



‘Is my horse  
telling me  
they’re sore?’

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# I'm Erin Dixon,

I've spent years helping horses move better, feel stronger and stay comfortable through massage and rehabilitation. Along the way, I've worked with horses of all shapes, sizes and disciplines - from high energy competition horses to older, more sensitive types.



I know it can be worrying when your horse shows subtle signs of discomfort, and it's easy to miss the little changes until they become bigger issues. That's why I created this guide - to help you understand what your horse is telling you, and what you can do to support them day-to-day.

This isn't about fear or overcomplicating things. It's about giving you clear, practical steps to notice and respond to early signs of soreness so your horse can stay happy, healthy and moving freely.

Think of this guide as a tool for observation and connection - a way to better understand your horse's body and signals, and to feel confident you're doing the right things to support them.

I hope you find it useful, and remember, every horse is unique - if you're ever unsure, it is always worth seeking advice and guidance.





# WHY SPOTTING DISCOMFORT EARLY MATTERS

## Prevent Escalation

A stiff stride, tense topline or unusual shift in weight might seem minor - but if left unnoticed, it can develop into more serious injuries, chronic tension or compensatory problems. Catching it early often means less intervention, quicker recovery, and a happier, more comfortable horse.

## Improve Performance and Movement

Horses that are sore and uncomfortable often change the way they move subtly - a shortened stride, a slightly crooked turn, or resistance in transitions. Addressing these signs early keeps their muscles strong, joints happy, and movement fluid.

## Build a Stronger Partnership

By observing and responding to your horse's cues, you deepen your understanding of them. They learn that you notice and respect their body language, which strengthens trust and responsiveness.

## Inform Professional Decisions

When you track patterns over time, noting stiffness, avoidance, or behavioural changes - you give vets, physiotherapists, or massage therapists a clear picture. This helps them provide more precise treatment, tailored exercise and practical recommendations.



# HOW YOUR HORSE 'SPEAKS' DISCOMFORT - LONG BEFORE THEY SHOW IT.

Most owners recognise big pain signs: limping, heat, swelling, reluctance to move. But the earliest, most reliable indicators are almost always behavioural.

Your horse's behaviour is their first language - and pain reshapes it long before the body visibly changes.

This page explains what to look for, why it matters, and how to interpret it without jumping to conclusions.



## E DIXON EQUINE Understanding Behavioural Pain Indicators

Move onto the next page to find out more...







# TEMPERAMENT & AFFECTIVE STATE SHIFTS

Pain influences the autonomic nervous system increasing sympathetic tone (fight/flight) or suppressing engagement (freeze).

You may see:

## HYPERAROUSAL (Fight/Flight)

- Increased reactivity to sound/movement
- Heightened startle response
- Reduced capacity to process cues
- Irritability around other horses or humans

These horses aren't 'sharp' they are compensating for discomfort by remaining constantly vigilant.

## HYPOAROUSAL (Freeze/Shutdown)

- Withdrawn or disengaged presentation
- Lack of interest in environment
- Slow responses to cues
- Appearing 'quiet' but with tension around eyes/mouth

This is often misread as a 'good temperament' when it may be a coping strategy.

## TOUCH SENSITIVITY

- Skin twitching along specific muscle chains
- Dislike of grooming in areas of fascial tension
- Guarding patterns (moving away before your hand reaches them)

These changes often correlate with myofascial discomfort, dermatomal irritation or vertebral pain.



# TRAINING & PERFORMANCE RESISTANCE

Performance-based behaviours can be biomechanical red flags. Instead of 'disobedience', consider;

## DIRECTIONAL RELUCTANCE

- Persistently stiff or resistance bend to one side
- Falling out through the shoulder during turns
- Often linked to unilateral thoracic sling weakness, rib cage mobility issues, or facet joint irritation

## LOSS OF IMPULSION or 'BACKWARDS THINKING'

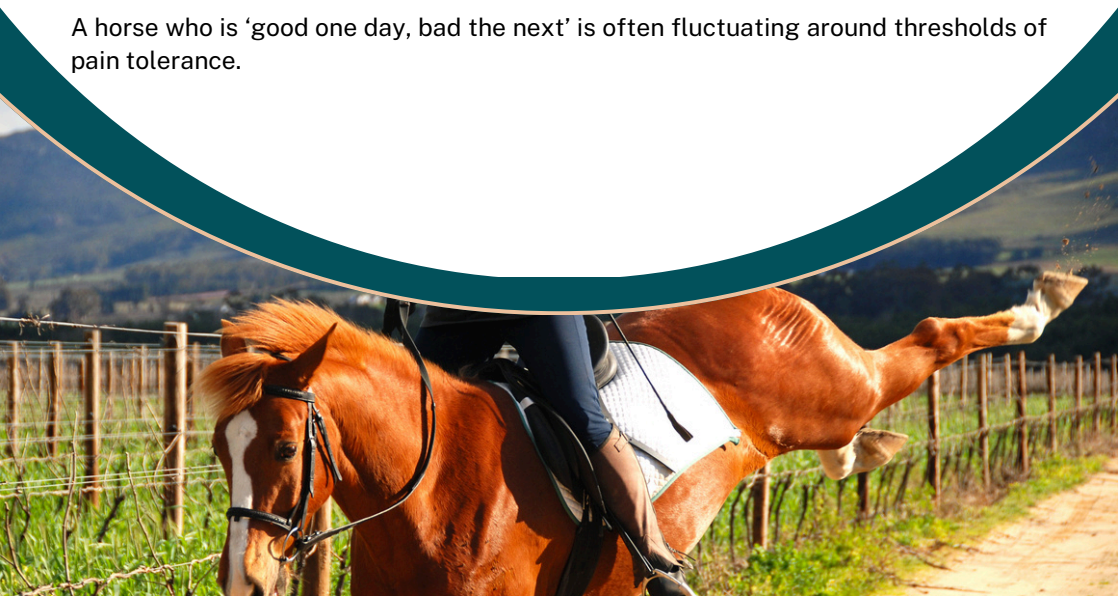
- Delayed transitions
- Lack of forward desire
- 'Sticking' which is often correlated to SI discomfort, gluteal tension or lumbar pain which limits propulsion.

## EXPLOSIVE RESPONSES

- Bucking during upwards transitions
- Head tossing when asked into contact
- Rearing in moments of pressure
- These are often pain-related protest behaviours rather than attitude-based reactions.

## INCONSISTENCY IN WORK

A horse who is 'good one day, bad the next' is often fluctuating around thresholds of pain tolerance.







# POSTURAL, BIOMECHANICAL & MOVEMENT DEVIATIONS

Subclinical pain frequently alters posture before it affects gait.  
Key indicators include;

## STATIC POSTURAL CHANGES

- Base-wide stance (fore or hind)
- Standing under themselves behind (SI/Lumbar discomfort)
- Hollowing through the thoracolumbar region
- Ribs rotated or asymmetrical at rest

These shifts show how the horse avoids load in painful structures.

## DYNAMIC MOVEMENT INDICATORS

- Shortened cranial phase (forelimb) - common in thoracic sling or cervical discomfort
- Reduced caudal swing (hindlimb) - often linked to SI or hamstring tightness
- Reduced spinal oscillation (board like movement)
- Toe-dragging, stumbling or delayed protraction
- Loss of straightness beyond rider influence

These aren't just training issues - they often mark compensatory gait strategies.

## COMPENSATORY PATTERNS

- Overdeveloped neck from pulling themselves forward instead of pushing
- Hypertrophy in one glute paired with atrophy of the opposite side
- Uneven sweat patches reflecting asymmetrical load

These patterns help pinpoint where the horse is protecting.



# CHANGES IN DAILY LIVING BEHAVIOURS

These subtle, low intensity behaviours often give you the earliest warning signs:

## REST & SLEEP ALTERATIONS

- Lying down less (avoiding the effort of rising)
- Lying down more (relieving limb or back pressure)
- Standing sleep replacing REM sleep - a huge welfare and pain marker

## FEEDING & DRINKING CHANGES

- Slowing down at the bucket
- Adjusting head position frequently (poll, TMJ or neck discomfort)
- Dropping weight despite normal intake (systematic stress response)

## HERD BEHAVIOUR

- Avoidance of play or social grooming
- Becoming more passive or more aggressive
- Standing on the fringes or the group

Pain directly affects a horse's ability to guard themselves socially.

## HANDLING & ROUTINE

- Resistance to rugging, tacking-up, leading
- Unwillingness to stand for the farrier
- Difficulty on tight turns when led

These often reflect functional discomfort along specific myofascial chains.







## **WHEN BEHAVIOUR & PHYSICAL SIGNS MATTER TOGETHER**

Pain assessment is patter-based. One sign alone mean little. Multiple signs form a clinical picture.

Look for clusters such as;

- Change in tail swish + change in bend + irritability when girthing
- Loss of impulsion + shortened stride + reluctance on the lunge
- Increased spookiness + hollow posture + toe-dragging

These clusters suggest the horse is compensating, not misbehaving.

## **WHEN TO ESCALATE: PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION INDICATORS**

Owners should seek veterinary or musculoskeletal assessment when:

- Behaviour changes persist over 7-10 days)
- Sudden resistance appears in previously easy work
- Multiple early indicators occur at once
- The horse shows any worsening pattern
- There is a combination of emotional change + physical change.



# SUBTLE SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- Reluctance to be caught
- Flicking tail, pinned ears
- Shorter strides
- Stiffness
- Uneven gait
- Difficulty in transitions
- Topline tightness
- Hollowing of back
- Reluctance to bend
- Shifting weight
- Favouring one leg
- Flinching when saddled
- Tight jaw
- Teeth grinding
- Refusal to wat
- Altered drinking patterns
- Changes in energy levels
- Swerving
- Head tossing
- Refusing to move forwards
- Avoidance to mounting
- Stopping
- Resistance when moving from walk/trot/canter
- Leaning

These are just a few of the common signs. All horses are individual and may present with a combination.







# DAILY 60-SECOND MOVEMENT & BODY CHECK

Lead your horse at walk and trot, observing stride symmetry and willingness.

Check topline, back, and shoulder muscles for tension with gentle palpation.

Observe stance and weight distribution while standing still.

Note subtle behaviour: ears, tail, head carriage.

Keep a simple record for patterns over time.

Call a professional if;

- Sudden or obvious lameness
- Swelling, heat, wounds or abnormal posture
- Persistent stiffness, resistance or behaviour change over several days
- Any concern that doesn't resolve with light movement or rest.

Professional support can relieve tension, restore movement and prevent future issues. My treatments combine:

- Hands-on massage targeting sore muscles
- Tailored exercise plans to strengthen weak areas
- Guidance for ongoing care and observation at home
- Support for both horse and handler to build confidence and connection.