



Men, Women & Horses By Gerrie Barnes

My experiences doing seminars and clinics for first-time horse buyers and owners and as a riding instructor specializing in novice and intermediate riders has brought me to the conclusion that there are natural differences in the way men and women relate to horses. Although this is not a new or startling conclusion, I have developed my own theory that I share with the men and women I teach that hopefully help them sidestep ineffective behaviors and techniques as they learn about horse handling, training, and riding.

I did research on the genetic, cultural, psychological, and behavioral differences between men and women to support – at least in my mind – my basic premise including topics on gender differences in war, business, sports and relationships. Two source titles seemed particularly descriptive:

- Women “Take Care”; Men “Take Charge” by Catalyst (research and advisory organization)
- Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication by John Gray

To share highlights from this research:

The Y chromosome in men is “responsible for all the differences between the sexes: biomechanical differences, physical size, body fat distribution and percentage, menstruation vs. sperm production, dietary requirements, effects of training, puberty and ageing, and psychology and behavior.”

“Men have 10 times more testosterone than women which is responsible for the distinctions in behavior pattern. Testosterone and related male hormones are often considered as responsible for aggression and drive.” A leading sociobiologist couldn’t be more clear: “ In the majority of animal species, males are characteristically aggressive, especially toward one another. Women as a group are less assertive and less physically aggressive. The degree of difference varies by culture.”

Thus, begins my theory... **(as a caveat, my theory recognizes that men and women differ in degree in their natural tendencies, qualities, and abilities.)** Men and women who do not have experience or training in working with horses have natural strengths, weaknesses, and possibly even counter-productive behaviors. Each gender has the ability to modify his or her behaviors to communicate more effectively with the horse.

Let’s look at the two primary horse instincts that trained riders consider when handling and riding: Flight Instinct and Herd Instinct.

Horses see their world first through the Flight Instinct. Is the person, animal, or situation going to hurt or kill me? Do I need to flee?

Untrained men will generally approach a horse with some sense of confidence. They will assume a “take charge” position even if they are untrained in the activity such as leading a horse. If the horse does not behave as expected, men usually take some action – even if it is the wrong action.

Untrained women will generally approach a horse slowly, possibly extending their hand for the horse to sniff or pet the horse before taking action. They are more cautious performing an activity they have not done before such as leading, checking in with the horse by looking backward to see whether the horse understands and assessing the horse’s “feelings” about the activity. If the horse does not behave as expected, women usually stop and decide what would be the best course of action for both the horse and the woman. Interestingly, my observation of the order of consideration is exactly that – first the horse then the woman. This probably results from our cultural expectation of women as caregivers.

The question is: Which untrained, natural approach is more effective with the horse?

Before answering that question, let us look at Herd Instinct. Horses live in a herd for protection against predators. The herd is a hierarchy, never a partnership, constructed with linear dominance – meaning that each horse is either above or below another horse in the herd. The leader controls the resources such as food, water, shelter, and the other members of the herd. Following the leader, the other horses establish their control over the resources of the group in order of dominance.

Does herd hierarchy sound like any institutions we have in our human society? Let's turn to the research.

"Hierarchical organization is widespread – and generally male dominated – in the military, business, religion, and other spheres of social life. Men are especially attuned to how they look in the eyes of their fellow men. Avoiding humiliation and maintaining face become especially important. By contrast, women are seen as more practical, less concerned with rank or honor, and thus better able to cooperate within a group. . ."

Going back to the example of leading the horse, the man assumed a leadership position with the expectation that the horse would follow. The woman assumed a team position with the horse checking in to make sure that the horse had everything it needed to be part of the team – understanding and willingness.

Further, if the horse did not behave as expected, the man would have taken some action and the woman would have considered the needs of the horse.

Again – which set of behaviors is more effective? Let's let the horse answer that question. From the list below, check the horse's needs that you meet given your own personality and note the horse's needs that perhaps you need to improve or change.

- Meet the physical needs of food, water, shelter, and a safe environment?
- Meet the psychological needs?
 - A feeling of safety
 - A feeling of trust
 - A respect for each horse as an individual
 - A need of companionship
- Does your horse know clearly who is in charge? From the horse's perspective, are you the leader that will protect his herd from predators or are you the subordinate?
- Are you a confident, fair, and consistent leader – not a bully or a leader that controls with pain and fear?
- Do you seek a harmonious relationship instead of a confrontative relationship? Can you finesse a horse instead of overpowering the horse or imposing your will to obtain your goal?
- Do you check your emotions and ego at the door, allowing only appropriate behaviors into the barn?
- Are you patient while the horse discovers, learns, or reacts?
- Do you assess the horse's reactions to your training and requests, modifying the way you request, or breaking the request down into smaller skills to make the horse more successful?
- Do you have an understanding of how horses establish dominance and control with each other? Do you control your horse using cues that the horse naturally understands?
- Do you control your horse's space and movement starting with low level cues and increasing the cues until there is an appropriate change?
- Do you understand that your relationship with your horse exists not only during training and riding and that your approach to ground activities and every day activities include the same standard of relationship?

Understand and appreciate your own individual untrained pre-disposition to interacting with your horse. However, understand that your horse has certain instinctual needs that you need to meet in a way that the horse understands. Both men and women can learn how to be fair, consistent, alpha leaders in their herd of two or more.

Basic Tip: Natural Horsemanship (NH) is not a new theory, but has been around since the beginning of human's relationship with the horse. If you learn about a horse's flight and herd instinct along with NH techniques, available in books, online, videos, instructors, and other sources, you will find common threads of technique that are effective with these non-verbal animals. If you make the effort to experience the world from the horse's perspective while maintaining your own goals, you should enjoy an effective, harmonious relationship.