

# Home is where the herd is

Owning a horse that can't bear to be parted from an equine friend can be hugely frustrating. Equine behaviourist Justine Harrison looks at why close attachments occur and how you can take the stress out of being separated



Horses form pair bonds that can last a lifetime

**M**ost owners and riders are sure to have encountered a horse or pony that becomes anxious about leaving his equine friends.

If left out in the field alone, he will race up and down the fence line, neighing frantically.

This is a classic sign of a horse having separation anxiety, a common problem that can frustrate even the most patient of owners.

But there are less recognised signs which may be mistaken for the horse being stubborn – for example, refusing to load or enter the ring at a show; not wanting to be caught unless a pal comes too; or napping when you've planned to have a relaxing hack alone.

And then there is the horse that, instead of concentrating on his dressage test, neighs constantly to a friend elsewhere on the showground, causing your marks to tumble.

## A natural reaction

Separation anxiety (also referred to as separation distress) is a psychological condition where an individual becomes anxious if they are apart from someone they have a close bond or emotional attachment to.

The symptoms can range from mild anxiety to full-blown panic.

Separation anxiety may not just affect the individual when the separation occurs, it can also impact on other areas of life.

Sufferers may be constantly nervous and hyper-vigilant, even when their friends are around.

For a herd animal to be anxious when left alone probably should be considered a normal behavioural reaction.

But why does separation anxiety seem to affect some horses and not others? And why are some so terrified of being alone they panic to such a degree they risk injuring themselves?

Horses have evolved over millions of years living in groups and forming close relationships with other herd members. They often form a 'pair bond' – a close relationship with one other horse that may last for life.

These relationships are relied upon to keep horses safe. Other herd members are extra



Having a friend has many benefits – including scratching an itch you can't reach

pairs of eyes to alert them to danger and to stand guard over them so they can truly relax and sleep.

In contrast, a horse on his own has to be on constant alert for danger, or he could end up becoming somebody's lunch.

Any lapse of concentration could be a matter of life or death.

This is why horses who are kept alone can become extremely anxious. They don't have a companion to watch over them while they doze, so never have the chance to totally relax and are often exhausted.

This leaves them at risk of physical problems related to stress – such as colic, for example.

Therefore, it's important for us to realise that although humans have domesticated horses, they still have a hard-wired, innate drive to stay safe in the company of friends of their own species.



A horse that's stabled alone may become anxious

**“Horses kept alone can become extremely anxious. They have no one to watch over them while they doze, so never have the chance to totally relax”**



Foals have so much to learn from Mum

## Early learning

How a horse behaves when separated from others will depend on his upbringing.

Foals that have had a traumatic, sudden separation from their dam, or are weaned too early, are likely to suffer from separation anxiety.

Naturally, a mare would stop suckling her young at nine to 12 months and wean the foal herself when she is ready. This time spent together is vital for a number of reasons:-

- The mare will watch over and protect the foal, giving him a safe and secure base to go and explore the world confidently.
- The foal will learn from his dam and other members of the group how to behave and interact with other horses. ▶

## Training Equine behaviour

● He will learn what is dangerous and what is safe in his environment while benefiting from the protection of his herd.

In this way, a foal will grow up to be a socially aware, confident and independent adult.

It is a vital part of a youngster's education that is often overlooked – domestic foals are often weaned far too early (at four months or less).

Also, separation can be sudden – the mare is removed or the foal is locked up in a stable. This can cause a trauma that affects the horse for life.

Ideally, a youngster should have a good relationship with his dam, and be kept with her for as long as possible.

He should be free to socialise with other horses of varying ages, and become accustomed to them coming and going.

Weaning should be a gradual process with the mare and foal being separated a little at a time, systematically increasing the time or distance away from each other, and always ensuring they have friendly company. In this way, neither foal or mare will have cause for concern or to panic.

But it isn't only youngsters that may develop separation anxiety. An adult horse who has been

### TIP from the TOP

Never force your horse to leave other horses, or punish him if he is anxious – this will only reinforce his fear.

Ensure other horses are always in view



**“The key is to change how the horse feels about being alone very gradually, so as not to reinforce his fear”**

### CASE STUDY

## “She was so distressed she ran through the fence”

Bella, a seven-year-old mare, developed an extreme form of separation anxiety after being turned out alone.

Her owner had been advised she should keep Bella separate to other horses as, on one occasion, she had called out when her equine pal, Wilma, was taken from the field.

But being alone left Bella so distressed she ran through a fence and injured herself.

This incident led her to being constantly anxious unless she was with other equine company, especially Wilma.

I was called out to see Bella and advised her owner to put the mare back in the field with Wilma and two other calm, friendly horses.

Then, a programme of gradual separation exercises was started, with Bella and Wilma always being left in the company of the 'new' horses.

At first, Bella and one of her new friends had their headcollars put on in the field. They were led through the gate, where they were rewarded with treats and immediately turned back out again.

The process was repeated as often as possible (two or three times a day), with the distance they were taken away from the field gradually increased, by a few metres at a time.

Soon, Bella became confident enough to go a little further.

Bella is now relaxed when apart from her friend Wima



At every stage, we watched Bella closely for signs of anxiety in her body language – such as triangulation of the eye, tension in her mouth and chin, raised head carriage or a reluctance to go forward.

If any of the above were spotted, Bella was returned to the field immediately.

We needed to ensure that Bella's fear of being separated was not reinforced at any point – she was always returned to the field on a good note, before becoming anxious.

Then the process was repeated with Bella going out of the field by herself.

She was praised and rewarded with positive experiences for being apart from her friends – this could be a tasty feed, grazing in a lush hedgerow, having her neck scratched (which she loves) or being given a treat.

Bella is now relaxed about being apart from Wilma, and is starting to hack out short distances on her own.

kept in isolation, been separated from his group or had a frightening experience, may become fearful of leaving the herd in the future.

### Coping with separation

The issue can be resolved, but you must remember that horses are social animals that need the company of other equines.

A common mistake made when trying to cure separation anxiety is to keep a horse in an individual paddock or away from others, to avoid them becoming too attached.

In fact, this can cause separation anxiety, or make the problem worse. When he does finally meet another horse, he will be even more desperate to stay with them – perhaps when they are hacked out together, or taken to a show in the same lorry.

In many cases, separation anxiety can be significantly improved by changes in management or through a sympathetic retraining programme (see case study box, left).

The key is to change how the horse feels about being alone gradually, so as not to reinforce his fear. If he only has good experiences when separated, and the length of time spent apart is increased a little at a time, his confidence can be restored.

He'll soon realise he will always be returned to his friends and there is nothing to fear.

Sometimes, simply moving stables (so he can see other horses), changing field mates or the order horses are turned out or brought in, can result in the issue resolving.

If a horse is attached to a specific individual, give them the company of another calm, well-socialised horse and practise short separations.

Reward the horse with a feed or treats when he is removed from his friends and, initially, return him to them immediately.



Lead him away from his friend for short periods at first

### SHARE YOUR STORY

Does your horse suffer from separation anxiety? What problems has this caused, and how have you tackled the issue? Email your experience to [joanna.browne@mytimemedia.com](mailto:joanna.browne@mytimemedia.com). If your story is published in our letters page, you could win £30 to spend at [www.equestrian.com](http://www.equestrian.com).

### Top tips for dealing with separation anxiety

- Always reward your horse for any separation, no matter how small.
- Plan any programme carefully and take it one step at a time.
- Don't ask too much in one session and always end on a good note.
- Go at your horse's pace – make sure his fear of being alone is never reinforced.
- Ensure nobody at the yard leaves your horse alone in the field or stable if he has separation anxiety, as this will make matters worse.

Over time, gradually increase the time and distance involved.

Having only two horses living together, without other equines on the yard, can lead to problems when they are separated.

Ideally there should be a third horse that can keep one company if another is hacked out or taken to a show, for example.

But if for some reason this isn't possible, as a last resort a friend of a different species is better than nothing. Horses can live happily with donkeys, sheep, goats or even alpacas, for example.

Pushing or shouting at a horse who is terrified when on his own will only make matters worse and you run the risk of him thinking you are something to be feared.

In more severe cases of separation anxiety you may need to employ a qualified behaviourist to help create a step-by-step programme, in order to find the best long-term solution to the problem.

### Reducing competition stress

For a horse that becomes anxious at competitions and calls out when you want him to concentrate on a dressage test or a course of fences, keep his equine friend in sight at first.

Position the other horse at the ringside for a few occasions. When not competing, practise walking them both short distances away from each other on the showground.

You can then build up to keeping them apart happily while one of you is in the ring.

### Coping on the yard

Make sure your horse has something really good to occupy him if you think he may struggle with a situation.

For example, if he needs to stand for the vet and you think he'll be worried, borrow a sensible horse to stand beside him and keep him company.

If there's a situation where other horses won't be in view, give him a net of his favourite haylage with some carrots sticking out.

Or, make him a tempting toy box – fill a large, strong box with apples, carrots and other tasty treats, plus pop in some large rubber dog toys and drizzle them with fruit juice. Then, stand back and let him explore!

Check the box doesn't contain any metal staples and keep an eye on the horse the first time you introduce a toy box to see how he reacts.

You can also fill a loosely wrapped towel with vegetable or other treats and watch him work out to unravel it. ■



Play the leapfrog game

### An easy exercise to solve hacking issues

If your horse is worried about leaving others on a hack, try this 'leapfrog' exercise in a quiet, safe area at home, then repeat when you're out riding with some calm, well-behaved equines.

1. Ride ahead for a few paces, then halt and let the other horse catch up.
2. Ask your horse to wait while your friend walks a few paces further on.
3. Ride forward to catch them up.
4. Gradually increase the distance you leave between yourself and the other horse on each hack.

If your horse is anxious, don't force him to go forward or to wait as it will only reinforce his fear.

He may only want to go two or three steps ahead, but your patience will pay off. You can always increase the distance next time.

Always reward your horse even for the smallest improvement with treats, verbal praise and/or a big wither scratch.