Secret, his head still bobbing up and down, still resisting my touch, offered insight. I received a message from him that he couldn't drop his guard because he was fighting for leadership with the pony next door. If he dropped his guard he'd surrender his leadership position. There it was. He gave me the reason for his behavior. He couldn't focus on his relationship with Emily or his work until this dispute was settled.

Resolution

As I relayed this information to Emily, Secret took several deep breaths and blew out through his nose. Then he dropped his head and yawned, once, twice, three times, releasing much of the fiery tension I had felt only moments ago around the top of his head. He shook his head a few times and continued to blow out through his nose, letting go of that pent-up tension, again and again.

Because the four horses were divided into mini-herds it was impossible for the two leaders to figure out who was in charge. Considering their difference in size, and that the pony belonged to another person, I was certainly not suggesting that the two geldings duke it out in the field.

Rather, Emily could explain to Secret that there were two herds in this barn — Secret was the leader of one, and the pony led the other. Every time Emily took Secret out of his stall and headed for the pasture she needed to remind him that Madi was his only responsibility. If Secret pinned his ears toward the pony or showed he was questioning his role Emily needed to remind him that the other horses were none of his business.

I recommended that Emily spend some time simply being with Secret so that they could reconnect. Their relationship had gotten far off the rails. It was time to sit and breathe together. Connecting like this would help Secret release more of the tension that had accumulated in his body.

The next day Emily texted me: "I cannot thank you enough for the powerful shift in perspective you provided for me about Secret. [I] had an amazing day with him today. He's still on the fence about things but was willing to receive some Reiki. He kept giving me his butt, his root chakra, then walked away and came back for more when he was ready. I see progress and possibility where I was feeling hopeless. Unbelievable."

Three days later another text: "Secret is almost back to normal; we've been practicing boundary setting toward the pony gelding. He's responding to that in a big way. I cannot believe that I was actually contemplating parting ways with him. [I'm] so grateful."

As horse owners we may feel puzzled when our horses display a behavior that we can't understand, and in many instances it's not an issue for a vet or trainer.

In my experience there's always a reason for the behavior and it's not impossible to find out why. Horses are usually willing to share information; this is where you may find it helpful to contact an equine communication expert to interpret the information correctly so that you as the owner have a plan to help, solve, or rectify what's going on. 🐾

Nicole Birkholzer is a horse advocate, animal communication expert, and the author of *Pet Logic*. Nicole is pioneering a new approach to horsemanship where horses are honored as soul companions and partners. To learn more about Nicole's services go to nicolebirkholzer.com.

Subscribe today!

at mahorse.com




HORSES
SMALL ANIMALS
EXOTICS

ACUPUNCTURE
CHIROPRACTIC
HOMEOPATHY
PHYSICAL THERAPY



HOUSE CALLS
FULL-SERVICE
SMALL-ANIMAL HOSPITAL
GROOMING
PET SUPPLIES

FAMILY
VETERINARY
CENTER

BUD ALLEN, M.S., D.V.M.
ROBIN KARLIN ALLEN, D.V.M.
99 MAIN ST. (RTE. 9)
HAYDENVILLE, MA
(413) 268-VETS
FAMVETS.COM

