

Two Horses Are Better Than One

By Misti Seppi, Utah Animal Adoption Center Horse Rescue and Adoptions

Ever notice how two horses can become instant friends after a single trailer ride together? And how they will call to strange horses and want to meet those horses? Horses are gregarious, sociable, herd animals, and enjoy the company of their own kind. This might be obvious, but have we really given it much thought? Have we done anything to accommodate this need for our horses or do we do just the opposite and blame the horse for being “stupid” or “stubborn.”

Look at feral horses. They live in groups with a stallion, mares, and foals. The bachelor herd of young stallions hangs around nearby looking for an opportunity to sneak in. The stallion's job is to protect the herd and breed mares. There is an Alpha mare who finds the food and water, disciplines the snotty foals, and leads the herd. Some members of the herd are good at noticing things far off while others notice things up close; the sentries' job is to sound the alarm if they perceive a threat. Everybody works together to keep the herd safe. All members of the herd know their job, and their place in the pecking order. If they are threatened, the first reaction is to flee; if they can't flee, they will bunch up because it's safer to be in the middle of a herd. These horses are in a life and death environment and yet show no signs of mental or emotional stress.

Feral horse herds will travel up to 20-25 miles a day. As soon as a foal is born and can stand, the mare moves off to get away from the smell of the birth and blood that will attract predators. The foal keeps up and can canter up to three miles within a couple of hours of being born. The foal will join other foals in the herd and will learn by playing tag and biting games with the other foals. These games teach them the skills they need to be part of the social structure of the herd, how to communicate with other horses and how to survive.

Feral horses don't have regular farrier visits and yet they have healthy, strong hooves with thick hoof walls that are rarely overgrown and usually just right for the environment. They rarely founder, never have quarter cracks, and are not known to have any navicular disease.

While it's true that horses can nap standing up, they must lie down to get REM sleep. Just like humans, that deep level of sleep where dreaming takes place, is critical for horses' overall well being. Narcolepsy has been observed in horses that don't lie down to sleep. But to lie down, and thus get deep sleep, they must first feel safe. When you see a group of horses sleeping you will usually also see at least one horse standing guard over them. The sleeping horses trust the guard to watch while they sleep. If there is no guard, solitary horses may be reluctant to lie down.

Domestic horses have a safer life than their feral cousins but is it a better life? Feral horses don't have vices like weaving, cribbing, stall walking, wind sucking, flank biting, head nodding, redirected aggression, lip popping or other neurotic behaviors. Many domestic horses do. Why? Vices are a sign of mental distress or even mental illness and once they occur, they tend to stay with the horse for life. We take a horse with a natural inclination and need to be in social groups and lock them up in solitary confinement. Think about people who are kept in solitary confinement. Often, these people become mentally ill, even sociopathic in a very short period of time. Horses kept in solitary can sometimes see or hear other horses, but are not allowed to touch other horses. They suffer, just like humans denied contact with other humans. We've all seen horses with mental distress or illness; the symptoms are stall vices and/or displacement behavior.

Rather than moving 20-25 miles a day, many horses are kept in an area 16ft x 16 ft for 23 hours of the day and then required to "work" and "pay attention" for the one hour a day they are out. Horses are designed for long periods of low intensity work with short bursts of high intensity work. Horses that are in pasture or have turnout most of the day maintain their condition and regain condition much faster than stall bound horses. Pastured horses don't typically "stock up" and are less likely to have thrush and other hoof problems associated with standing in soft, damp bedding all day. Pastured horses may also have a lower incidence of colic as inactivity is linked to some types of colic.

Rather than grazing a little bit at a time over 12-16 hours of the day, our horses are fed two or three large meals. These meals are often far richer in calories and nutrients than the horse requires, which can lead to overweight horses, equine metabolic syndrome, founder, excess energy that comes out in ways we didn't anticipate and really don't want, and a host of other health problems.

Domestic foals rarely have opportunities to interact with other foals and horses other than their mom. Keeping foals in nice, warm, deeply bedded stalls seems like a nice thing to do, but has profound negative effects on the lifetime health and size of their hooves, decreased tendon, ligament and muscle development, and lessened mental and emotional well being. When the foals want to "play" with us we get mad and "teach them a lesson". We end up with horses that are damaged physically, mentally, and emotionally-- all from wanting to provide them with what we think is the best possible life.

So what's the solution? Provide the horse with as natural an environment as possible. Horses do best in small compatible groups with enough area to move out of the way if somebody becomes aggressive. If you only have one horse, think about providing a companion for your horse. You can get a companion horse for your horse simply by boarding a friend's or neighbor's horse, by pasture-sharing or alternating with somebody (with the added benefit your pasture can rest while your horse is on their pasture and vice versa), or by fostering a horse for Utah Animal Adoption Center. For a modest fee you can adopt a second horse from Utah Animal Adoption Center. Horses make strong and

lasting bonds and are very distressed when they lose a companion, so consider adopting a pasture pal for your horse. Pasture pals are horses that are still relatively healthy but for one reason or another, can no longer be ridden. These horses often have a lot of experience and training and can be a positive influence on a riding horse. They are often excellent lead-line horses. In Utah, horses (pasture pals and sound-to-ride) can be adopted from Utah Animal Adoption Center, Best Friends or Ching Farm Sanctuary. The other benefit of pasture pals is that you are not obligated to ride them. You can have two horses, only ride one and not feel guilty. Take the pasture pal with you when you travel with your horse and you will find you have a less stressed horse which might even result in better rides. If you can't afford to care for a second horse, consider getting a goat as a companion for your horse. Goats make great horse companions and are especially nice for stallions that cannot live with other horses. One famous racehorse had a goat that traveled from track to track with him and was credited with the race horses's win record.

Some other tips:

If you have a foal, try to find another foal of similar age as a play mate. Be careful about introducing mares with foals to each other as they can be very protective. If you are expecting a foal next spring, try to find somebody that is also expecting and arrange for the mares to meet. If they are compatible, arrange for them to live together. The foals will enjoy having each other and the mares will enjoy having some time to rest while the foals play. Make sure your foal is out and running around at least 12-16 hours of the day, if not 24 hours a day. This arrangement might even work out to mean less work for you!

If your horse is being boarded in a stall, arrange for him to have turnout at least 12 hours a day. If you can identify another horse at the stable that is compatible with your horse, arrange for them to have turnout together. You will find your horse much more willing to do what you want after he has had an opportunity to do what he wants

Consult your veterinarian on a feeding program that might include a lot more grass hay, less alfalfa and less concentrates so your horse can spend more of the day eating. Horses love to eat and they are designed to eat constantly. Have you ever shown up to ride just at feeding time and found your horse was more interested in getting back to dinner than paying attention to you? Horses that have food in front of them most of the time are less likely to freak out if they hear other horses being fed, don't get stressed if dinner is late, are less likely to bolt their food and choke and may even have less incidences of colic.

Consult with your farrier about the possibility of leaving your horse barefoot. Unless the horse has some special needs such as navicular, coffin bone fracture, or laminitis, a horse that is not in regular use doesn't need to be shod. Many horses in full work do quite well barefoot. It depends on the horse, the footing they typically work on, and the type of work they are doing. Some horses are barefoot candidates and others are not; it's worth talking to your farrier about it. Going barefoot even part of the year can be very beneficial for the horse. You might even save some money!

Keeping your horse as naturally as possible, results in improved physical, mental and emotional health for the horse, and lower horse keeping bills you. Our horses are completely at our mercy and we owe them as stress free, happy and healthy environment as possible.

To learn more about pasture pals available for adoption please visit Utah Animal Adoption Center's website at www.utahanimaladoptioncenter.org, Best Friends website at www.bestfriends.org or Ching Farm Sanctuary at www.chingsanctuary.org. The love of your horse's life might just be an internet date away.