

Managing stress for a happier horse

Equine vet **Aoife Byrne** considers how we can improve our horses' physical and psychological well-being by reducing their exposure to stress



OUR EXPERT

Aoife Byrne
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Historically, horses were a prey animal that lived in herds grazing for the majority of their time. It is therefore not surprising that some of today's domesticated horses – kept in environments and in routines that go against how equines live in nature – experience a certain degree of stress.

Stress affects the psychological wellbeing of a horse and may manifest in issues such as stereotypies (box walking, for example) and behavioural problems, as well as more serious health conditions.

Many behavioural problems are associated with confinement. Under free-ranging circumstances, horses wander and spend more than 60 per cent of their day foraging.

The remainder of their time is spent resting (standing or lying down), mutual grooming

or engaging in another activity. Horses are highly social animals that require contact with others for normal daily maintenance and wellbeing. Isolating them can lead to problems developing.

What is stress?

Stress, as described by the American Psychological Association, is an "emotional experience accompanied by biochemical, physiological, and behavioral changes."

Psychology Today defines it as "a reaction to a stimulus that disturbs our physical or mental equilibrium".

Owners might not pick up on, or appreciate, which stressors can cause a horse distress, and equine researchers say this can amount to a welfare issue. Responsible owners, trainers and handlers owe it to their horses to either reduce or manage stress wherever and whenever possible.

It is in their best interests if they wish to compete. To attain optimal performance within any equestrian discipline, horses must be in peak physical fitness and have the correct psychological state.

The 'Psychological state' is made up primarily of three factors: temperament, mood and emotional reaction.

"Horses were a prey animal that lived in herds grazing for the majority of their time"

Paying attention to these factors is the key to ensuring their mental wellbeing and a happy horse.

Temperament is a basic, long-term attitude. Developed from genetic factors and life experiences, a horse's temperament usually remains essentially consistent throughout his life.

Also, the 'correct' psychological state for each horse varies, according to the kind of work he does.

For example, a dressage horse should be cool and calm so as not to be distracted by his environment, but 'flightiness' in a racehorse can be a good thing.

Signs of a problem

The warning signs of stress in a horse are characterised by certain unexplained behavioural problems that tend to fall into three groups:-

1. A negative or variable attitude towards work, a drop in performance or exhibiting traits such as ear pinning, girthiness and not getting along with other horses;
2. Episodes of hyper-reactivity, spookiness, apparent panic, a change in mental activity or – in extreme cases – collapse;
3. Demonstrating undesirable behaviours, such as self-mutilation or biting.

Stress can be brought on by certain situations (acute) or be the result of day-to-day management issues (chronic).

Acute stress: The following are indicators a horse is suffering from acute stress, caused by a certain scenario, such as loading:-

- Elevated head and neck position;
- Ears pricked tightly forward;
- Displaying one of the four Fs – flight, fight, fidget or freeze;
- Showing the white (sclera) of the eye; ▶



Understanding how horses live in the wild is key to reducing stress in domesticated equines





Stereotypies such as crib-biting can develop in stressed horses

- A triangular appearance to the upper eyelid;
- Staring intensely;
- Poor concentration;
- Increased breathing and heart rates.

Chronic stress; A horse that is unhappy in his general environment – such as being stabled for long periods – can suffer from long-term stress. He may show the following signs:-

- Aggression and irritability;
- Submissive body language, such as licking and chewing, head lowering and yawning;
- Stereotypical behaviour such as crib-biting, windsucking, weaving or box walking;
- Extreme and/or regular fear responses;
- Poor sleep patterns/hypervigilance;
- Poor learning capacity;
- Picky eating;
- Weight loss/gain;
- Certain chronic health problems.

Assess his management

If your horse's behaviour changes, you need to consider what caused it. Has he started

kicking the wall of his stable because he is in pain, or is he stressed because he is unhappy he's being kept in for too long, and wants to go out in the field?

Behaviour changes can stem from physical problems, psychological ones, or a combination of the two.

Primarily, psychological problems will stem from social interaction, learning or adaptation to a suboptimal environment.

One example would be a horse randomly kicking out once just before feeding time. The horse then begins to associate his kicking with getting fed, and when the pattern repeats, it reinforces the behaviour.

In contrast, a primarily physical problem has its roots in pain or discomfort, hormonal influences, or neurologic conditions.

Physical and psychological problems are very interrelated, and so are often challenging to sort out.

The main goal of managing behaviour issues in horses is to identify the deviation from normal equine behaviour and correct it.

The health risks of stress

Veterinary issues that could arise due to a horse being unhappy or stressed are related to the regular release of cortisol (known as the stress hormone) in the body. These include:-

- Increased amounts of inflammation – predisposing the horse to allergies, itchy skin and poor wound and injury healing;
- Allergic reactions triggered by stress;
- Digestive disorders – such as stomach ulcers, some types of colic, intermittent diarrhoea/intermittent to regular loose faeces;
- Lowered immune system – causing the horse to suffer from repeated infections, such as skin infection/airway infections.

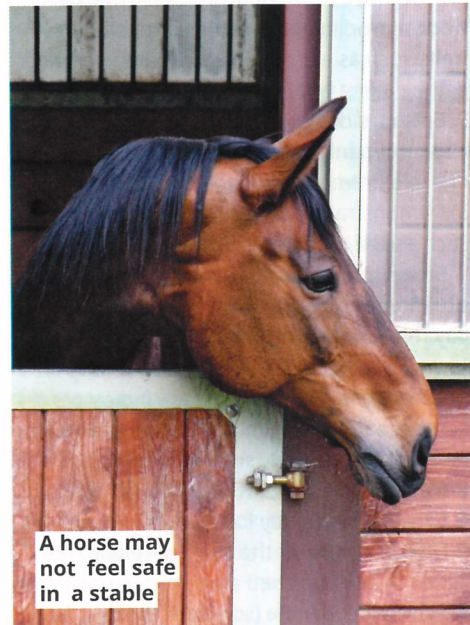
If you think your horse has a behavioural or medical issue that might be caused or exacerbated by stress, contact your vet. They might recommend a consultation with a specialist who understands stress in horses.

Your vet should also aim to help you find the cause of stress and give you advice on how to remove it.

There are lots of ways of achieving this, both in the short and long term, so a consultation is often the best way to work out what will be practical for you and your horse.

They may consider stress relieving medication but in horses this is not particularly common. Anti-anxiety drugs result in horses becoming wobbly on their feet, therefore making them dangerous to be around. However, there are some complementary supplements or herbal medicines that can help some horses.

Ultimately, only the removal of the source of the stress can truly fix the problem and this often involves a review of their management, as well as some re-training to make the horse feel differently about previous stress triggers.



A horse may not feel safe in a stable

7 ways to avoid stress

Aoife shares her top tips to help you improve your horse's well-being by reducing the chance of him suffering from stress

We can't always prevent stress, but we can reduce some stressors, and help our horses cope better. To do that, you need to understand his instinctual and biological needs.

Here are seven tips for reducing stress levels for your horse:

1 Allow him to create social bonds:

Having friends is stronger than any other instinct in the horse. The need to belong to a herd, or at least have friends for safety and comfort, is paramount. If you don't have another horse, provide a social mammal such as a goat, dog or cat as a friend. Nurturing behaviours such as mutual grooming are important – you can help provide this yourself by massaging and grooming/scratching where the horse 'asks' for it.

2 Provide him with a safe environment:

Horses want to feel safe. As a prey species they react to stimuli humans are unaware of, or don't sense as equines do. Horses need 'safe space' and, contrary to what many people think, a stable is not always considered a safe place to a horse. In nature, the herd and open spaces provide safety, which is why turnout is best.

3 Feed a balanced diet:

In a natural habitat, horses will eat a variety of plants, including grasses, herbs and shrubs. Ensure you give your horse a well-balanced diet, including 24/7 access to grass/hay or free grazing. Provide mineral/vitamin supplements if needed, preferably from a natural source.

4 Give leadership:

Horses want to follow a leader. In their natural lives, leadership is determined by space domination and respect. When you are interacting with your horse, you need to be a competent leader. This is accomplished through understanding horse behaviour, and being fair and consistent.

5 Allow him access to natural stimuli:

Horses need sunshine and a large enough space to be horses – running, rolling and bucking. They also need to feel and hear the wind blowing, smell various scents, listen to birds and watch interesting



Ensure your horse has plenty of turnout, with equine company

activities. Try to provide them with a sensory-rich environment.

6 Give him the chance to play: Allow your horse to meet other horses and animals, smell manure and engage in as many 'horse' activities that you safely can allow. Plan 'play time' for you and your horse and prevent boredom by providing suitable toys or activities.

7 Plan an exercise regime: Horses are designed to walk at least 10 miles a day and need movement to stay healthy and feel good. Provide regular but varied exercise – do a combination of schooling, hacking and ground work, for example. This stimulates a horse's body and mind.

Remember to balance your own stress levels. This will keep your horse from picking up your thoughts and feelings and reflecting them back to you through behavioural and physical problems. Keeping stress to a minimum is a win-win situation for everyone. ■



Mutual grooming is an important behaviour for horses to carry out

To help you keep your horse or pony healthy, XLEquine practices are holding 'Picture of Health' activities during the summer. These will educate people about preventative healthcare and help reduce the risk of unexpected or significant vet bills. Visit: www.xlequine.co.uk

