



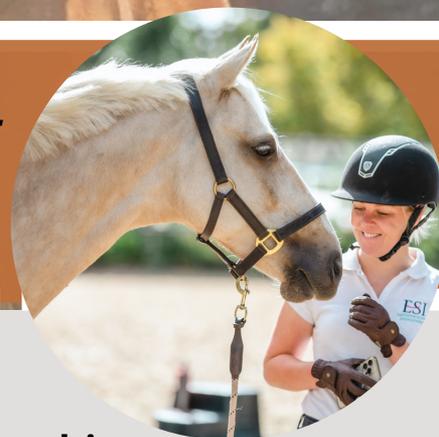
ESI NEWS

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Tips for successful group housing

By Sophie Wyllie



The horse's need for socialisation is now well-documented, but despite this, the logistics of making this happen hold many people back. For many, the concern of injury, individual feed allocation, and separation anxiety are enough for people to maintain individual housing for their horses. These hesitations are perfectly understandable, but there are ways to manage these potential problems in the interest of horse welfare.

The fear of Injury

Understandably, a major issue preventing group housing is the fear of injury. We don't want our horses hurt and we don't want vet bills. Injuries occur for multiple reasons:

1. The horses are not suitable mates
2. The horses have not learnt to properly socialise
3. Competition for resources
4. There is insufficient space for horses to retreat one another's advances

Despite horses being social animals, they still have preferences for certain types of mates. It's not always as simple as putting two horses together to

become friends. Finding the right mate takes a little effort, and also allowing time for horses to interact and form a relationship is important. This is also important for horses who have not had the opportunity to learn to socialise.



Before you put two horses together, let them socialise across multiple sessions over a safe fence/gate. Research with large numbers of horses have validated this. Each side should have sufficient room to escape any unwanted advances, but they also need to be able to touch over the joining area.

There will likely be squealing and other shows of opposition, but trust that your horse is no different to any other – they are the same species, and they are hardwired to live in social groups, despite being domesticated for thousands of years. Give them time, allow normal horse behaviour. To mitigate risks:

- Ensure the joining area is free of wires or things they can get tangled in
- Remove halters and rugs that could be used to hold on to or pull at
- Fit boots if you are initially worried about leg injuries



Above: Introducing horses slowly & safely

Horses are brilliant at reading body language. With no other form of communication, and having evolved to live in groups, they are masters at it. They will know when to retreat and how to understand threatening behaviour. It might be difficult to watch, but don't let human ideals of relationships cloud your judgement of what's normal between horses. Once you feel the horses are comfortable with each other, put them in a paddock together (rugs/halters removed, initially).

Signs that the horses have bonded include:

- Standing/grazing near each other
- Grooming each other

If the horses have not bonded after a few days, or one appears to be relentlessly bullying the other, check you do not have too much competition for resources. Ensure there is enough space between food resources (i.e, feed bins are well spaced apart, round bales have access from multiple sides or there are multiple hay bags), and that there are multiple areas for seeking shade/shelter.



Above: Ensure feed bins are well spaced apart

Feed allocations

Feed allocations can be tricky if the horses have very different diets, but there are a couple of solutions here:

1. Space feed bins very far apart to discourage wandering between bins
2. Don't put bins in a corner of a paddock
3. Feed the food-dominant horse first
4. Separate them for feeding by either removing a horse or creating a corral within the paddock for feed time.

You'll be surprised how quickly the horses learn their places for feed, and it can be as simple as closing a gate to safely enclose one horse away and opening it again 10 minutes later.

Put a bit of thought into this. Feed time accounts for around 30 minutes of the day. The other 23 and a half hours are worth the effort required to find a solution.

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is not uncommon and somewhat normal between social animals. When a horse is comfortable and secure in its environment and with you, you will not have any problem with separation anxiety. Until then, think of separation anxiety as simply a need for security. Other horses are an easy source of security; they understand each other, they are clear in their communication, and they are instinctively wired to feel safer in the company of other horses (safety in numbers).

There is less separation anxiety if the social group consists of three or more horses living together.

The aim is to create that security with you, as their human. Spending lots of time bonding by scratching your horse around the withers region (or in another location you know they enjoy) will help establish a feeling of connection. Your interactions when training them are what can give them a sense of controllability and predictability (security). Your signals need to be clear so the horse easily understands them (controllability) and consistent, so the horse knows each signal will result in the same response (predictability). If your horse is tense/anxious/nervous around you, you need to find where the source/s of confusion lies.

In the stable area it's important to ensure the environment is positive. Make it a calm atmosphere with palatable hay such as lucerne to keep occupied, and ideally other horses they can see.



Why is it worth it?

It is not simply that horses want companionship, they actually need it.

There is mounting evidence to show that horses who have companionship are more secure and settled, and braver when faced with new objects and challenges.

ABOVE: You can bond with your horse by spending time scratching them around their withers region

If lockdowns during Covid19 weren't enough to understand the detrimental effects of isolation, remember that at the very least we had video calls and phones to maintain a minimum form of connection. We know that seeing other horses is helpful, but a critical part of socialisation for horses is the ability to touch and interact. Touch is the basis of attachment theory.



If you can't do group housing due to agistment rules or logistic reasons, at the very least have a space where paddocks/stables join to allow your horse to touch another horse. Keep in mind that **Charlotte Dujardin** and **Carl Hester** allow their world champion horses to be paddocked together because they understand the risks are far outweighed by the benefit of companionship. No horse is too important to be denied socialisation.





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Case Study: Group Housing

If I had to describe my 5-year-old Warmblood a year ago I would have said he was highly sensitive, reactive, distracted and unsettled.

His behaviour escalated when we moved properties to the point where just leading him from the paddock to the stables was super stressful, forget trying to ride! He was unsettled in his paddock too, rarely lying down to rest and would regularly flick his head and neck in an aggressive manner. At the tie ups, he would paw at the ground, try to nip me at me constantly and would not stand still even if a hay bag was in front of him.

I literally tried everything to help him be a happier horse, everything from feeding supplements, taking him off grass, having him scoped for ulcers and assessed by numerous therapists just to name a few.

At that same time, my daughter purchased a new horse, a lovely young stock horse and he went into the paddock next door.

It was Manu that made me think outside the square and consider group housing. I, like so many, had always been hesitant to do this for fear of injury and issues arising from separation anxiety. At that point I really didn't understand the importance and benefits of group housing and just the innate need horses have for touch and connection.

Putting our young horses in a paddock together could honestly not have gone any smoother. There were only a couple of initial squeals, a few minutes of running around, and some tense moments for me as I watched on from the sidelines. Within about 10 minutes they had begun to groom each other, and you could see the bond forming instantly.

In the following days it was quite amazing to witness the transformation from both horses. By day 3, they were even napping together, flat out, side by side in a deep, restful sleep. Both horses visibly looked more content and spent their day picking grass side by side or just resting happily in each other's company. Any head tossing or behaviours that would indicate stress had diminished. I have spent so much time since enjoying watching the beautiful interaction of these 2 horses from my kitchen window.

Much to my surprise there was minimal fuss when taking one horse away from the other. There was a little bit of running and calling out initially but before too long I think the horses were confident that their buddy would be returned and as a result became quite relaxed about it all.

The rideability, trainability and general demeanor of my young horse improved out of sight in the weeks and months following. I truly believe that he gained so much confidence from having companionship which translated to a more relaxed, attentive and safer horse for our training sessions, outings and even trail rides.

It's safe to say, all my horses will have a paddock mate from now on as I can truly see how important it is for every horse no matter what the circumstances.



Happy horses have friends