

Is companionship essential for horses?



Horses naturally live in herds and a normal horse is never alone by choice. Horses - if allowed - have a rich social life.

These facts drive the behaviour of horses and cause them to do some of the things that can seem irrational to us - such as panic if they get separated from



other horses. We *all* know that horses are herd animals but many people do not really understand what this entails. A fuller understanding of what herd behaviour *actually* is, means that horse management systems can be designed to incorporate rather than ignore basic facts about horses. Modern management systems do not always take important facts about horse behaviour into consideration and when coupled with a diet that is too low in fibre, some horses develop stereotypic behaviours such as 'cribbing' and 'weaving'.

In this age of enlightenment more and more people are willing to improve the 'lifestyle' of the horses in their care, both for the welfare benefits *and* the improvement in performance that results from healthier horses, not to mention the environmental management benefits.

Wild and feral equines naturally live in herds (harems) that consist of a stallion, a few mares and their offspring. Horses therefore have a very strong fundamental instinct to form attachments to other horses. These attachments are often for life.

Living as part of a herd has many advantages for horses such as 'safety in numbers'. A horse living alone in the wild would be much more likely to be caught by a predator therefore horses feel safer when they have other horses around them.

Horses take it in turns to watch over each other while they sleep. One horse usually stays standing when the others are asleep on the ground. This horse is more alert than the others (even if dozing) while the others sleep more deeply. This is a good example of how herds operate.

When not eating or sleeping horses carry out many other social behaviours termed 'loafing'. Loafing includes activities such as mutual grooming and playing. Mutual grooming, which is where horses use their incisor teeth to groom each other, is a *very* important behaviour for horses. Areas that they cannot reach themselves can be

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scratched by the other horse. It is also a way of maintaining bonds among herd members. Horses regularly simply stand together in the shade, nose to tail during hot weather, using their tails to keep flies off each other. In cold, wet weather horses will stand in a sheltered spot together because their large bodies help to keep each other warm.

Playing and running around together is another very important behaviour for horses of all ages.

Domestic horses have the same instincts and behave in much the same way that their free living cousins, therefore if we ignore these facts about their natural behaviour we can cause them to be stressed. Domestic horses do not reason that they do not need to worry about predators. Their instincts tell them that there are predators lurking around every corner and therefore they still feel much safer in a herd than alone. Horses that live alone do not get to benefit from the shared responsibilities of herd life and all the benefits of social behaviour.



A horse that is stressed due to a lack of companionship may show behaviours that include running around a lot (usually up and down the fence line that prevents the horse from reaching other horses) and whinnying. They may also lose weight. A horse that has been separated from other horses for a long time may show dull 'switched off' behaviour termed 'learned helplessness'.

A horse will 'bond' with another type of animal if that is all that is available. Horses will bond with many other types of animal if another horse is not available. In a stabled situation horses have even been known to bond with a chicken or a cat, but another horse is by far and away the best companion. Different types of animals behave in different ways which does not usually fulfil each of the animal's needs. For example

goats, sheep and cows are ruminant animals which means that they eat more quickly than a horse and then spend more time laying down ruminating, whereas horses spend longer grazing and digest their food whilst grazing. Horses need other horses around them to graze properly as they rely on each other to share the responsibility of looking out for predators therefore if they only have a ruminant animal for company they will not spend as long grazing or be as relaxed while doing so.



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Horses need other horses. Humans do not make a good enough substitute for another horse. Apart from the fact that a human cannot be with their horse 24/7, they cannot perform the functions that another horse can such as mutual grooming, standing over the horse while he or she sleeps and playing any of the many (very boisterous) games that healthy horses play. It is not acceptable practice to deliberately keep your horse without the company of other horses so that he or she bonds more strongly with you.



Horses get on with grazing better when in the company of other horses.

Ideally a horse should always be able to see and touch another horse. Many horse owners separate horses in paddocks believing this to be the safest way to keep them however this often leads to fence injuries as horses walk the fence line or stand next to each other on either side of a fence or play over a fence because they have a strong need to be together. Some horses will even charge straight through a fence to get to a mate. Keeping horses in 'herds' also allows you to manage your pasture better as this way paddocks can be rested for periods between grazing periods which allows the pasture to re-grow.

If building stables aim to build horse friendly stables (rather than fully partitioned cages) so that the occupants can still socialise when confined.

Actual aggression is not common in free living horses; more often than not horses display body language that seeks to avoid aggression. Aggression is only used when absolutely necessary because it is dangerous for the aggressor as well as the victim. Horses have many facial expressions and gestures that convey their intentions to other horses so that actual aggression need only be used if absolutely necessary.

When horses are fed concentrates this tends to increase aggression. So separating horses for the short time it takes to eat concentrate feed is usually necessary. For example horses can be separated into individual yards or stables for the short time that it takes to eat any supplementary feed both for their safety and the safety of handlers.

When horses live in captivity their strong herd instincts do not disappear and cannot be disregarded. When living in a herd situation domesticated horses interact with each other in much the same way that they would in a wild/feral situation. Domestic horses have retained all their herd instincts and this is one reason why horses can and do survive successfully if they are released or escape into the wild.

See our publication [A horse is a horse - of course \(2011\)](#) for more information about horse behaviour. All horse owners should understand horse behaviour and how this relates to the way that we keep them, train them and work them.

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