

WINDOWS TO THEIR WORLDS

by Shea Stewart

A horse's eye tells us a lot about what is going on inside. You can tell where a horse's thought is by where his eyes are looking, and you can tell how he is feeling about what's being presented to him by the expression in his eyes.

Ideally, a horse's eye should look big and soft, as in the top photo. This horse is present, focused, and confident. The horse should be looking towards the direction in which he is moving. He should also be blinking, with his head set relaxed—about wither-height depending on the horse's conformation—and his ears should be soft and moving around independently.

A horse's eye will appear dull and lifeless when he is "shut-down" or "checked out" as in the second photo. A shut-down horse can be difficult to identify as he will appear calm and "bombproof," yet when you look into his eyes, there will be no expression, or he will look like he is just going through the motions of what is being asked of him without much expression at all. His eyes will draw up and be tight, small and usually dark. A shut-down horse will also often have tight-looking skin on his face and neck. He won't blink much, or show any other signs of releasing tension such as blowing or yawning. His ears may also be flopped off to the sides. Once a shut-down horse feels better about life, his eyes can change and become naturally soft and round again.

When a horse is concerned or worried—as in the third photo—wrinkles gather on the bottom eyelid, like the eyes are being drawn down. His eyes may dilate and you may see veins pop out in his face. A worried horse will usually fix his ears toward the object of his concern. Another sign of worry is when the horse doesn't blink at all. He will be standing perfectly still, seemingly calm, but his eyes won't be moving or blinking—giving the appearance of a stuffed animal. His breath will be shallow, where you can barely notice his breathing. When the horse feels okay about the worrisome situation, he will take a deep breath, start blinking and moving his eyes around. His face will relax and his eyes will soften.

When you can see the whites of a horse's eyes, it usually means a more extreme worry—or even panic—as in the bottom photo. A very worried horse will have his head up high, which can be mistaken for "excitement." His mouth will also be tight and his ears fixed.

We should all become familiar with our horse's eyes. Whether working with our horse on the ground, or mounted, we want his eyes to be soft and blinking. We want him to be looking ahead to where he is going while also casually observing his surroundings. His ears should be softly moving around as he takes in his world. Everything a horse feels and thinks is right there for us to see—if we understand how to read his eyes.

Shea Stewart specializes in helping people better understand their equine friends. Shea offers instruction and hands-on training in horsemanship using a gentle and in-depth approach. Learn more about Shea at www.stewartranch.net.



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