

equine trainer and behaviourist

TRUDI DEMPSEY

In conversation with...

What qualifications does an equine behaviourist need?

TRUDI: Whilst there is currently no fixed career path for equine behaviourists many will have a combination of studying theory and applying theory in the field. Universities, colleges and specialised providers offer the opportunity to study animal and equine behaviour to a high level.

What professional groups support equine behaviourists?

TRUDI: My personal choice is the IAABC (International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants) because they have a rigorous entry policy and support only consultants adhering to the LIMA (least invasive, minimally aversive) protocol. You can be sure that IAABC professionals work primarily with positive reinforcement, avoiding punishment and applying learning theory and best management/ husbandry methods in all cases.

What is an equine behaviourist?

TRUDI: Sometimes referred to as an equine behaviour consultant an equine behaviourist identifies the underlying causes of unwanted behaviour in horses. Using science based techniques centred on ethology and learning theory they will create behaviour modification plans to improve unwanted behaviour and the wellbeing of horse and human.

What made you become an equine behaviourist?

TRUDI: I have been a dressage trainer (classically focussed) since the 1990's resolving many of the

problems faced by clients using correct training philosophy. However I found myself increasingly drawing on my experience in applying behavioural techniques to help a growing number of clients experiencing unwanted behaviour. Whilst I had the practical experience it was time to get back to studying to make sure I had the science and theory to back up this up. After qualifying with the Natural Animal Centre I completed a mentorship with the IAABC which started me on the road to being a consultant.

What do you like best about your work?

TRUDI: I love being the instigator of change in the human-horse relationship, seeing the joy in both sides of the partnership when problems have been solved is worth all the miles of travel and time spent in the office.

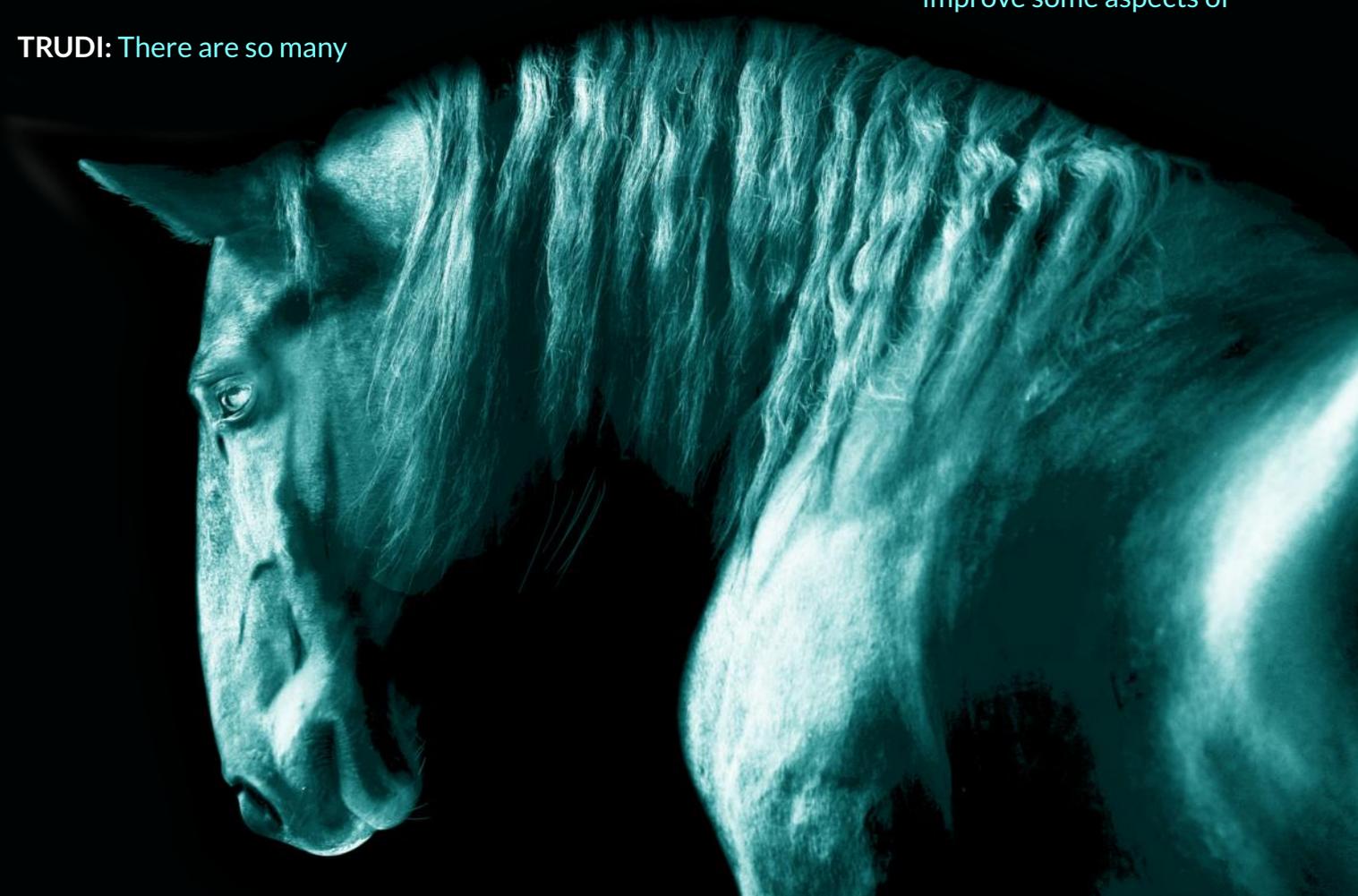
What are the most common behaviour problems you encounter?

TRUDI: There are so many

different problems but I think the most common is based on separation anxiety. This can manifest itself in many ways from not wanting to leave the field or enter the yard to refusing to go out of the gate without company or becoming difficult to load. The first step is to make sure that the management and lifestyle of the horse is as good as possible and to support the human in making any necessary changes. Often simple changes in husbandry can bring about huge behavioural improvements.

What is the difference between a trainer and a behaviourist?

TRUDI: This is rather a grey area! Some clients come to me for training but when I take a history it becomes apparent that a full behavioural consultation is required due to the severity of the problem. Behaviour problems impinge on the horse-human relationship at its most profound level and whilst training may improve some aspects of



behaviour the trainer often sees only the surface layer of the problem whereas the behaviourist will work with general handling and husbandry that would be outside the remit of a trainer.

What happens at a consultation?

TRUDI: Every client starts by completing my history form which allows me to get to know the client and rule out any management/ husbandry issues ahead of the visit. In advance of the consultation I contact the client's vet to obtain a referral as it is essential to rule out any physical issues that might be causing the behaviour. On the first visit I will observe and ask questions before making suggestions for improvements to management and handling- known as behaviour modification plans. The whole consultation takes 2 to 3 hours and afterwards I will write a resume that will act as a reminder for the client, I also send them information about any behaviour modification plans that we have implemented along with ongoing support for the next few weeks.

Further visits will focus on continued training and behaviour improvements.

What methods do you employ?

TRUDI: In many cases behaviour change begins by improving living environments guided by ethology and the study of innate horse behaviour which provide better opportunities for domestic horses to live a closer to natural lifestyle. Although mainstream understanding of horse behaviour is only just starting to catch up with that of dogs, we are seeing a welcome rise in the use of positive reinforcement methods. I improve handling and training by applying the science of learning to change the horse's perception of fearful situations. These techniques keep horses below their own fear threshold and reinforce behaviour that is incompatible with the problem behaviour rather than using punishment of the unwanted behaviour. The whole process helps the horse gain confidence and trust allowing him to adjust more easily to our human world and the pressures it brings.



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