

The Smart Equestrian's List to Brightening the Winter Blues

We've compiled a science-based list of nonriding activities to help keep you and your horse busy during these cold winter months.

Posted by Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA | Jan 3, 2020 | Article, Behavior, Behavior & Handling, Equine Behavior, Horse Care, Seasonal Care, Welfare and Industry, Winter Care



Winter doesn't mean you can make progress with your horses ! Bundle up and try one of our science-based tips. | Photo: iStock

It's super cold outside. You *could* ride ... but, well, it's *super* cold outside.

Fortunately, riding is just one of many enjoyable and enriching activities we can do with our horses. So, when that winter wind howls and the freezing rain comes blowing in from the side and you can't even feel your toes and hands enough to find your stirrups and reins, you've got some other choices.

We've compiled a list of ideas for you smart equestrians looking for stimulating and

mutually beneficial ways to share time with your horses this winter when getting into the saddle just isn't in the cards. Get ready to brighten your winter blues with these science-driven suggestions!

1. Train practical-care skills.

Some of the most well-educated horses under saddle are terrible to work with when it comes to veterinary and farrier care. Don't let your horse be one of them! Take this grounded time to teach him helpful skills that make practical management easier using well-timed positive and negative reinforcement. "Take an electric toothbrush and teach him to accept the noise and then the vibration

on his skin as a preparation for using clippers," says Andy Booth, trainer and owner of the Horseman Science education program based in southern France. "Tap a pen against his neck to teach him to accept needle pressure. Desensitize his response to touching the ears. Train him to lower his head with poll pressure. Work on having him hold up his feet for farrier work. And give him dewormer cartridges (syringes) filled with applesauce."

2. Test his outlook on life.

Winter can be a gloomy time of year. But how does your horse feel about it? There's actually a way to find out. Carried out correctly, a "cognitive bias" test can reveal interesting information about how optimistic or pessimistic your horse is on any given day. The [concept was designed by Sabrina Briefer, PhD, of Agroscope National Stud, in Avenches, Switzerland](#), and is fairly simple. Place two covered buckets about 20 feet apart in an arena. Put a carrot in the left bucket but leave the right bucket empty. Then let the horse loose in the arena, and let him check out the buckets. Repeat this several times until the horse always goes directly to the left bucket and doesn't bother lifting the lid of the right bucket. Once that step is confirmed, take away the left and right buckets, and replace them with three covered buckets in intermediate positions (between where the right and left buckets had been). Let the horse go into the test area and see which lids he lifts. If he doesn't check any of the three new buckets, or only the one closest to the left, he might be a little pessimistic, says Briefer. However, if he checks the middle bucket—or especially the bucket closest to the right—he might be optimistic despite the dreary winter days. Remember, though, this test was designed for researchers in specific scientific test settings. It's fun to see your results, but don't consider them 100% reliable at home.

3. Teach him to recognize shapes and colors.

Horses can recognize shapes, including circles, squares, letters, numbers, and more. Teach your horse to distinguish between shapes by printing out different black-and-white shapes, one per sheet of paper. Slip each page into a plastic sleeve (to protect it from slobber), then start by presenting just two shapes to your horse. (You can hold them up, but it's easier to attach them to a wall.) Using positive reinforcement with small treats such as carrot or apple slices, teach your horse to point every time to one of the shapes—for example, the square. Be sure to switch the positions of the shapes so you're not training him to choose left versus right. Later, add shapes and even more complex shapes for your horse to differentiate between (e.g., choosing a square versus a rectangle). You can do the same with color blocks and eventually even combine colors with shapes (choose the green triangle). You'll learn a lot about your horse's cognition—and his ability to see (or not see) certain colors. Meanwhile, your horse will exercise his cognitive skills and "learn that he can learn." These exercises constitute "cognitive activation," and they're "a great way to activate the horse's mind and create a bond with the human," says Paolo Baragli, DVM, PhD, a researcher and professor specializing in the horse-human connection at the University of Pisa Department of Veterinary Sciences, in Italy. "It's like

a game with your horses," he says. Be careful not to frustrate your horse, though. Keep training sessions short, maybe five minutes at a time, and avoid switching the target shape or color too often, especially when he's just learning the game.

4. Strengthen his core.

Even if you can't be working your horse's full body under saddle during winter, you can keep his core muscles strong and healthy through "[carrot stretches](#)." Using carrots as a motivator and a guide, bring your horse's head toward his left side, his right side, and his belly between his front legs. He should be standing square without taking a step through the exercises. This will help strengthen stabilizing muscles in the back and abdomen. Start slowly, having the horse hold positions for two seconds. Gradually build to 10-second holds over a period of a few weeks.

"Carrot stretches and other core training exercises have been proven to activate and strengthen the core muscles that are so important for keeping your horse's back strong and healthy," says Hilary Clayton, BVMS, PhD, FRCVS, Dipl. ACVSMR, McPhail Dressage Chair Emerita at Michigan State University (MSU) and president of Sport Horse Science, in Mason, Michigan. "Plus, doing these exercises is a great way to spend quality time with your horse on cold days."

You can find more details and step-by-step instructions in the [The Horse's Pocket Guide to Dynamic Mobility Exercises \(Carrot Stretches\)](#).

5. Improve your negative reinforcement skills.

When the weather's especially bad, take your training indoors. These negative-reinforcement skill-building exercises work just as well indoors in front of your fireplace as they do out in the barn or arena. Successful use of negative reinforcement requires excellent timing. Getting that timing right isn't as intuitive as you might think, says Angelo Telatin, PhD, associate professor of equine studies at Delaware Valley University, in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Work with a friend to complete a horse imitation exercise using a bit and reins. Have one person be the "horse," grasping the bit with both fists clasped around the mouthpiece. The second person should hold the reins with flexed elbows as if he or she were riding.

With eyes closed (to not take visual clues from the other person), the "rider" should try to maintain a light contact with the horse in a set position. Meanwhile, the "horse" should make large, somewhat random movements with the bit, like a horse tossing his head. "Ninety percent of the time, the 'rider' has such stiff elbows that he can't follow the movement, and he ends up releasing pressure at the wrong moment," Telatin says. "This exercise shows riders that what they're actually telling the horse through their bad timing of reinforcement is: 'Yes, good! Keep tossing your head like that, that's right!'"

It's also useful for the "horse" to have a basic understanding of rein pressure from the horse's point of view. "People need to take turns being the horse and the rider in this exercise," he says.

In a second exercise, check your ability to have good timing with negative reinforcement by asking a friend or family member to drop a basic, bouncy rubber ball. Your goal is to clap your hands as soon as the ball touches the ground. Add a challenge by having the other person kick the ball before it touches the ground, or even when it bounces back up. Are you still able to align your clapping with when the ball hits the floor? "Most people clap when the ball is kicked—if it were a horse they'd be reinforcing the wrong behavior," Telatin says.

6. Take horse language lessons.

Horses' primary language is body language. You can use this downtime to sharpen your interspecies communication skills through careful "reading" of your horse's body language—and even trying to "speak" it yourself, says Mary Ann Simonds, MA, a Wellington, Florida-based scientist and equestrian specializing in educating owners and professionals in interspecies communication, especially with horses. "Try doing a 'buddy scratch,'" she says. Start with a place you know your horse likes to be touched—the neck or withers—and start to scratch. Then just listen—meaning, watch and pay attention to any body signs the horse gives about what he wants. More? Less? Higher? To the right? If communication goes well, it's possible your horse will try to scratch you back. You can also synchronize your breathing," Simonds says. Take time to listen and align your breathing with your horse's. Then take a deep breath and see if your horse breathes deeply, too. "Horses often synchronize their breathing with each other," she says. "If you can do it now you might do it unconsciously—to your benefit—when riding, as well." Finally, take time to see what your horse's body has to tell you about its health and fitness. "Find out where your horse is tight, where he's weak," says Simonds. "Does it hurt to touch a particular place? Does he feel balanced from side to side? Put your hands on either side of his neck and run them down the neck vertebrae looking for evenness from side to side. Is he tight over the poll? Does he have similar jaw muscles and spacing from side to side?" Above all, spend a lot of time in eye-to-eye contact with your horse—but be sure to use gentle looks so as not to accidentally convey negative body language, she says.

7. Observe, observe, observe.

Take a warm mug of your favorite brew out to the stable or field, and just spend long periods observing. You can learn a great deal about your horses by watching them, seeing how they move and interact, and paying attention to their similarities and unique differences, says Elke Hartmann, PhD, of the Department of Animal Environment and Health at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, in Uppsala. While a truly reliable analysis of herd dynamics would require as many as 15 hours of observation a day for several days in a row, you can still glean useful information about your

horses and their relationships with each other by quietly watching for an hour or two, she says. "Observe how they talk to each other, how much or how little is needed to approach or retreat," says Hartmann. "How close are they to each other, or how far away do they stay? This will help you figure out who likes or dislikes whom." You can also add a prop to the scenario, she says. Add a novel object in the paddock—an inflatable ball, for example—and watch what happens. "Who initiates an approach? Who watches from a distance? How does that relate to the relationships the horses have with each other?" While this can give you an overview and better insight into your horses' personalities and interhorse relationships, don't assume this means you've unraveled the mystery of herd rank, Hartmann warns. Herd dynamics are complex and require significant further investigation. "However, you could challenge yourself to consider if anything you've observed might have parallels in your training," she says.