

# **Intrizen Workshop RE: Overweight Horses and Intrizen**

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## **Introduction**

This is a very difficult and nuanced topic, because every horse, human and stable situation is unique and thus needs a unique approach. I by no means feel like I have found a solution to the problem, nor do I want to pretend that the path won't be difficult or that everything will be better if you just do xyz — we all know that is not how intrizen or being with horses works, but I want to share a few of my experiences and what helped and still helps me with dealing with this challenge.

Before giving you ideas and inspirations on how you can create environments where more effortful movements emerge, thus combining a training for weight-loss with the intrizen-principles, I want to take a look at two important factors that often hinder us in our outcomes:

- the horse's (unfulfilled) needs
- the human's mindset

## **The horse's unfulfilled needs**

First up: The horse's unfulfilled needs or the question of: what else is going on in my horse's life that has nothing to do with me but may affect the time we spend together?

So often we are angry or disappointed with the horse for not being willing to engage with us, maybe we question a lot of what we are doing, because the results aren't what we expected or the horse is saying „no“ a lot more than it used to.. and even though I'm a big fan of looking for the problem within myself and reflecting on my expectations and inner workings to improve my relationship with basically everyone, be it family, partner or pet, (and we'll come to that in a minute) sometimes it's not (only) our fault.

I'm sure that most of you know the horse's basic needs, but it can't hurt to check in with everything, so to start exploring, we can ask ourselves questions like: What needs might the horse have that aren't met? Do they have enough forage, water and do they get everything they need regarding nutrients and minerals and so on?

I don't want to go into feeding here but I recommend that everyone informs themselves about what kind of food is fitting for overweight horses, especially those with metabolic issues like laminitis, ems and cushing. It can also be helpful to know early signs of metabolic issues so you can differentiate between a horse „just“ being overweight and leaning towards being sick because of it.

Other questions can be: Are they happy in their herd or have there been changes which influenced the dynamics, gave our horse new tasks in the herd or made them feel unsafe? Do they have enough shelter space so that everyone can lie down and get enough sleep? Are they under constant negative stress? Have there been major weather changes or storms, is it uncharacteristically warm or cold for the season?

If any of these areas are an issue for your horse, they might literally not be able to engage with you, because they are tired, hungry or stressed. Also keep in mind that when they live in a herd outside, they might simply be busy at times and have other things to do, they have lives without you as well. When we look at all of this, it becomes apparent why

autonomy is so crucial, because when the horse has autonomy, they can \*tell\* us when they are not up for something.

But let's face it, many of us don't own their own stable and have only limited influence over the way our horses are kept. And even though we all wish for our horses to live in a huge Paddock Paradise with lovely friends, good food and lots of movement, that is the reality for only very few of us. While some changes might be possible when we ask our barn-owners, most of us have to make due with what is available to us, in our region, at the price we can afford. Not being able to fulfil all of our horse's needs can quickly give us a feeling of helplessness: You're trying to do your best, to give your horse a nice life and keep it healthy while also enjoying the time you spend together and giving them a voice.. it seems impossible sometimes. Which brings me to my second point...

### **The effects of the human mindset**

Here I want to talk about four different aspects:

- Pressure from the inside or the outside
- Unrealistic expectations
- Perfectionism
- Our own physical and mental well-being

#### **Pressure:**

I'm assuming all of us love our horses and want them to be happy and healthy. Seeing them not at their best, realising that they might be heading towards being sick is super hard and worries us.. a lot. Sometimes so much, that it takes over everything else, and makes us forget or overlook all the good things and it can create a huge pressure to do things, because we feel like we have to, not because they feel aligned with our values and who we are as a team. Doing things because we think we have to, not because we really want to do them, can also lead to incongruence in our behaviour, i.e. cueing one thing while not really meaning it at the same time. We all know how sensitive horses are and they can get really confused by this, not sure whether to listen to our cues or the things we actually want, like harmony or spending undemanding time.

This pressure of course can also be applied more from the outside, from people telling us that our pony is too fat or looking poorly, making snide remarks and so on. When we feel pressured we can ask ourselves, where is this coming from? Is this really how I feel, how I see my horse? Or is it coming from the outside, is it someone else's opinion? And then we can decide how to deal with it.

For me, this pressure sometimes manifests in a panic, like „Oh God, my horse is gonna drop dead immediately if we don't move NOW“, which makes me push my horse and myself further than I might normally go. Quickly followed by a super bad conscience because along the way I probably ignored a few of the horse's nos, leading to self-loathing and a feeling of utter helplessness, because I just don't know how to deal with it anymore. It's a terrible place to be and even though I don't wish it on anyone, I think at least few of you can relate.

So what can we do instead?

First of all: Try not to panic! Trust yourself that you are always acting in your horse's best interest. If you are here, I am sure you want the best for your horse, want to listen to them and give them the best life possible. That is enough.

And then go on and ask yourself: How bad is it? Is my horse sick already, or almost there, or is it just a little overweight (which still should be improved but at least it's not an emergency).

If it is an emergency, more drastic measures might need to be taken, be it a very strict diet, an extensive movement programme (though not with a lot of faster gaits if the horse is heavily overweight, to protect its joints) and maybe also medication or a change of stables.

If it's not an emergency, ask yourself: How necessary is training, really, right now, at this moment, where we might both feel like shit and I'm halfway into panic? Do they really need to canter 10mins straight on the lunge to lose weight (spoiler alert: they don't), or can we maybe find another way? How can we make sure the horse can lose weight without compromising its mental well-being and autonomy, and our relationship? Can we maybe provide a space for movement and exploration instead of dictating movement the way we think, feel or were taught is necessary?

Try to develop a strategy for getting your horse's weight down, make a plan and stick to it. That way you regain control over the situation and can feel better about it, at least that's what always helps me a lot.

If you can, change the situation so that the horse is losing weight without us having to use a lot of pressure for it to move enough (keywords: diet, incentives for movement). It's always a combination of both diet **and** movement that ensures improvement long-term.

It might also be helpful to ease your conscience a little by realising that you are acting in your horse's best interest, even if you are sometimes „forcing“ them to move, and that there is a spectrum of no's, from „Uhm, maybe?“ via „I'd rather not“ to „Hell no!“. Even though I would advise you to not ignore a „hell no!“ as it might hurt them in their autonomy, it might be okay for you and your horse to ask again after an „Uhm, maybe“, or push them a little despite of an „I'd rather not“. It's okay if the horse doesn't love everything you do, just try to make it as nicely for them as possible.

You decide how far you are prepared to go and what kind of pressure you are willing to apply, depending on your own character and your horse's background. I'd suggest that you draw a fixed line for you personally somewhere and are consistent in not crossing it. That can be no escalating pressure, or no driving from behind, only pulling, or whatever you and your horse feel comfortable with. Disclaimer: For this to not be harmful, your horse should be really convinced of their autonomy and very sure that you would not ignore a „hell no!“ from them!!

### **Unrealistic expectations:**

Expectations can be either too low or too high, maybe sounding like „But she knows this, so she should be able to do this!“ or „They don't want to engage with me anyway, they never do“. Apart from probably being bullshit, unrealistic expectations can limit us in our creativity and our free thinking and if we have too rigid ideas or expectations, we might overlook or miss awesome ideas the horse may offer us.

Of course that's not what we want, especially in training intrinsic-inspired, so instead we can try to cultivate curiosity, ask ourselves „What new thing can we do today?“ and celebrate the horse for everything they offer. To make sure you don't have unrealistic expectations, you can also try to set up contexts that provide a lot of space for exploration and many different outcomes.

### **Perfectionism:**

Perfectionism actually ties in with both pressure and expectations, it's kind of an extreme form of very high expectations (both for yourself and your horse), which goes hand in hand

with a lot of pressure (again on both of us) to reach those goals of meet those expectations.

Even though it's hard, try to not strive for perfectionism and accept that neither you nor your horse are perfect. In fact, in intrinsic-inspired training we're not actually training for perfect movement solutions because there are none, variability is the goal, and inspiring movements that are a little different every single time. And mistakes are awesome, because we can learn so much from them!

### **Our own physical and mental well-being:**

This also plays a big role in how we meet our horses. It's okay to not always feel awesome, our needs matter as well. There is this nice idea of leaving your baggage by the gate, and if this works for you, awesome! If not, there are other ways. For example you can try to be aware of how you feel every time before you engage with your horse, that will keep you from being unfair because of some anger or annoyance you are carrying around with you.

It might also help to decide beforehand what is possible for you that day, depending on your energy levels and physical and mental capacity that day, so you don't end up doing things you don't feel like. Many of us have been at the stable with a headache or period cramps before and haven't felt like running around or doing sprints ourselves and that's absolutely okay.

And I would highly suggest that you don't put it (meaning: yourself) **on** the horse if you're not feeling well or are preoccupied, because they feel even more of what is going on for us when we are on their backs and have less chance to distance themselves from it or us.

### **Checking in:**

So, after having talked about the horse's needs and the human's mindset, it might be a good idea for you to check both areas before you engage with your horse. When you arrive at the stable, take stock of yourself and your horse:

- How am I feeling today? How are my energy levels?
- What do I feel like doing? Does what I have planned feel aligned with how I feel today?
- Can I be present with my horse, really there?
- How is my horse feeling today? What impression do I have of them?
- What time is it? Could they be hungry or sleepy?
- How is the weather today? Does my horse like rain/wind/sun/cold/warmth?
- Do I really \*want\* to do this activity or do I feel like I \*have\* to?

### **Excursion on purpose**

Did you ever have to do anything you didn't see the sense of, like doing your taxes, or cleaning your room as a teenager? Remember how much fun you had..? Yeah, exactly. It's the same for horses, especially the clever energy-savers. Running in an endless circle doesn't make sense to a horse, neither does performing strange tasks or movements just because their human says so. To really win them (and their nervous system!) over, you have to give them a reason and if you don't want the reason to be fear of you or your equipment, you have to give them a movement purpose.

### **Ideas for session designs**

Finally, I want to give you some ideas and pointers regarding what you can do, if your horse is healthy mentally and physically, but needs to move and lacks motivation, or, like Katja often describes it, is already in a state of brain fog which can make them feel numb, tired, listless, even slightly depressed, and inhibits their motivation to move.

- find things your horse enjoys and do more of that, it's simple but oh so powerful!
- use targets, objects or obstacles as an external focus to engage with (gymnastics ball, poles lying on the ground or sticking upright, jumps, mat folded, flat or standing upright..)
- take the horse outside, use racing and grazing, explore new paths with them
- mix up foreseeable and surprising elements to keep things interesting
- compromise to spark their self-determination (e.g. on walks, let them decide the direction/tempo)

Some purposeful fat-burning ideas for horses:

- try HIIT (high-intensity interval training) instead of lungeing, so doing really intense workouts to get the breathing and heart rate up and spike the metabolism; it is also more natural for a horse and can be combined with running towards something (a tree, patch of grass, corner of a reversed triangle (in protected contact) etc.)
- build muscles instead of doing endurance training (they burn fat not only in their building but also in their existing, so win-win, and they can also be built during crunches or on the see-saw)
- try a chaos- or bounce chute (two parallel fence-lines with various obstacles or jumps in-between and a bucket on either end into which you alternately chuck food, so the horse walks or runs back and forth), invented by Vince and Dahlia, as a clear frame and task which requires self-organisation from the horse and is highly motivating
- try to spark intense bursts of energy, even if only for a few seconds (like a kick-start or rear)

Some ideas to help you get out of your head and into action:

- reframe certain modes of training (for example try hiit lungeing on walks with grazing breaks as a reward, jog with your horse in the arena, try different leading positions like behind them, next to their shoulder etc...)
- disrupt (negative) patterns and unrealistic expectations by trying new things (medical training, trick-training, new toys, long-reining etc.)
- alternate between movement days and full autonomy days, both in the arena and on walks, to give both of you a clear frame of what is okay when and what isn't

### **Finally, remember these:**

You're doing the best you can and acting in your horse's best interest, acknowledge that!

Not every „no“ is a „Hell no!!!“

If you must play, you can't play!

It's okay to tell the horse \*that\* it should move, just not \*how\*!

Your horse doesn't work \*against\* you — you have to figure things out \*together\*

Don't forget to have fun!

**You've got this!**