

10 STEPS TO A HAPPY HORSE

Follow behaviourist Justine Harrison's brilliant tips, and keep your horse happier and healthier

Stress is a common issue that affects humans and can be caused by a variety of reasons. Horses can get stressed too, and often it's brought on by the same factors that influence us.

Maybe they aren't sleeping well, someone new has arrived they don't get on with, they are struggling with their job, or they are stuck inside for hours upon end.

All of these things affect how a horse feels and behaves.

Of course, every rider and owner wants their horse to be happy – but what makes a horse happy, and how can we tell when he is in this state?

In summary, a happy horse is healthy, relaxed yet alert, eats well,

maintains weight, enjoys training and exercise, copes well with change or new situations, rolls, looks after himself and gets on well with other horses.

Having a happy horse isn't just about our own peace of mind – it provides tangible benefits.

A horse whose basic emotional needs are met will be healthier, safer and easier to handle, quick to learn and will perform better.

They will probably require fewer vet visits and generally be a joy to spend time with.

So what makes a horse happy? The short answer is having the freedom to be allowed to be a horse – plenty of turnout, equine company, ad-lib food and a safe environment.

But in a domestic situation, when their choices may be restricted, how can we ensure our horses are getting what they need on both a physical and mental level?

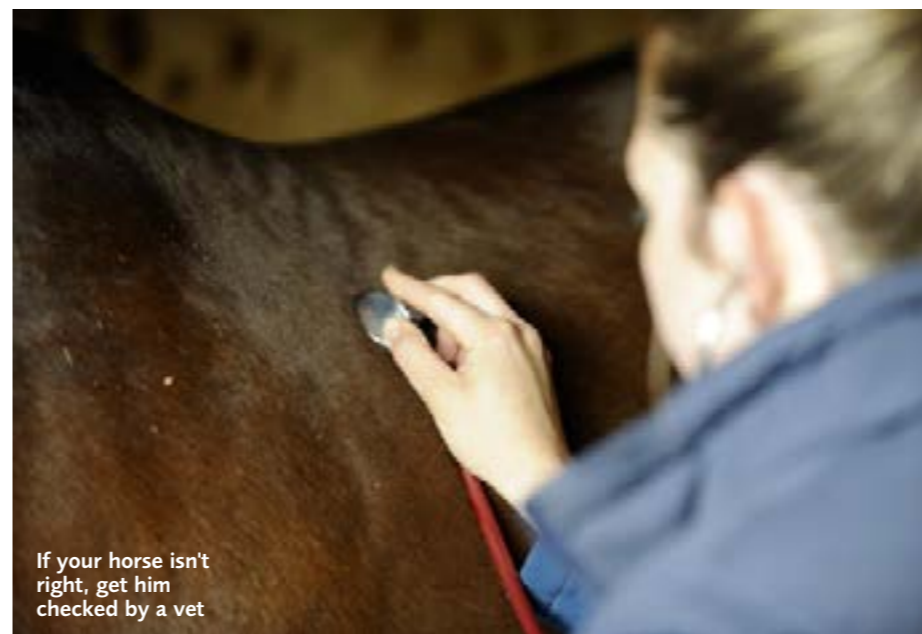
Here are some small changes you can make that will reap huge rewards – your horse will thank you for them.

1 Monitor your horse's health

Get to know your horse's body and spot problem signs so you can address them straight away.

Check him over daily for any new bumps, scrapes and areas of heat, which could indicate a problem.

Invest in a thermometer and take your horse's baseline temperature, and his pulse and respiration rates, often so you know what is normal for him (individual horses may differ).



If your horse isn't right, get him checked by a vet

Ensure that you arrange regular check ups for your horse with a registered equine dental technician (EDT), physiotherapist and qualified saddle fitter.

Doing this will allow the experts to spot any minor issues before they begin to develop into major problems.



Give your horse freedom to move around each day

2 Consider your horse's viewpoint

Watch out for changes in behaviour but avoid anthropomorphism – attributing human characteristics to equines.

Horses that behave badly may be labelled as naughty, jealous or stubborn, but it's more likely to be due to pain, hunger or fear.

Contact your vet and a qualified behaviourist if you start to witness unusual behaviour.

What you want may not be what your horse wants or needs.

For example, owners often put too many rugs on their horse because they themselves feel cold, but the horse probably doesn't feel the same way and may overheat.



Don't rug up just because you are cold

3 Maximise turnout

Horses have evolved to travel up to 100 miles a day, grazing as they go, so provide as much turnout as possible.

Their default environment should be outside – not inside – and freedom to move is vital for a horse's wellbeing.

Horses would very rarely stand still in the wild, unless dozing or sleeping. In fact, they naturally move one of their feet every three to five seconds.

Spending hours standing still in a stable can lead to all sorts of physical and mental problems.

Paddocks must have adequate shelter, water and plenty of forage available, so feed multiple piles of hay if your grass is low.

Owners often think a horse waits at the field gate as they prefer their stable, when in fact they may just be hungry and the only reason they want to come in is to get some food.

If your turnout is restricted, create a fenced area outside the horse's stable so he has the choice to wander in and out at will.

Do it NOW!

Keep your horse occupied with this clever idea for a box of delights...

Make a toy box to entertain your horse, either in the stable or when he's tied up.

Half-fill a large, strong bucket or crate with horse-safe toys – large dog toys, rubber balls and rings are ideal.

Scatter grass nuts, vegetable strips or high-fibre treats in the bottom of the bucket and pour diluted apple or carrot juice over the top.

Watch to make sure he doesn't become frustrated or swallow anything he shouldn't, and take the box off him as soon as he loses interest.

Toy boxes become a real treat and are useful to keep your horse occupied during difficult vet and farrier visits, or to help him settle into a new environment, for example.

TIP from the TOP

Create rolling patches in the field – make a patch of sand and one of pea gravel. Your horse will love using them.



Happy horses tend to get on well with others



Horse-friendly housing enables them to socialise

4 Ensure he has equine company

Horses rely on other equines for friendship, shared vigilance and security. They are extremely social and doze, groom and play together.

But many are socially isolated or turned out individually and this can lead to behavioural problems.

A well-socialised and stable mixed herd of varying ages provides the best environment and is essential for a young horse's development.

If your horse is stabled a lot, ensure he is housed next to a friend. Ideally, they should be able to touch and groom each other.

Even better, why not adopt a group housing or barn system? →

5 Provide plenty of forage

Restricting forage intake can affect a horse both mentally and physically. They are designed to eat for 16 to 18 hours a day and in the wild would decide when to eat.

Being without food for even a few hours a day can increase frustration and lead to aggressive behaviour, as well as putting him at risk of developing gastric ulcers.

Ideally, feed a choice of different forages at ground level to mimic his natural grazing behaviour and reduce frustration.

Haynets placed at different heights and positions in the field or stable will provide interest and variety.

Avoid sugar- and grain-based feeds, though, as they have been shown to raise anxiety levels and can easily cause weight gain.



Give your horse access to forage at all times

8 Groom regularly

Being able to roll, self-groom and be groomed by other horses is important. These all help maintain skin health by removing any shedding coat and dead skin and improve circulation.

Remove rugs regularly to allow him to scratch and roll, and groom rugged horses daily to maintain skin health.

Scratching the areas where horses mutually groom – especially around the withers – will lower the heart rate and can help them relax.

A nice wither scratch will also improve the horse-human bond.



Grooming helps maintain skin health



Clicker training uses positive reinforcement

9 Embrace positive reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is rewarding your horse when he does the right thing and it is an extremely effective training tool.

If you tell your horse that he has done well, either by using praise, giving him a treat or a wither scratch, he will be much more likely to repeat the behaviour in the future.

Traditional horse training relies heavily on pressure and release. However, creating training situations that result in rewarding your horse's success can achieve effective results without undue pressure.

Reward-based training will pay off long-term. A horse that's not worried that he is going to be pressured will enjoy training and is more likely to trust you and your judgement when he encounters a new situation.

10 Ditch the gadgets

Tack is often fitted incorrectly or doesn't fit at all, and this can cause a number of problems when you're in the saddle.

Make sure your tack isn't causing discomfort and have your saddle fit checked by a professional every six months.

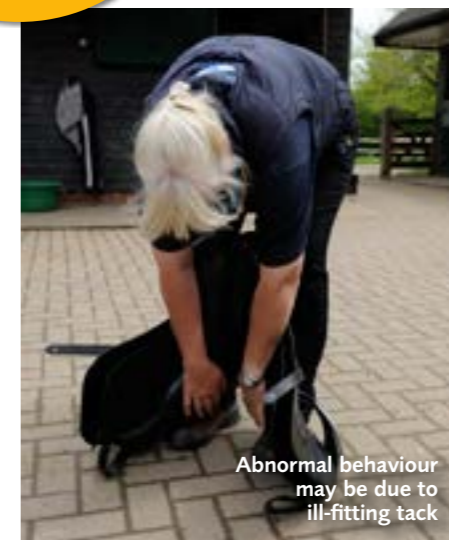
When horses don't perform a desired behaviour, owners often use a gadget in order to force him to do what is being asked, rather than looking for the underlying cause.

By using more force, minor issues can quickly escalate into very dangerous behaviours.

Most importantly, listen to your horse – using a stronger bit to stop, a martingale to prevent him tossing his head or a pressure halter because the horse won't go into a lorry or trailer, doesn't address the cause.

TIP from the TOP
Add variety by changing the horse toys or treats you provide each day, to ensure your horse's interest is maintained.

It's much better to work out why the horse won't do what's required and try to fix the cause. It could be that he is in pain or frightened and unable to do what is being asked. **H**



Abnormal behaviour may be due to ill-fitting tack



Is your stable big enough for your horse to lie down?

6 Encourage a good night's sleep

Horses don't sleep well unless they feel safe and relaxed.

In a herd situation, they would have an equine friend to stand guard over them. They will then be able to sleep, safe in the knowledge that they will be alerted to any potential danger.

Horses need to be able to lie flat out on their side to achieve REM [a deep] sleep, and their stable may be too small for them to do this.

Often, stabled horses sleep only when they are turned out and watched over by their herd mates. Ensure your horse has plenty of space to lie down and equine company to look out for him during his rest periods.

Sleep can be disrupted when moving to a new environment (perhaps a new home or at a show where you are staying overnight), so having a trusted horse friend to accompany your horse may mean they both sleep well.

7 Provide mental stimulation

In a natural environment, horses constantly learn about their environment, looking for food and trying to keep away from danger.

Our domestic horses tend to be turned out in boring flat paddocks, then are stabled with nothing other than a limited forage ration to keep them occupied. This is not really enough to provide them with the mental stimulation they need.

For many years, zoos have been enriching their environments and have seen huge positive changes in

their animals' behaviour, learning and health as a result. See the column 'Enrich his environment' (right) for some great ideas on how to provide mental stimulation.

You could teach your horse tricks, take him for walks and introduce him to new things in a safe environment, such as dogs, cones, umbrellas or bicycles, so he starts to expand his comfort zone.

Allow him to approach each object, one at a time, from a distance and on a loose lead rope.

Reward him for each step he takes towards the object with a treat or a big lip-curling wither scratch.



Introduce your horse to new experiences and challenges

ENRICH HIS ENVIRONMENT

Many horses are stabled for long periods of time, which can result in boredom. Make sure your horse has plenty to occupy his mind when he's inside – here are a few ideas you can try.

- Pack a traffic cone with hay – leave some poking out of the top and hide treats inside.
- Knock up some root vegetable kebabs – thread carrots, parsnips and turnips on to a strong cord or rope and hang from your stable ceiling or tree branches in the field (pictured).
- Part of a horse's diet would naturally be bark and branches. So put horse-safe logs and suitable branches – such as willow or hazel – around the stable and field for your horse to browse on. Check they are not poisonous first.
- Make treat branches – find a suitable branch and smear with honey or low-sugar jam and stick vegetable treats or Polos on to it, then hang in the stable or field. Add something different every day.
- Hide treats inside towels or staple-free cardboard boxes. Loosely fold or wrap the towel at first, until your horse works out how to access the treats.
- Suitable, non-poisonous shrubs can be cut and placed amongst your horse's forage ration. Horses love cow-parsley, cleavers, mint and dandelions – find out what your horse enjoys the most and cut something different for him every day.
- Studies have shown that given a choice of bedding, horses prefer a big straw bed to rummage through. Hiding strips of root vegetables or grass nuts in their bed and forage ration will extend foraging time.

● While you can buy a stable toy for your horse, make sure it's easy for him to do. Some horses can become frustrated if it's too difficult to access the treat.

Always use your common sense and supervise your horse, and don't provide anything that could cause him to choke. If your horse is laminitic, seek advice before providing sugary treats.

