Making Do—keeping horses healthy in an imperfect environment

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Earlier I discussed three fundamental facts about horses: that horses are *social* animals, horses are *grazing* animals, and horses are *highly sensitive* to their environment. When we do not take these facts into consideration, we risk adversely affecting our horses' health, well-being, performance, and even longevity. The key to keeping your horse healthy for life is to base your health and management decisions around the horse's nature and natural lifestyle.

Many horses seem to cope alright spending the bulk of their lives in a stall, with limited pasture turnout; some horses actually thrive in a barn environment. However, many others do not. The prevalence of behavioral problems, digestive complaints, respiratory disorders, and various other medical conditions in stabled horses compared with their pastured counterparts illustrates this point.

This article is primarily for those of you who board your horses at a barn, and thus have relatively little say in how they are managed. Hopefully, you've found a facility where the owner/manager respects you and your horse and who is committed to providing the best care possible. If not, then start looking around for a better place to keep your horse.

Below are some ideas for "making do"—making the best of a less-than-perfect situation—when circumstances limit your options.

1. Allow and preserve social bonds.

Horses are herd animals, so they do best living with a relatively stable (no pun intended) group of friends—what I refer to as compatible company. Everyone in the group gets along pretty well, within the natural hierarchy that forms and despite the occasional squabble that blows up over food or personal space.

To the best of your ability, allow your horse to form social bonds with several other horses, and do your best to respect and preserve those bonds. For example, discuss the situation with the barn manager and other boarders, and see what can be done to maintain fairly stable "herdlets" of compatible horses within the general farm/barn population. You cannot do anything about the sale or relocation of your horse's herdmates, but these changes are less upsetting when only one horse leaves and the rest of the group remains the same.

On the surface, it may seem that this strategy would worsen the behavioral problem in which a horse is particularly reluctant to leave the company of her mates, for example to go on a solo trail ride. However, these horses typically are suffering from a *lack* of social connection and belonging, rather than an excess of it. In time, they usually become more settled when they belong to a relatively stable group of horses and other aspects of their physical and psychological well-being are adequately addressed.

2. Feed as natural a diet as possible.

Horses are grazing animals, so they do best when permitted to graze for as much of the day and night as possible (unless they are overweight and prone to laminitis). When

circumstances limit or prevent pasture turnout, then use hay to meet the bulk of your horse's nutritional needs and to meet your horse's need to browse and graze.

Most pleasure horses need little or no grain or other concentrated feeds to maintain their body weight and energy output for work. Most horses can meet the bulk of their nutritional needs from pasture and hay alone. (I discuss this at length in the two articles on healthy eating.) In fact, many behavioral, digestive, and other health problems can be dramatically reduced simply by cutting out grain and grain-based feeds from the horse's diet.

The horse's basic instinct to *forage* or search for food and spend most of the day and night grazing often is overlooked in discussions of nutrition. It also is often overlooked in the desire for economy—of money and time—in modern horsekeeping. It is so much easier to throw the horse his breakfast and dinner twice a day than it is to manage the horse's dietary needs in a more natural way, which is to *allow the horse to eat little and often.* Horses' digestive tracts simply are not designed for meal feeding.

Horses who "act up" because they are bored, anxious, frustrated, or otherwise unhappy with their situation often become much more contented when hay is fed free-choice, rather than being fed as separate meals two or three times a day. This strategy somewhat mimics grazing, in that the horse can eat as little or as much as he wants, when he wants. It can also be useful for horses who are picky eaters or prone to digestive upsets.

If your horse is already overweight or is likely to become so when hay is always available, then calculate his daily roughage requirement, divide that total amount into 3 or 4 separate meals, and feed those portions throughout the day and evening. Start with a ballpark figure of 2% of his ideal body weight per day, which is around 20 lbs of hay for a horse whose ideal weight is 1000 lbs. Go up or down from there as your horse's body condition and energy needs dictate.

(It has been my observation that too many horse owners and barn managers feed too little hay, barely meeting the *minimum* roughage requirement of 1% of bodyweight per day, or 10 lbs for a 1000-lb horse. Even if you do it only once, weigh out the daily requirement you calculated so that you know approximately how many slices of hay that is.)

3. Provide daily exercise.

Horses in a natural setting move around for much of the day and night. If pasture turnout is limited, then you'll need to provide some form of structured exercise, even if it's just turnout in the arena for a couple of hours each day. Ideally, turn your horse out for her daily exercise with at least one other horse she gets along well with.

4. Be involved in your horse's daily life.

Horses need the company of their own species, but they do also bond with humans whose company they enjoy. So, even though you may not make it out to the barn every day, or even if you can spend only a short time each day with your horse, don't underestimate the importance of the "quality time" you spend just futzing around with your horse. Grooming is a wonderful way to bond with your horse, and vice versa. It's also great for the horse's skin and coat. Make it a part of your daily routine if you possibly can.

5. Consider the use of nutritional supplements.

Horses who are not well settled into their environment may benefit from nutritional supplements which have calming effects on the nervous system or that moderate the stress response. Depending on the circumstances, options include B-complex vitamins (particularly vitamin B_1, or thiamine), magnesium (but only if the diet is deficient in this mineral), herbs such as valerian and chamomile, the amino acids L-tryptophan and L-theanine, and a group of herbs called adaptogens. One of my favorite products for stressed horses is APF by Auburn Labs (www.auburnlabs.com). It is a blend of four adaptogenic herbs specifically formulated for horses under physical or psychological stress. (Adaptogens are discussed further in the article on stress, performance, and adaptogenic herbs.)

I must emphasize, though, that *no supplement can make up for poor management.* Do the best you can, and when that's still not enough, then bite the bullet and find a better place to keep your horse.

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