



The last goodbye

If the thought of losing an equine friend is too much to bear, a new XLEquine workshop could help. Andrea Oakes went along to find out more

The greying whiskers and dipping back may be a giveaway, but few owners like to dwell on the fact that their beloved horse or pony is starting to age. Imagining life without him is even more traumatic - how many of us simply bury our head in the sand when it comes to thinking about the end of our horse's life?

Retirement and euthanasia are emotive issues at the best of times, so it's perhaps not surprising that the idea of making proper plans for these final stages is something most of us would rather avoid. The good news is that vet group XLEquine is here to make the whole subject a bit easier to handle with the launch of an innovative new workshop entitled 'Old Friends and Saying Goodbye'.

Tackling such a subject head on is never going to be easy, so it was with some trepidation and plenty of tissues that I went along to the first of these workshops at St Boniface Veterinary Clinic in Devon. The agenda included:

- Caring for sick or older horses, ponies and donkeys
- Preparing for euthanasia
- Understanding and coping with grief

Despite the rather heavy-going theme, the workshop offered a practical and positive approach to easing an elderly horse into retirement and coping with loss when the time comes. It certainly gave me confidence about how I could help a horse - and myself - handle the inevitable final chapter. After attending, I couldn't help thinking that every

owner with an equine OAP could benefit from XLEquine's sensible and sympathetic advice.

Understanding ageing

Our classroom-based workshop kicked off with an introduction from equine vet Anna Jesse, who encouraged us to get to know each other by discussing our horses. Almost all of the course-goers had experience of ageing equines - one had lost a pony to melanoma, another's horse had recently been put to sleep with a heart problem, while several were worried about making proper provisions for their geriatrics.

But how old is 'old'? Anna explained that while any horse over 12 years at a vetting is described as 'aged', the term does not kick in for insurance purposes until 15-17 years.



'Old' is best used for horses of around 20-25 years, ponies of around 25-30 years and donkeys even older than that.

We then learned that 20-30% of the UK's equines were considered geriatric - and that 95% of those were suffering from at least one health problem. On the brighter side, however, Anna pointed out that an impressive proportion of the horses competing at the London 2012 Olympics were aged 15 or over.

"Saying goodbye to a family friend will never be easy"

Just because he's getting on a bit doesn't mean that an older horse is a write-off, of course, but Anna next talked about the equine ageing process and the various health issues that can crop up. Covering topics ranging from obesity and dental disease to joint trouble, liver problems, Cushing's syndrome and colic, she outlined typical signs and potential treatments. We were also each given a useful booklet explaining these key points in further detail.

Anna had stressed at the start that we were welcome to chip in or ask questions at any time, and we discussed the management of the older horse, people were keen to raise queries and exchange their own ideas and experiences.

An older horse may or may not display common signs of ageing and even if he does, that doesn't mean he's no longer useful or wanted

When is the 'right' time?

Anna then introduced us to her own horse, Seamac, by way of a series of funny and endearing photos that flashed up onto the wall. Now in her thirties, the chestnut mare has been part of Anna's life for 20 years and the two of them clearly share a close bond.

It was a poignant way of approaching the topic of euthanasia. As Anna voiced her own feelings about Seamac's advancing age and the inevitable fact that her mare's life is nearing its end, we realised that she wasn't just presenting the workshop as a professional - she is a horse owner, too, with the inevitable emotional attachments. Saying goodbye to a family friend will never be easy, but Anna pointed out that few horses die naturally without suffering. Euthanasia is there to protect welfare, allowing us to ensure a comfortable, pain-free death.

Some graphic injury photos reminded us that the decision to destroy a horse is occasionally taken out of our hands. But what about a gradual decline into old age - when is the 'right' time? Anna advised us to consider quality of life 'markers' by monitoring a horse's behaviour, his ability to

stand up after lying down and his general demeanour and health. A photo diary can be useful to gauge depreciation of his condition, as can the opinion of a friend, farrier or vet who doesn't see the horse as often as you.

With a chronic illness, Anna suggested agreeing a time limit with your vet for significant improvement. And always remember, she stressed, that your vet is there to help.

As hard as it may be, planning end-of-life decisions in good time will be a big support to you in the final stages. It wasn't easy to hear about euthanasia methods - shooting or lethal injection - but Anna talked us through the options and reassured us that prior sedation will ensure a humane ending. We covered the practical considerations of dealing with the death, disposing of the body afterwards and handling passport and insurance issues. As unpleasant as some aspects of the discussion were, Anna's no-nonsense but sensitive handling of the subject certainly helped to ease concerns.

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Coping with loss

Over a break for tea and cake, some of the course-goers admitted that knowing what to expect at a horse's end had already helped to lighten the burden a little. Armed with the practical facts, we were ready to move on to the third and final part of the workshop - how we would prepare for and cope with the loss.

We all know that owners love talking about their horses, but would we be so ready to talk about ourselves? Animal bereavement counsellor Angela Garner started the session with a clever technique to encourage us to voice our concerns. Working in pairs, we first had to write down our fears about losing our equine friends. We then had to make the



Our emotional connection to our horses means saying goodbye to is never easy



Discuss any worries you have about your horse with trusted friends and, of course, your vet



Andrea gets ready to launch her 'fear aeroplane'

sheets into paper aeroplanes and 'launch' these fears across the room - an exercise that certainly lightened the atmosphere.

Angela then read out our statements, which encompassed worries about the 'before', 'during' and 'after' aspects of the death of a horse. She emphasised that talking to a vet and planning the process beforehand would settle some of the 'what ifs', while understanding the course of grief would help us cope with the aftermath.

Likening life to a jigsaw puzzle, Angela explained that the pieces represent the cornerstones of our life - such as family, health, friends, work, even our horses. These can be scattered by trauma. The stability and harmony we've grown accustomed go out of the window as we experience the raw emotions of loss.

This pain must be worked through, said Angela. We must allow ourselves time to grieve the loss of a treasured equine companion and not underestimate the

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impact of this. Only then can we begin to bring the puzzle pieces back together, creating a new picture.

Some of the course members talked about their own experiences of losing a horse - one describing the heart-ache as 'a real ache' and another revealing that she hadn't been able to eat or sleep properly for some time. How could we handle these feelings?

Angela admitted that the effects of grief can be physical and advised those recovering from loss to try to take good care of themselves. Talking to close friends, respecting the significance of what you're going through and expressing your feelings by crying or shouting can all help us ride these 'waves' of emotion. In time, Angela reassured us, it is possible to reach a settlement with the fact that sometimes our companions must move on before we do.

The three-and-a-half hours at the workshop certainly felt like a good investment of time - and the take-home message was clear: if you are preparing for the loss of a horse, staying in close contact with your vet will allow you to talk through any worries as they arise. Remaining focussed on your horse's needs can help you through this traumatic period and knowing the options available and making decisions

beforehand will settle your mind and provide him with the best possible care.

Recognising that grief is a natural and necessary process - and giving yourself time to work through the many emotions - will help ease your recovery from the loss.

● **Other XLEquine workshops include: foot care, how horses learn, and first aid for horses. For a full list of course dates, and information on how to book, visit www.equineskills.co.uk**

Who are XLEquine? **XLEquine**

This feature is brought to you in association with XLEquine. This specialist division of XLVets is an established group of practices working together to deliver a high quality of veterinary care. Currently XLEquine has 35 members across the UK, ranging from large equine referral hospitals to mixed veterinary practices, incorporating over 120 equine vets. To find an XLEquine practice in your area or for more information, visit www.xlequine.co.uk