

Calming the Head-Shy Mule

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Gaining control of a mule's head is the most important step in giving a head shy mule confidence

A head shy mule is one that is afraid when things approach or touch his head, ears or nose. The mule may react violently or just slightly pull his head away. Either way, the mule is head shy. There are many reasons why a mule may be head shy, because of past abuse or because it just does not like things around his head. Any way you look at it, when a mule is head shy he is telling us that he is worried or scared about something. It is our job to help the mule get over his fear.

The one thing we should not do is expect the mule to just stand still and “take it.” Instead, what we must do is gain control of our mule's head by using training techniques that will help our mule become comfortable with things around his head.

Most people think the best thing to do for a head shy mule is to avoid his head. Quite the contrary; in order to get the mule past his fear of anything touching his head, we must work with his head a lot and in several different ways.

Some ways we will discuss include sacking out the head with our hands, teaching the mule the “calm down cue” so he will relax on cue and finally sacking out our mule's head with other objects.

There are many signs a head shy mule will give us to let us know he is uncomfortable. One mule may move his head constantly when we place a halter or bridle on him. Another mule may pull back when we try to touch his head or neck with a towel or even our

hand. The biggest clue a head shy or scared mule will give almost 99 percent of the time – he will raise his head.

Anyway you look at it, a head shy mule is an unsafe mule because they are reactive instead of looking to us for answers. It is unfair of us to ask the mule to not be afraid. What we must do instead is teach the mule to respond to our cues even when things are touching his head.

First, let's get our mule comfortable with us touching his head with our hands. Many head shy mules do not want their heads and specifically, their ears, handled. Why? Honestly, we don't know and don't care; we cannot change the past. We just know that it is an issue that needs to be addressed now. So, how can we touch the mule's



TIM places his hand on Diamond Creek Angel's nose (1), then swiftly over her ears (2), making sure his hand is past the ears before Angel can react (3)



TIM keeps working with Angel and the "Calm Down Cue" until she will touch the ground with her nose

head and ears safely?

Our initial goal will be to touch the mule's ears with our hand for a split second; just long enough that we can touch it and pull it away. Remember, the ear is our goal, so in order to reach that goal we will take several steps in between to make it possible. To accomplish this we will start with our hand on the mule's nose. Once your hand is on the mule's nose, begin moving your hand upward towards the mule's eyes and forehead.

When you reach for the mule's eyes and forehead, take your hand away. If the mule moves his head away before you take your hand away, do not chase his head with your hand. Instead, keep your hand on the mule's forehead until the mule stops moving his head. When the mule stops moving his head, then take your hand away.

If the mule will not allow you to touch his nose, you will have to back-up in your training. Start where ever you can touch the mule. Let's say the

shoulder. Then move to the neck, then the bottom of his head and then to the nose. You will need to work back and forth from spot to spot, until the mule calmly allows you to touch his nose. The mule soon learns that there is nothing to be afraid of when you touch his nose and forehead.

Next, before taking your hand away from his forehead, move your hand swiftly, but gently, up and over his ears. This should only take a split second; then immediately take your hand away. Do not bump or hurt the mule's ears.

The mule will raise his head after we take our hand away.

Again, this is OK because your hand is no longer touching his ears. Remember you want the mule to stand calmly when you touch his ears, even if we only touch his ears for a split second. We do not care what he does after our hand leaves his ear.

As we keep working with the mule, he will feel more comfortable with us touching his ear for a second. After your mule is comfortable with just a split second, then we can start to slow our hand speed down a little at a time.

With a lot of practice we will be able to reach up and handle the mule's ears with no reaction from the mule. Then we can move on to the next step, the "Calm Down Cue".

We can teach our mule a cue to drop his head, thus teaching his fear level to drop with it. We will teach this cue from the ground first, then we can also use and teach this cue from the saddle.

Start with a bridle with a full cheek snaffle bit on the mule. A bridle will allow the mule to learn faster. He cannot

pull as hard on a bridle as he can on a halter. A bridle will also give the mule a quicker release.

Standing alongside your mule, say the left side, put light pressure on your left rein and concentrate on the tip of your mule's ear. Keep pressure on the rein until the tip of the mule's ear drops. While you are waiting for your mule's ear to drop, your mule will be looking for a release in several ways; by moving his head up, then maybe right, then possibly left and then down.

This process is known as: "Your mule is trying to figure out what you want," simple as that. Your mule is not evading or being stubborn, he is simply thinking things through. Mules are so smart!

If the tip of the ear moves in directions other than down, move with the head keeping the same pressure on the rein. As soon as the mule drops his head even an eighth of an inch, immediately release rein pressure. The release of rein pressure is your reward. Now, repeat the process by asking again.

This process may take five minutes or five hours. Work with the exercise until the mule will drop his head to chest height. But remember, you do not have to do the entire lesson all at once. You can break it into several lessons if you are short on training time.

Once our mule drops his head on cue, we will then work on softening the mule's neck and shoulder to teach him to relax even more. This will also make it easier to have your mule drop his head all the way to the ground.

Use the same pressure and release sequence to teach the mule to give his nose to the side - horizontally. It will seem the same to you, but the mule will know the difference by when you release rein pressure. The mule learns not by us applying pressure, but by releasing pressure. We release pressure when the mule responds to our cue. By applying pressure, we are telling the mule that we are asking something from the mule.

As the mule gives to the side, you will notice his head will also drop.



Sack out your mule with a lot of different items

Keep asking the mule to give to his side aiming his head to the point of his shoulder. We are not asking the mule to move his head all the way around to his side. We want about three to four inches of sideways movement.

Once we have the mule giving to the point of his shoulder, we will go back to getting the mule to drop his head all the way to the ground.

You are giving the mule the same cue, just picking a different spot for the mule to take his nose. Example, first we ask the mule to drop his ear, then we ask the mule to take his nose to the point of his shoulder, then we ask the mule to take his nose to his front hoof.

Once our mule is relaxed with our hand touching his nose, forehead and ears, and he drops his head and relaxes his neck and shoulder on cue, we have complete control of our mule's head.

But, we are not done with our lesson. Until now, we do have complete control of our mule's head, but only if our hand is the only thing that will ever touch his head. What

if we want to clip his ears, or wash his nose off with a towel, or even put a bridle over his ears properly? We will now need to sack out his head with other objects.

A lot of people believe sacking out a mule is getting the mule to tolerate scary items. That is not sacking out. True sacking out is exposing the mule to something scary and then removing the object before the mule reacts or moves. In fact, we want to teach the mule to stand still, not to run away. Soon the mule will learn that the object is not scary and he does not have to react.

By removing the scary object, releasing, before the mule moves, you reward the mule for the behavior you want - standing still.

We have already sacked our mule out with our hand. That was our first lesson. So here, we will start with a tissue or paper towel – a small object that is not overly intimidating to the mule. Begin by rubbing the tissue all over the mule's nose and work your way up to the forehead and ears like we did with our hand. Remember to take your hand away before the mule moves his head. If the mule does move, keep your hand on the mule's head and ask the mule to lower his head using the calm down cue. Once he stops moving his head, take the tissue away.

Once your mule has mastered the tissue, move to an item that is a little scarier to the mule, like maybe a wash cloth. The more things you can think of to sack your mule out with, the better trained your mule will be. Keep adding items like a towel, then a newspaper, then a brush and so on.

Do not skip to big items. The slower you go, the faster you will get your mule to relax and be calm with any item. For example, you would not want to move from your hand to a chain saw. The more steps, items, we use the safer mule we end up with.

In closing, the sequence we use to train our head shy mule is this:

- Control the mule's head.
- Expose a scary object.
- Remove the scary object before the mule moves.
- When the mule is ready increase to a scarier object.

With a lot of practice and creativity by us, we will have a cue that can get our head shy mule to calm down no matter what is happening around him or his head.

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