

# EMA

Equine Massage Academy Ltd

*Therapy Education Research*

## Naughty or Uncomfortable? Rethinking 'Bad Behaviour' in Horses



It's easy to label things your horse is doing or not doing as "*bad behaviour*".

But what if your horse isn't being difficult at all?

What if they're trying to cope?

### **Behaviour Is Communication!**

Horses don't misbehave for no reason.

Every reaction—big or small—is a response to something:

- Physical discomfort
- Confusion
- Tension
- Previous experiences

When we label behaviour as "naughty," we risk missing the real cause.

Let's look at some common labels given to horses and often incorrectly...

#### ◆ **"Lazy"**

- Doesn't want to go forward
- Needs constant leg
- Feels unmotivated

👉 Often linked to discomfort, poor posture, or incorrect training—not attitude. But the horse could be fatigued or have an underlying problem that hasn't been diagnosed.

#### ◆ **"Naughty" or "Stubborn"**

- Random resistance
- Doesn't "do as it's told"
- Unpredictable behaviour
- Refuses to move
- Argues with the rider

👉 Usually a sign of confusion, discomfort, or inconsistent aids. Often a horse that can't, not won't.

#### ◆ **"Sharp" / "Hot"**

- Overreactive
- Sensitive to aids
- Tense or reactive

👉 Can be linked to pain, tension, or feeling insecure in the body. It might run away from pain.

◆ **“Cold-Backed”**

- Stiff or reactive when first mounted
- “Needs to warm up”

👉 Frequently related to back discomfort, saddle fit, or rider imbalances.

◆ **“Strong”**

- Heavy in the hand
- Pulls or leans
- Hard to stop

👉 Often balance and posture issues—not strength. It could also be tack related especially the bit, horses don’t need to be over-bitted if they are ridden correctly as this is counter-productive – some run away from a strong bit because its uncomfortable.

◆ **“Doesn’t Like Schooling”**

- Nappy in the arena
- Resistant during flatwork
- Better hacking

👉 Schooling may be exposing discomfort or poor training structure.

◆ **“Rushes”**

- Speeds up instead of balancing
- Runs through transitions

👉 Often lacks balance, strength, or understanding.

◆ **“Behind the Leg”**

- Slow to respond
- Dull to aids

👉 Can be linked to discomfort, desensitisation, or confusion.

◆ **“Overbent” / “On the Bit but Wrong”**

- Tucked in but not truly working
- Avoiding contact

👉 A posture issue—not correct engagement.

◆ **“Fussy in the Contact”**

- Head tossing
- Snatching reins
- Inconsistent connection

👉 Frequently linked to tack, tension, or discomfort from the bit/bridle or rider hands.

◆ **“Nappy”**

- Doesn't want to leave yard or others
- Spins, plants, or naps

👉 Often insecurity, discomfort, or lack of clear guidance from the rider.

◆ **“Explosive”**

- Bucks, rears, bolts
- Sudden reactions

👉 A big red flag for discomfort, fear, or overwhelm – are you training your horse too much and not enough down-time or rest to be a horse? Imagine your are doing this and the horse is also uncomfortable – its no wonder it's explosive!

◆ **“Girthy” / “Bites When Being Girthed”**

- Ears back when tightening girth
- Attempts to bite
- Tension or swelling through the body

👉 Commonly linked to:

- Saddle or girth discomfort
- Previous girthing issues or experiencing being “over girthed”
- Gastric issues (such as ulcers or incorrect diet – too much starch)
- Anticipation of pain during work

◆ **“Won't Stand Still to Mount”**

- Moves away from the mounting block
- Fidgets or walks off
- Tense or reactive when weight is added

👉 Often associated with:

- Pain when weight is applied (back, saddle, or muscular issues)
- Poor balance or instability
- Previous negative experiences
- Rider weight or balance causing discomfort.

### **The Key Message**

Most of these labels describe what the horse is doing.....but not why.

- 👉 Labels simplify behaviour
- 👉 But they often stop us looking deeper

### **Why This Matters?**

When you understand the *root cause*:

- The welfare of your horse improves and you become a more responsible owner
- Training becomes clearer
- Progress becomes consistent
- Behaviour improves naturally
- Performance improves

Because most horses aren't:

- 👉 Lazy
- 👉 Naughty
- 👉 Stubborn

They're simply:

- 👉 Communicating something we haven't understood yet

### **✅ A Better Approach**

Instead of asking:

- ❌ "How do I fix this behaviour?"

Ask:

- ✅ "Why is my horse responding like this?"

This shift changes everything.

### **Want to Help Your Horse on a Deeper Level?**

When you understand the link between body and behaviour, you stop guessing—and start helping.

A little investment can save you thousands of £'s in the long run - in vet bills, downtime and potentially a rehabilitation programme to help put your horse right.

Inside our no work required just sit back and learn courses, we help you to identify the route cause and how to fix things:

First choice courses:

- **Impact of Nutrition on Equine Wellness, Performance and Recovery** [LINK](#)
- **Taking Equine Vital Signs** [LINK](#)
- **Equine Massage for Horse Owners** (here we teach you how to assess your horses' muscles as well as help them) [LINK](#)

Follow up courses:

- **Equine Musculoskeletal Health, Training and Rehabilitation: A Comprehensive Guide for Professional Riding Coaches** – but this is a great course for anyone not just riding coaches and you WILL learn a lot [LINK](#)
- **Equine Bit and Bridle Fitting for Equestrians** (an essential skill for all horse owners) [LINK](#)
- **Empowering Equestrians with Saddle Assessment Skills** (another essential skill for all horse owners) [LINK](#)

**Your Horse Shouldn't Have to Cope – it Should Thrive!**

Our courses are approved by:

