

Choosing a Life Less Ordinary

Happy, Healthy & Content

Domesticated horses live a very different life from their wild ancestors however their basic needs and abilities remain the same. Happy, healthy and content horses need, at the very least, friends, forage and freedom,¹ but how do we achieve this, in Jersey, where equine grazing is restricted by law?²



Around 600 horses live in the Island and these tend to be kept at full livery with fewer DIY and grass livery options available. Also, the horse's role has changed with more people keeping minis, less people hacking and even fewer competing³.

Many horses are segregated in stables and kept in fields divided into tiny paddocks. They can't choose if they want to be outside or inside, they can't choose the horses alongside them and they can't touch and mutually groom each other.

Less than 35% of the Island's farmable land can be used for equine grazing, resulting in horse-sick pastures. Their management means that, particularly in winter, horses can be inside for 20 to 24 hours a day with their stress levels rising. As a result, there is a higher risk of stereotypies developing such as box walking, weaving, cribbing and windsucking.

What horses need

We know horses are social creatures, living in groups for their own safety⁴ and their bonds with fellow equines and humans are important for their emotional and psychological health.

We know horses are natural grazers – they need to move and eat nutrient-rich forage for their physical and mental wellbeing. Grass, hay, straw, leafy twigs, shrubs and tree branches are essential for their digestion and dental health.

Let's de-stress not distress

So how are we going to de-stress rather than distress our horses? How do we make sure they have a 'a life worth living'⁵? Enrichment can offer lots of ways for horses to use their minds and senses and improve their wellbeing⁶ and welfare assessments, such as WAHY (Welfare Assessment for Horse in Yards),⁷ which is based on The Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare,⁵ can be used as a baseline. Why not encourage yard managers and grooms to try out HEY (Horses' Experience on Yards)?⁸

Switch to enrich

Enrichment can be used indoors and outdoors offering:-

- Food to promote foraging and mental stimulation;
- Environmental changes to make living more complex and engaging;
- Sensory stimulation providing novelty and prompting curiosity;
- Socialisation with other horses⁹;
- Games using positive reinforcement, including clicker and target training;

- Grooming (testing out different brushes to see which one your horse likes best), massage, and in-hand forage walking, particularly with wither scratches, encouraging oxytocin release,¹⁰ to strengthen the bond between you.



Ways to change your horse's life

Let's look at some of the least expensive ways to change your horse's life for the better.

- Use haynets with different hole sizes (making sure your horse doesn't get frustrated), hang at different heights or feed hay on the ground, which can promote calmness.
- Wrapping non-poisonous plants (cow parsley, willow, blackberry) around the bars of the stable or hanging them from the ceiling.
- Fill a cardboard box with hay and hide chopped vegetables inside (chop into small pieces to prevent choking).
- Thread fruit and vegetables onto a rope and hang them up (keep ropes short and securely attached and hang items high enough so they cannot be stepped over or tangled but low enough for safe play).

- Freeze fruits and vegetables in water or herbal tea to make ice blocks (remember some foods may be high in sugars so will not be suitable for laminitics or those on a restricted diet).
- Scatter hay or small portions of hard feed around the stable or field.
- Offer safe tree branches/logs (willow, ash, poplar, silver birch, hawthorn, hazel, elder, blackthorn). ¹¹
- Offer small amounts of herbs (eg parsley, comfrey, chamomile)¹² in different water containers to encourage drinking.
- Dab safe scents like essential oils (menthol, lavender) or herbs (mint, rosemary) to stimulate your horse's sense of smell.
- Play calming, classical music (not pop music) from time to time (not continuously).
- Notice if your horse is bonding with another and ask if they can be introduced to each other slowly over the stable door then graze in adjacent fields before going out together.

More time-consuming and expensive suggestions are:

- Filling treat balls (remember to wash these regularly) with carrots, apple pieces, pony nuts to encourage foraging and movement.
- Putting up broom heads or a scratching mat.
- Introducing play balls/oversized yoga balls for your horse to kick and toss.
- Putting up a horse-safe acrylic mirror.
- Providing different surfaces, such as a sandy area for rolling and gravel/woodchip to provide different sensations under hoof.
- Enclosing an area alongside your stables or providing a field shelter so your horse can choose whether to be inside or outside.
- Creating a herb enrichment trough covered by mesh wire.
- Moving horses to different grazing areas to provide new sights, smells and fresh grass. In Jersey there may be an option to use meadow land during the summer, with a stream in the middle and the perimeter banks lined by bushes and trees – landowners may welcome the opportunity to reduce maintenance costs. Recently, some native ponies have been introduced as part of a conservation project.



Here, browsing options are offered with hay offered in haynets with different sized holes, some hay tucked under log piles and slivers of fruit and vegetables hidden in the pile of woodchip – this encourages seeking – one of Jaak Panksepp's seven core emotions



Here, Baxter, who had just arrived from a livery yard where he had been kept segregated from other horses, is introduced for the first time to my horse, Milo. Baxter was in chronic pain, wearing a fly rug because his skin was so itchy, and had an extremely high worm count. When Milo moved to mutually groom his back, Baxter lashed out making a hole in the wall!

After interacting with my herd of horses for a few months and after receiving regular physiotherapy, his worm count reduced dramatically without intervention and his skin irritation reduced.



Here, Rio, who arrived in a traumatised state from Spain several years before, lies down in the stable for the first time alongside Milo – this happened when he was given the choice about whether he wanted to be inside or outside

Sit down & relax

Remember, horses are individuals so it's important to check to see what they prefer, introduce new things slowly to prevent over-stimulation or competition for treats, and monitor your horse. Safety is paramount, so make sure all items are non-toxic, too large to be ingested and cannot cause injury or entrapment. Then, it's time to pull up a chair, sit down, relax, and watch how your horse's demeanour changes.



References:

¹ Lauren Fraser, The 3Fs, 2012

² Agricultural Land (Control of Sales and Leases) (Jersey) Law 1974

³ Jersey Horse Association Survey 2025

⁴ Lucy Rees, Horses in Company, 2017

⁵ Mellor and Reid, 2020

⁶ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/advice/horse/wellbeing-and-care/horse-enrichment-activities>

⁷ Dr Jill Fernandes/World Horse Welfare 2025

⁸ <https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/advice/horse-welfare-assessment>

⁹ Newberry, 1995

¹⁰ Meg Daley Olmert, 'Made for Each Other. The Biology of the Human-Animal Bond'

¹¹ Horse and Hound, 12 February 2015

¹² <https://naturalhorseworld.com/horse-safe-herbs-shrubs/>

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