

All the right moves



OUR EXPERT

Justine is an equine behaviourist certified with the International Association of Animal Behaviour Consultants. She helps owners solve a wide range of horse behaviour problems.

Moving to a new home, or even staying overnight at a show, can be unsettling for a horse. Equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** shows you how to make the transition stress-free

Researchers have found that moving home is one of the most stressful events we will experience in our lifetime, along with bereavement, divorce and illness.

A lot of people take time off work when they move, to adjust to the strange surroundings and to meet new neighbours.

Of course, we usually have a choice as to whether we move house or not. We also have an idea of what to expect so we can mentally prepare.

In contrast, horses are often expected to carry on as normal when they move yards, when in fact they are likely to be stressed by the experience.

Without any choice in the matter and without warning, they are taken from their home, family or friends and suddenly their life has changed.

They find themselves in a strange environment with new horses, people, sights and sounds, in an unfamiliar routine with potential danger everywhere.

It is a disturbing situation for a prey animal and many horses can take several months – or even years – to totally relax in a new home.

Watch his reactions

Horses often behave differently in a new environment, but they don't all react in the same way to stressful situations.

It is important to watch for changes in your horse that could indicate he is anxious.

He may be hypervigilant (on high alert), with his attention constantly on his surroundings. Or, he may become withdrawn and quiet, not wanting to leave the stable – this is something owners often mistake for being relaxed.

Many horses do not eat or drink normally when they are somewhere new and their sleep can be disturbed for weeks, leaving them stressed, exhausted and at risk of colic.

An anxious horse can be dangerous and unpredictable, too, putting them and you at risk of injury, so it is wise to make any move as stress free for our horses as possible.

If you are planning a move to a new yard, there are a number of practical ways you can make the experience of moving easier for you both.

TAKE YOUR HORSE TO VISIT HIS NEW HOME BEFORE HE MOVES

If your horse already knows the environment before the move, it will not be such a shock to him. Travel him to the new yard with a

An ideal yard

When drawing up a list of attributes and facilities you'd like a yard to offer, bear in mind that what is good for you may not be of interest to your horse.

Equines have different priorities to their owners, so if you are looking for a school with a nice surface, bear in mind what your horse would prefer:-

- Year-round turnout, with well managed pasture and safe fencing;
- Good shelter – hedgerows, bushes and trees for shade and to browse on;
- A well-socialised, friendly group of horses for company;
- A calm, safe environment;
- Clean, fresh water and good quality, ad-lib forage;
- A consistent daily routine for all the horses – for example, they are turned out and fed at the same time.

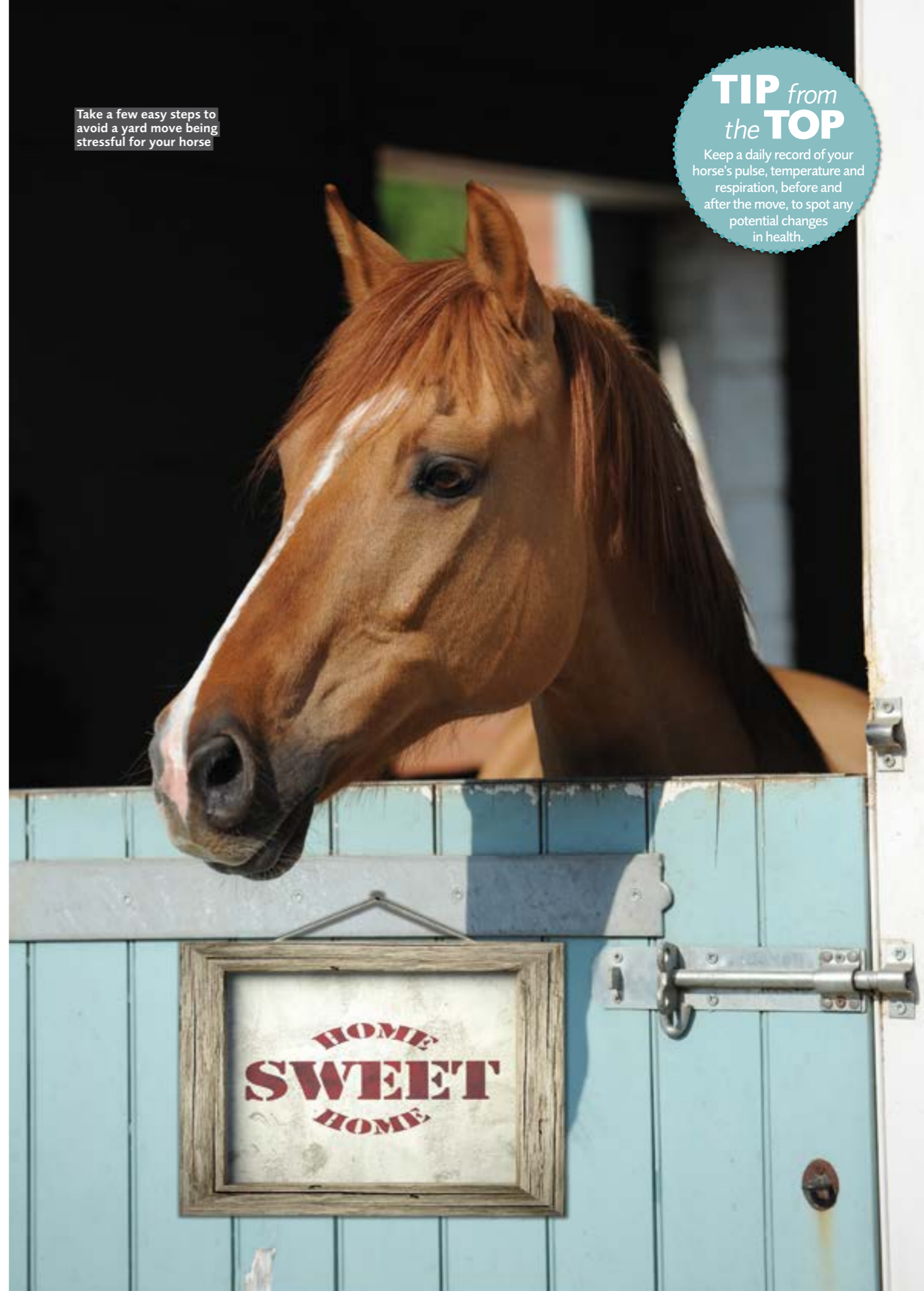


Watch how your horse reacts in a new environment

Take a few easy steps to avoid a yard move being stressful for your horse

TIP from the TOP

Keep a daily record of your horse's pulse, temperature and respiration, before and after the move, to spot any potential changes in health.





Introduce new horses over a fence at first

calm horse friend and arrange for them to have a few hours turnout in his new field. If they are happy, take them for a walk to explore the area.

MOVE YOUR HORSE WITH A FRIEND

The safest place for a horse is with his herd. Horses rely on their close friends for security, so will be more likely to relax in a new environment with someone they trust to warn of any potential danger and stand guard over him while he sleeps.

It is not always practical, but if you move him with a horse he knows, he should settle quicker.

ORGANISE TRANSPORT IN ADVANCE

Have safe transport arranged for the day of the move and try to have a practice run to ensure your horse is happy to be loaded.

You want him to arrive in his new home as relaxed as possible, so allow plenty of time for loading and travelling. You will become stressed yourself if you end up in a rush.

TURN YOUR HORSE OUT ON ARRIVAL

Arrange for your horse to be turned out after the journey. This will give him time to graze, relax and take in his new surroundings.

If the yard has a quarantine policy for new arrivals, ask if this could be in a field or paddock.

STABLE HIM NEXT TO A FRIEND OR A WELL-SOCIALISED HORSE

If your horse is to be stabled for part of his day, he will benefit from friendly equine company next door.

He will be happier if he can see other horses at all times, but having physical contact with a friend is better still. Being able to mutually groom over a low internal wall or through a window in

bed to encourage him to lie down and sleep if he's tired.

MAXIMISE TURNOUT

Horses would naturally graze for 16-18 hours a day, so allow your horse as much turnout as possible, with friendly equine company.

Horses are more likely to be relaxed if they enjoy plenty of turnout, and tend to be calmer when ridden.

INTRODUCE NEW HORSES GRADUALLY

There is always a risk of injury when new horses meet, but gradual introductions can keep that risk to a minimum.

Take your horse for a walk to meet the other horses over their stable doors or field fences and see who he gets along with best, and who to avoid.

Arrange for your horse to be turned out with a well-socialised, calm, friendly horse for a few weeks.

Ideally, he should be in the next field to his future field mates at first, so he can get to know them over the fence.

Only turn him out in a group when there are no signs of aggression over the fence and the horses are grazing happily alongside each other.

If at all possible, choose a new 'neutral' field for everyone to be turned out together for the first time.

Tape off any small areas of the field that someone could be cornered in, should there be any aggressive behaviour.

At first, turn your horse out with one other from the new group. When they are relaxed and grazing happily, introduce the next one and so on.

TIP from the TOP
Feed your horse from the floor or a ground-level manger. This mimics natural grazing behaviour and reduces the risk of frustration.

between stables is preferable. Group housing is ideal.

ESTABLISH A ROUTINE

Maintain the routine that your horse had before you moved. He will find it easier to adjust if he knows what he is supposed to be doing and when.

ENRICH HIS ENVIRONMENT

Ensure your horse has plenty to do to keep him occupied, both in the field and the stable.

Provide a choice of forages ad-lib, and safe and healthy stable toys, and make sure he has a deep

A home away from home

If you are staying overnight at a show, this type of environment can be hugely unsettling due to the different sights and sounds. Here's how to help him settle in...

- Have a practice run to the showground, with a horse friend, and give them a chance to explore the area and graze;
- Travel your horse with a friend and stable them next to each other. If you can hire a paddock or create a taped-off grass area for them to graze together, even better.
- Lead him around so he becomes accustomed to unfamiliar sights and sounds.
- Reward your horse when he does the right thing. Tell him he's done well, either with praise, a treat or a wither scratch. He will be much more likely to stay calm and trust you than if you pressure him into doing something.
- Enrich your horse's temporary stable environment (see right) and take familiar items like stable toys and buckets from home.
- Add a little apple juice to his water if he's reluctant to drink.
- Offer a selection of forages to encourage him to eat.
- Stick to his usual routine – feed at the same time as you would at home. If he would be turned out at a specific time, take him for a walk to explore the showground.
- Don't ask too much of him – there's always a next time. Watch his body language and look for signs of anxiety, such as triangulation of the eye or tightness in the chin and lips.

GIVE HIM A HOLIDAY FROM WORK

Don't be tempted to ride your horse too soon after the move – allow him a few days to adjust to his new surroundings.

Take it slowly and don't ask too much of him. If you can, school alongside or hack out with calm and friendly equine company, until your horse is more confident on his own.

Do things your horse enjoys to encourage him to relax in his new environment. Take him for walks in hand – with another calm horse – to graze or browse hedgerows.

This is a great way for him to explore his 'home range' and learn about his new environment. Gradually increase the distance you go when he is more confident.

HANG OUT WITH YOUR HORSE

Keep him company whenever you can. Take the opportunity to catch up on all the things you've been meaning to do at the yard – wash your grooming kit, clean your tack or even read a book in his stable or paddock.

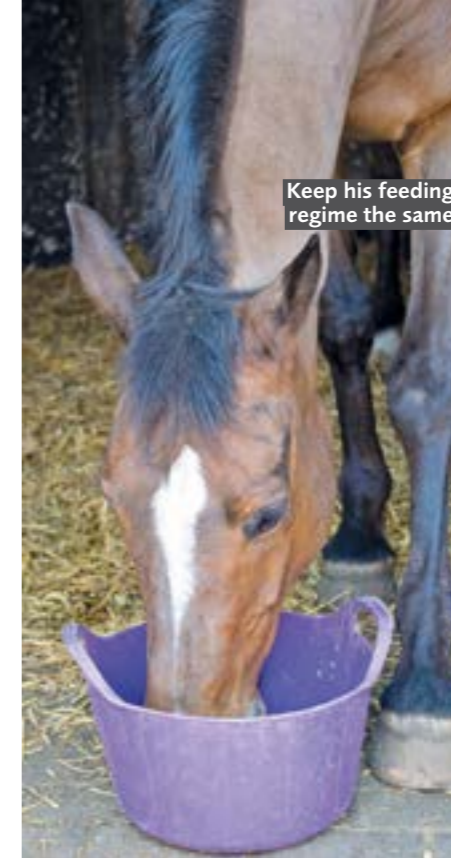
He'll appreciate you being around, especially if he's feeling insecure, and it will go a long way to improving your relationship.

Spend time grooming him and scratching his favourite itchy spots. Grooming around the base of his neck and wither area with a plastic curry comb simulates mutual grooming, lowers the heart rate and will relax your horse.

OBSERVE HIS BEHAVIOUR

Keep a diary and jot down how your horse behaves every day. Note how much he is eating and drinking, how he is getting on with the other horses, how they interact with him and his general mood.

Many horses don't lie down unless they feel safe, so try and work out whether he's rolling and lying down to sleep – either in the field or the stable.



Keep his feeding regime the same

Tell tale signs he's been lying down in his stable are a flattened bed, stable stains or straw or shavings in his mane or tail.

If he's out in the field he will be muddy or have grass stains.

MAINTAIN HIS FEED REGIME

Travelling and moving are huge stressors and put horses at a higher risk of colic. Don't make any changes to your horse's diet until he is settled in.

Take bales of hay or haylage from your last yard with you, and if he is on hard feed, stick to the same brand.

Make sure his forage and feed are placed in an area he feels safe to eat in, and that no other horses can reach his food. ■



Showgrounds are busy environments

8 ways to enrich his environment

Keep a horse happy and entertained with these clever ideas. They can help him settle into a new home and prevent boredom when he's stabled:

1 Offer a choice of forages in different ways – with such a wide variety available, there is no need to stick to hay or haylage. Consider offering dried grass, chopped straw, alfalfa blocks or hay replacement pellets as part of your horse's forage ration.

2 Offer your horse good quality mineral licks and free-choice salt in a bucket. Make your own refreshing licks in hot weather by pureeing suitable fruits or vegetables and freezing them.

Alternatively, put chopped veg into water or diluted fruit juice into a large dish or tray and pop in the freezer.

3 Pack a cone with hay – leave some poking out of the top and hide treats inside.

4 Make root vegetable kebabs by threading them onto a strong cord or rope and hang from your stable ceiling or tree branches in the field.

5 A horse's natural diet would include bark and branches. Put horse-safe logs and suitable branches around the stable and field for your horse to browse on. Check they aren't poisonous first!

5 Fashion treat branches – find a suitable branch and smear with honey or low-sugar jam and stick vegetable treats or polos onto it. Add something different every day.

6 Towels and staple-free cardboard boxes with treats hidden inside can make entertaining toys.

7 Suitable shrubs can be cut and placed amongst the forage ration. Horses love cow parsley, cleavers, mint and dandelions – find out what yours enjoys and cut something different for him every day.

8 Studies have shown that given a choice of bedding, horses prefer a big straw bed to rummage through. Hide strips of root vegetables or grass nuts in the bed.

Whether using home-made or bought stable toys, ensure your horse doesn't become frustrated if the game is too difficult. Make the game easier or choose something else if this is the case.

Change the items every day to ensure your horse doesn't get bored with the same toy or food