

## MAKING FRIENDS: SIX KEYS TO A JOYFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR HORSE AND HUMANS

There is nothing better than when you walk out to get your horse, you call his name, and he comes to the gate ready and willing to be with you. Corazon, my mustang, was a wild horse, highly sensitive to everything. When I first got Corazon I couldn't even catch him. Now, a year and a half later, he comes to the gate as soon as he hears or sees me. What caused the difference?

1. He trusts me. After his colic this summer the trust between us deepened immensely. After the vet insisted that I put him down, I refused and instead began to massage his stomach and ileo-cecal valve area until he passed manure. Before the colic, he was still reticent to have me touch certain areas of his body, and did not always want to come out of the pasture to be with me. Something about our relationship clicked in his mind when he coliced. I believe that on some level he came to understand that I have his very best interest in mind and I mean to "do no harm."
2. I get centered when I am with him. Each day before I enter into the pasture, what I consider to be my horse's private space, I center myself, find my breath, and release any negative or anxious thoughts I might be unconsciously carrying. I focus on the environment, tune into what I hear and see, and especially what I am feeling in the environment. This process puts me into horse time. I don't ask my horse to deal with any of my human incongruence. I get present with him and then he feels he can rely on me as an aware member of the herd.
3. I always wait at the gate for Corazon. I do not barge into his space, throw a halter on him, and march him back to the barn. Once he comes my way – and he often he gets to the gate before I am even there – I enter and say hello. "Hello" consists of taking a few minutes to breathe with him, and then offer some yummy strokes to his neck. The hello includes a pause as I once again show my appreciation for the gift of horse time that he gives me every time I am with him.
4. He makes a choice. I place the halter in front of him, just below his nose where he can see it and understand it is our next step. I wait for him to lower his nose and insert it into the halter. The key word in the last sentence is "wait." At times, I have waited a few minutes. Those days when he seems less interested, I simply communicate to him that it is his choice and that he must place his nose in the halter. I must watch for his offer. Sometimes it will be just the slightest lower or moving of his head toward me. This is his way of saying yes. I do not force him. Once his nose is in the halter, I tie it and rub his favorite spot. Then we walk out of the pasture.
5. He receives positive reinforcement. The more I tell him what is good and what works well in our relationship, the more positive his actions with me become. When I use negative reinforcement or punishment, it only creates confusion, disappointment, and separation between us. The more negative feedback he experiences, the less he wants to be with me. Does this sound familiar? Think of one person you want to be with? Do they fill you up with positive vibrations? Or do they criticize, judge, continually tell you how to be different, or try to make you feel small? We naturally gravitate to positive vibrations (unless, of course, self-esteem is low).
6. I use very strong communication to prevent unsafe or inappropriate behaviors. Corazon is an adolescent and can have an opinion. You will read about this in the chapter titled Rebel in my book, *Hope...From the Heart of Horses*. At times I might communicate a very clear "No"



and a slight shake of his lead line to let him know the behavior *he is about to engage in* is not appropriate. I say it once, with neutral, firm energy to make it perfectly clear. If he doesn't listen, my energy gets a bit bigger so he will. I only increase my energy in steps so that he does not experience me as a passive-aggressive leader. The boundary is set either just before the action or in the middle of the action. It simply does not work to communicate *after* the action. Horses live in present time.

7. Our relationship comes first, activities second. There is also consistency in our relationship. For the past four months he and I have stopped working with any other trainers. I see him most every day. We always do something different - otherwise he gets bored. However, I have learned to be consistent in my demeanor, tone of voice, how I request things, and how we approach things. He now trusts this consistency and knows what to expect of me. You might be thinking: But what if my horse never comes to me? What if he won't drop his head? What if he doesn't want to be with me?

These are great questions. And if you see life from the horse's perspective you may find your answer. You must understand what motivates your horse. Each horse will be different. However, I have found that almost every horse wants to know they have a friend they can trust first. Lift the spirit of your horse with your positive approach and gentle way of connecting and you will have a trusting friend for life.

The relationship must be most important. To relate, we must first be conscious of ourselves (thoughts, feelings, intentions), and second, be conscious of another. Consciousness is a whole body experience.

I see my partnership with Corazon as a two-way street. At times I need to get into his space or "horse time." Other times I will ask him to work with me and understand that ultimately I am the leader. It is the consistent approach to the relationship that has made a difference with Corazon.

I can be a very driven, goal-oriented person. You have probably observed this as you see the articles, books, and programs that I have written and assembled over the last ten years. What my horse has taught me is that if I approach my relationships with this same drive it simply doesn't work. I saw it happening in my life with my relationships with humans. Well-meaning people would want to help me, and my directness and lack of concerns about their being, feelings, and life would destroy our connection. There was a lack of authentic caring in the relationship. I was so busy trying to reach the goal that I wasn't conscious and experiencing the process! I did not fully understand how to slow down and pay attention until I learned it in the visceral way that Corazon has taught me.

When I am driven and narrow in my focus, his highly sensitive, relationship-oriented survival skills kick in and create resistance. When I take ten minutes to drop into horse time and widen my sensing of the work within me and around me it makes all the difference in what we achieve for the rest of the day. When I first got Corazon, I actually feared that he might hurt me. Now, I know on some level that he is my protector. His is loyal to me because I am part of his family. If he does hurt me, I know it will not be through malice, but instead because of my ignorance to reading his needs.



This learning is now moving into my relationships with humans. Instead of being direct and driven, I am consciously slowing down and wanting to feel and understand where a person is at in their life. I spend more time now getting present and saying “hello” to people than ever before. I feel more of a heart connection each time I do. Just like Corazon coming to the gate, now I notice more humans reaching out to be with me, to connect with me. I believe that Corazon is teaching me to be a better friend.