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Horse-Eating Monsters: 4 Steps To Controlling The Spook

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Bend away from objects and go! Photo Credit:NBanaszak Photography

You're probably familiar with that horse-eating monster in the corner of the arena. You know - the invisible one that pops up even after passing that spot for the 100th time!

Or it might get even better. After going by without a thought for the past fifteen minutes, your horse suddenly decides that the invisible monster just showed up this moment! And you're stuck riding the spook rather than riding your plan (hopefully, you *are* riding and not on the ground).

In any case, your horse might spook at imaginary objects. He might spook at real objects - as in, the jumps that were moved around and put back differently than the day before. Or he might spook at a sound - no object needed!

The spook can be a problem not only in terms of the potential danger it might cause to you and your horse. Even if it is just a mild side-step or a dropped shoulder to the inside of the ring, your ride can be affected as well.

Your horse will likely drop his back and increase in tension through the body. He might lift his head and look at the offending objects, or step away without even looking. The tempo might be affected and you might find yourself becoming more of a reactive rider than you would like, waiting to see what happens and then trying to fix it after the spook.

What to do?

Always be safe! If you feel that you or your horse are not in a safe situation, take steps to de-escalate the situation. Tone down the ride, avoid the area, get off and work from the ground. Always be super-vigilant about safety for both of you. The solution below might not work for everyone in every scenario. Use your common sense or get help from a professional.

The following solution is a long-term “fix”. It is not intended to give you a one-off, on-the-spot result. The horse’s response will take time to develop, but if you stick with this routine in every spook situation (assuming you are safe enough), you will actually be able to teach your horse what to do when he feels like he should scoot, balk or deek sideways.

Step 1.

Do not look at the offending corner or object!

Most of us tend to have our attention attracted to whatever the horse is looking at. As John Lyons has often said, you end up spooking right along with your horse, since now both of you end up looking at the horse-eating monster! Your horse says, let’s get outta here! And your body says, wow that is a scary horse-eating monster! And you both end up feeding each other’s spook.

So first off, assuming you know what your horse is looking at, look the other way - preferably to the middle of the ring, where there is absolutely nothing to gawk at and everything appears to be calm and boring.

Step 2.

Encourage your horse to do the same.

This is where your bend aids come handy. Turn your own body to the inside. Use your inside seat bone and leg to ask for the bend. You can even do a small leg yield out (yes, in the direction of the monster) assuming that your horse is looking to the inside away from what he is scared of.

Take up just enough contact so that you have clear communication, and so that you can stop any dangerous movements. Try not to pull back. Stabilize your elbows so you don’t pull, and keep your rein length consistent as you bend your horse.

Use your inside rein to help with flexion and get the horse’s eyes looking toward the middle of the ring. Use your outside rein as a neck rein to prevent the horse from drifting too far out.

Step 3.

Go straight.

Well, straight on the turn or bend. So the body stays bent, but the front legs should only go straight forward. No side stepping. No stopping. Just GO!

Give the horse a way out - straight ahead.

You can give an inch in your elbows to free the horse's front end slightly (not a lot, especially if he feels like he is going to fly sideways) to encourage the forward movement.

Step 4.

Half-halt.

Here comes the half-halt! Just as in any other movement or transition, use the half-halt after the "go" to control the amount of leg speed and impulsion. Make sure you are committed to the horse's movement. If the horse lurches forward, go with him and then control through the half-halts. Do everything you can to *not* pull on the mouth or jerk the reins or in any way cause discomfort to the horse's tongue or bars of the mouth.

The resulting picture should be that the horse stays on the path you sent him on. He might spook up a storm, but his legs keep going exactly where they *were* going in the first place. The horse might tense a bit but as you bend him toward the middle of the ring, he should calm down and settle in his gait. If he learns to go when you ask him to, his rhythm should stay even and his pace should stay unhurried.

And then it looks like there was no spook at all. In the long run, your horse might even learn to not spook because there is nothing to spook at in the first place.

Remember that this is a lesson - it's a learning process that will take many repetitions for both of you to master, especially if your horse is used to spooking fairly regularly. It's not a quick fix and there is a fair amount of learning that must take place on your part until you can communicate it effectively to your horse.

At the beginning, accept any reduction in the spook as an improvement. Over time, you can expect less and less evidence of a spook. Always encourage your horse with your voice, a light pat with your inside hand, or a change of topic after passing the spooky area.

Good luck and remember to be safe.