

How do you use the time that your equine isn't with you to work on their training? **Anna Bonnage** explains how she set up a puzzle to help an ear-shy mule.

CASE STUDY



Marty, a six-year-old mule who came to Anna for five weeks in 2016 for help with catching, leading and handling. He had been thoroughly examined prior to training, including having x-rays and ultrasound taken of his poll and neck, but no physical cause for his worry was found.

When Marty arrived it struck me how much he didn't want me or anything touching his ears or poll area. I started thinking about this. I needed to work on him feeling better but I didn't want to focus on the problem, as this could make more of an issue out of it.

While working to help Marty gain confidence in other new areas, I also thought about the fact that he spends

twenty-two hours a day without me around; twenty-two hours where he could be working on a puzzle to solve his fears of things touching his ears. So with the help of my landlord I securely erected two shower curtains across the barn entrance. This was done with a five metre piece of rope, erected four and a half metres high, which secured two sliding shower curtains which had been cut into six inch strips. The strips meant that I was able to pull one or more down at a time, depending on what Marty could cope with.

This was not an attempt to desensitise Marty, it was a puzzle for him to have time to think through. You hear of people hanging stuff all around a horse's stable - this I don't agree with, as a stable is a small space where the horse can't escape. It is forced upon them so they very often shut down and learn displacement behaviours in order to cope. In Marty's puzzle he was able to be out of sight from it and, when he decided he wanted to approach, he could walk under the showers curtains *if* he wished. He had plenty of food and water on both sides of the shower curtain so he didn't feel stressed and forced to cross under it in order to eat, for example.

On the morning of day one I tied up all of the shower curtain strips and initially had nothing hanging down so that the puzzle felt easy to him. I didn't want him to get into the barn, turn around and

then fear how he could get out again while I wasn't present to help him.

"The important thing in this puzzle was to notice what Marty was telling me, and only increase the number of strips hanging down when he felt ready."

In the afternoon I noticed that he had crossed under it and eaten his hay in the barn so I pulled down one strip of shower curtain.

On day two, I saw that Marty had been in the barn again so I pulled down two more strips. Marty then followed me into the barn of his own accord, walking around the end of the strips carefully so as not to touch them.

Over time I planned to bring down one more strip of shower curtain each day. If he stopped going in the barn then I would leave the same number of strips down for several days to help him try. The important thing in this puzzle was to notice what Marty was telling me, and only increase the number of strips hanging down when he felt ready. The more strips that came down would initially touch his sides, which would increase his confidence to eventually duck his head down and let his ears push through the curtain strips.

SETTING UP A PUZZLE

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