

# “Fainting Calf Syndrome”

it's called **TONIC IMMOBILITY**

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I came across this question on Facebook the other day:

*“...yesterday as I was leading him around, he suddenly decided to lay down. We let him be about 15 minutes and came back and he got up. As I started leading him around again, he went down on his front knees twice in the span of about 5 minutes. I thought it was because he was tired (we’d had him tied up about 30 minutes prior and he’d gotten himself untied) but in all his years of working with cattle and doing 4H himself, my husband has never seen anything quite like it.*”

*Today, he did the same thing and he hadn't been tied up at all. He laid all the way down before we could do anything. We did get him up just a few minutes later and led him around just a bit longer before tying him up for a little while.*

## ***What is going on with our calf?"***

This Facebook site was for show cattle. Most of the comments were along the lines of:

*"He's laying down hoping that you will just leave him alone. Just keep at him to get up and don't let him be. He will learn that you are not going to leave him alone just because he lays down."*

*"He's testing you."*

*"He's throwing a tantrum, of sorts. Don't let him get away with it, whatever you do. Never leave him alone after he does this and tie him up good and high for about thirty minutes. Assert your authority and he'll learn."*

*"Stay close to him and when he starts to go down grab the rope and pull his head up hard."*

*"You let him do it once and he realized he can do it all the time! It's a bad habit to start! One of my show calves did that; and we thought we broke him of it and we get into the ring and he lays down! Don't let him keep doing that or he will just be lazy!"*

*"When he goes to lay down give him a good slap on his butt or twist his tail. Have someone walk next to your daughter to grab the rope and yank up when he goes down."*

*"This is a passive-aggressive temper tantrum about being led. When the calf is left alone after the 'tantrum', it is rewarded and is learning that its tantrums work."*

*"My heifer was the same way, but she would sprawl out like she was dead till I let go of the rope."*

*"He's just being a jerk."*

## **NO.**

"Fainting Calf Syndrome" is a humorous name for a disconcerting behavior sometimes seen in *Bos Indicus* cattle, especially calves. In reaction to a new experience such as halter breaking, the calf will sink down to the ground. He may go to his knees or totally stretch out flat. He's totally limp and his eyes may roll up in his head. He's unresponsive. Nothing you do will wake him up. Sooner or later he'll magically recover. This behavior is called "Tonic Immobility." We're all familiar with "fight or flight"; but there's also "freeze." Chickens ("hypnotizing a chicken") and opossums ("playing possum") also exhibit this behavior. It is not related to the myotonic reaction of Tennessee Fainting Goats, which causes the muscles to become rigid, and the goat topples to the ground.

In Tonic Immobility, the calf is confronted by an overwhelming stress and just collapses. The first time it happened to me I thought I had broken my calf's neck.



## Here's how to deal with this behavior:

First, realize that any new experience is a stressor. And just like humans, cattle need new experiences even though they cause stress. Without exposure to novel situations, a cow becomes terrified of everything outside of its pasture. As prey animals, their instinctive reaction is fear. You need to reduce the stress and allow them to realize that they're not going to be murdered. Don't pull on the rope. When they start to sink, release the pressure and turn away from them; pay them no attention and wait. **Leave him alone.** Older cows, the first time you halter them or attempt to load them on a trailer, will sometimes demonstrate this reaction. It's a novel experience to them, and just because they're older doesn't mean they can handle it. They are not throwing tantrums and have no control over their responses. If you continue to work with them over a few days, I promise they will calm down. Invariably, at shows some calves come out of the trailer and immediately drop.

Then they see other cows being comfortable and calm. They see big piles of hay and grain, and soft shavings to sleep on. They start allowing strangers to pet them. By the end of the show, they're happily walking around. Really!

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