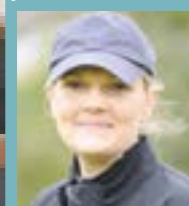
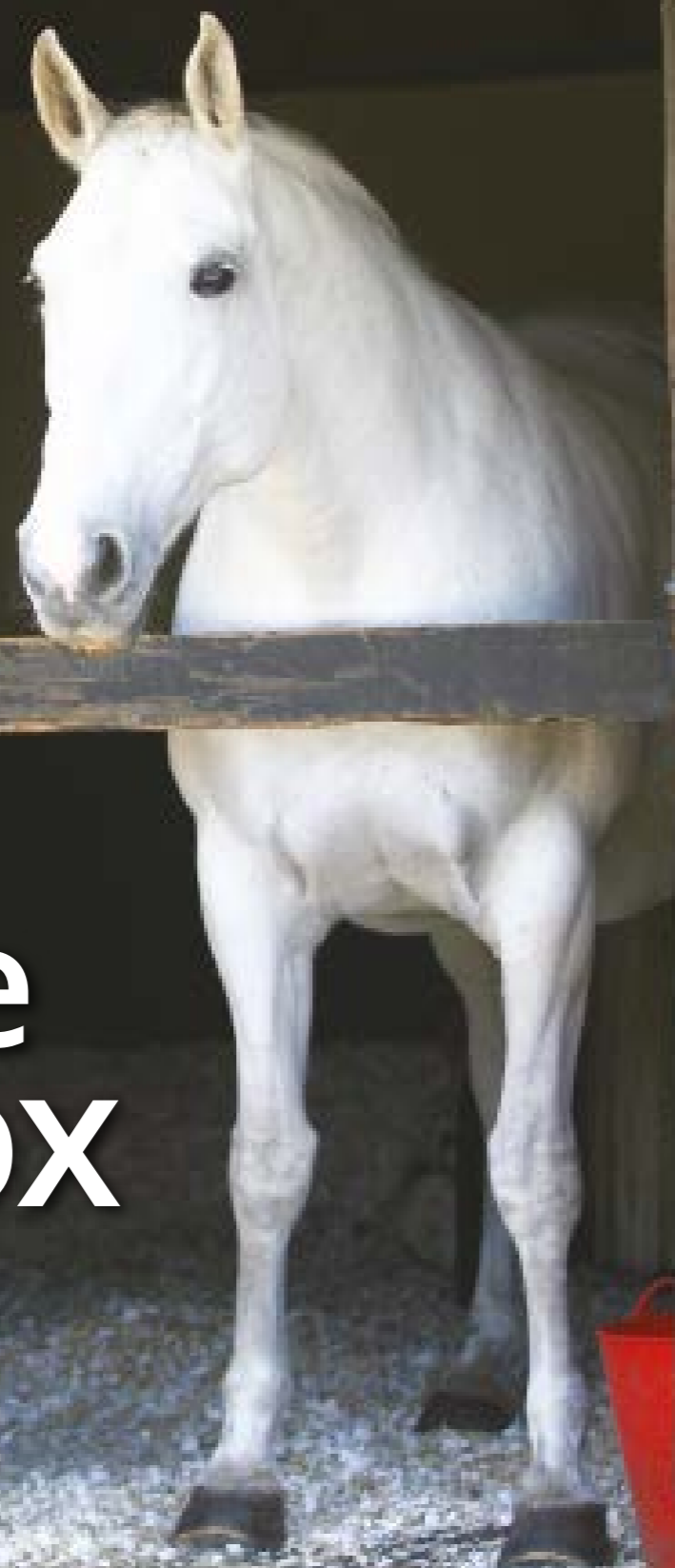


OUR EXPERT
Justine Harrison

As a certified equine behaviourist, Justine uses the science of behaviour to help owners understand and solve a wide range of issues with their horses.

Think outside the box



Discover how to make box rest easier for your horse – and yourself – with wise words from equine behaviourist Justine Harrison

Box rest is, unfortunately, something most horse owners will have to deal with at some point.

It is a frustrating time – not only do you miss out on riding, there's a huge amount of extra work involved: changing dressings, cold hosing, washing stable bandages, extra mucking out, filling endless haynets and managing an understandably frustrated horse.

While it is a difficult experience for the owner, for a horse to be confined for so long is extremely traumatic for him.

For days, weeks and sometimes months, a horse may be trapped inside four walls with little to do, no freedom of choice and often without equine company.

It is no wonder they can become aggressive, try to barge out of the stable or turn into raging monsters every time the door is opened. In some cases, box rest could even be counterproductive and have a negative impact on a horse's physical and mental health and well-being.

Research by Nottingham Trent University found that horses stabled with little or no contact with other equines show significantly higher signs of stress than those kept in group housing.

The long-term release of stress hormones has been linked to many conditions in horses, including laminitis, PPID (equine Cushing's disease), immunosuppression, breathing issues, skin conditions, allergic reactions and the increased risk of gastric ulcers and colic.

As a result, we need to consider that long periods of confinement could contribute to a wide range of health problems.

Reduce stress levels

There are several ways to improve the box rest process and make this difficult time easier for us and less stressful for our horses.

1 Ask if he can have access to turnout

This may seem like a strange question, but for a lot of injuries, total box rest is not necessary.

Ask your vet if your horse can be turned out for short periods or have access to a small paddock or outside yard.

If he can have access to a larger space, you could create a fenced area outside his stable so he has the choice to wander in and out.



Help break up a long day by spending extra time with your horse

2 Provide equine company

Horses rely on others of their kind for friendship, shared vigilance and security – ensure yours has equine company at all times.

Ideally, put him in a stable where he can touch, interact and mutually groom with an equine friend over the wall. Even better, can he stay in a group housing or barn system?

If you cannot provide equine contact, then at the very least he must be able to see another horse. If others on the yard are turned out for part of the day, ask the owner or manager if the horses can go out on a rota basis, so he always has company.

3 Organise visiting hours

If your horse has a best friend who can't be stabled nearby, see if you can bring him over to visit for an hour or so every day.

Let them mutually groom over the door and hang a haynet outside your horse's stable so his friend can hang out with him and keep

4 Spend quality time with your horse

Boredom can quickly set in on box rest, so take the opportunity to spend some quiet time with your horse and get to know him better.

You can groom him, or give him a massage, but even just being around will help. Take along a book – or the latest issue of *Horse magazine* – and sit next to his stable.

Sort out your grooming kit or clean your tack outside his stable. He will appreciate the company and it could improve your relationship with him.

him company. Ensure they are supervised at all times, though.

Alternatively, if your horse is allowed to go for short walks, lead him over to visit his friend.

Give your horse a comfy bed for warmth and protection



9 Flavour his hay

Soaking some – or all – of your horse's hay ration may be advised to lower the amount of sugars, or water soluble carbohydrates, your horse consumes.

The soaking process will also reduce dust and mould, reducing the risk of respiratory diseases or digestive upset.

To give your horse some variety, you could steam or soak his hay in herbal teas.

Some horses love the taste of nettle, rosehip, camomile or mint, so add a teabag to a bucket of water and soak some hay in it.

You could put different flavours in different buckets but always give him a choice in case he doesn't like one.

10 Groom him regularly

A huge factor in a horse's physical and mental wellbeing is looking after themselves.

They need to be able to roll, self-groom and groom with other horses. This maintains skin health by removing any shedding coat and dead skin while improving skin circulation.

If he is rugged, remove his blanket at least once a day to check for any rubs and allow him to scratch and roll.

Groom him daily to maintain skin health, stimulate circulation and keep him comfortable.

Leading out safely



Start by leading the horse in an area where he is used to walking calmly

Horses would naturally walk up to 100 miles a day, so being unable to move will be understandably frustrating for them.

If your vet allows it, take your horse to graze and walk out in-hand as often as possible. But beware – any period of confinement can mean your horse could perform 'rebound behaviours'. His need to move will be far more than you might like!

This is completely normal and be prepared for your horse to bounce around at the end of the leadrope.

Some will be calm but many can be difficult to manage and risk injuring himself if they are too excited.

Dress appropriately

Always wear a hard hat, gloves and sturdy boots when walking your horse out. Attach a lunge line to his headcollar and have help if necessary.

If you feel anxious, ask someone to walk with you – both of you walking quietly at

each shoulder may encourage your horse stay calm.

Choose an enclosed area at first, to reduce the chance of exuberant behaviour and to ensure your horse is contained if he gets away from you. Start with an area where he is used to walking quietly – such as around the yard.

If you want to walk out, arrange to go with another calm horse and stay behind.

Have a goal for your walks

Lead your horse to an area where he can enjoy some grass, or set a small distance to walk – you could just go from stable to stable, initially. It can help to have a specific goal for your walk. Walk to a tree or a bush, allow the horse to graze, and then lead him back.

Put buckets of food on the floor at intervals to encourage him to move while staying relaxed. Over time, gradually move the buckets further apart.



Take your horse out on a long line and stay in an enclosed area at first



Horses enjoy having their itchy spots scratched

5 Scratch his itchy spot

Most horses have a place where they love to be scratched. It may be somewhere he can't reach, like the chest, under the bottom jaw, or inside a hindleg.

You'll know you have found the right spot when his nose starts twitching or he tries to return the favour by scratching you back with his teeth!

Scratching the wither area and around the base of the neck can lower the heart rate and help a horse relax, so is useful for stressful times like this.

It is also a great reward and can help to improve the horse-human bond.

6 Make sure he is comfortable

Ensure your horse has plenty of room to lie down and sleep well. Horses need to be able to lie flat out to achieve REM (rapid eye movement) sleep.

He will also need a big, deep bed to protect him when he gets up and lays down.

Rubber matting topped with a generous bed of shavings or straw, with big banks around the walls, will provide warmth, prevent any knocks to his legs and reduce the risk of him getting cast.

Skip out regularly to keep the bed clean. If possible, move him into another box or tie him up outside his stable while mucking out.

This will give him a change of scenery, help break up his day and avoid him inhaling dust and ammonia when his soiled bedding is disturbed.

7 Change his environment on a regular basis

If there is a spare loosebox on the yard, arrange for him to swap stables for part of the day to give him a change of scene.

Tie him up on different parts of the yard with a carrot studded haynet or a forage box (see page 84) to keep him occupied.

Make sure he is relaxed in any new environment, is supervised and has equine or human company at all times.

8 Provide plenty of forage

Restricting forage intake can affect a horse both mentally and physically. Horses would naturally graze for up to 18 hours a day, so being without access to forage for even short periods of time can increase frustration and the risk of aggressive behaviour and gastric ulcers.

Providing plenty of good quality forage will keep your horse occupied and his digestive system working effectively.

Ideally, give him a choice of different forages at ground level to simulate natural grazing behaviour.

As long as he doesn't have back or neck pain you could put several haynets around the stable, each hung at different heights and positions.

This will encourage him to move around and will provide interest and variety.

Short-chopped forages or chaff will take longer to eat. You could give him a choice every day in different bowls.

Avoid feeding sugary or grain-based feeds. Studies have shown they can raise anxiety levels and can quickly cause weight gain in the stabled horse.

Watch out for the sugar content in some licks and treats and opt for sugar free alternatives, if possible.



A stabled horse will appreciate some freshly picked grass

Horse sense Box rest

11 Monitor health

Check your horse daily for any new bumps, scrapes and areas of heat, which could indicate a problem.

Invest in a thermometer and take note of his temperature, pulse and respiration rates.

12 Make a treasure box

Entertain your horse by half filling a large, strong bucket or crate with horse-safe toys – large dog toys, rubber balls and rings are ideal.

Scatter grass nuts, vegetable strips or high-fibre treats in the bottom of the bucket and pour a little diluted apple or carrot juice on top.

Watch to make sure he doesn't become frustrated or swallow anything he shouldn't, and take the box away when he loses interest.

Treasure boxes are useful to keep your horse occupied when tied up on the yard or during difficult vet and farrier visits.

13 Provide him with toys

Horses love to play and toys that make them think can help alleviate boredom.

There is a huge range of toys on the market, from balls that trickle-feed pony nuts to edible toys on ropes. You can also get creative and make your own – towels and staple-free cardboard boxes with treats hidden inside make great toys.

Ensure your horse doesn't get frustrated because the game is too difficult. If that's the case, make things easier or try something else. Change the items daily, so your horse doesn't get bored.

14 Plan his rehab

While your horse is having his downtime you may be able to work with your vet, physiotherapist and behaviourist to create a progressive rehabilitation plan.

The rehab process can often take months of walking out and specific exercises. Plan well in advance, so you know what you have to do.

This is a great way of feeling motivated and focusing on the day when your horse can start working towards being ridden again. ■



Ask your vet to help you plan a rehab programme



Provide toys to keep your horse entertained in the stable

Enrich his environment

If a horse is stabled for long periods of time, it can result in boredom. The same applies to a horse or pony on restricted grazing in the summer.

Aim to give him lots of things to occupy his mind, and reduce his stress levels. Here are a few ideas to try:-

- Pack a traffic cone with hay – leave some poking out of the top and hide treats inside.
- Knock up some root vegetable kebabs – thread carrots, parsnips and turnips onto a strong cord or rope and hang from the stable ceiling or tree branches in the field.
- Part of a horse's natural diet would be bark and branches. Put horse-safe logs and suitable branches – such as willow or hazel – around the stable and field for your horse to browse on. Some trees are poisonous to horses, so check what you use.
- Make treat branches – find a suitable branch and smear with honey or low-sugar jam and stick vegetable treats or Polos on to it. Hang the branch in the stable or field. Add something different every day.

- Hide treats inside towels or staple-free cardboard boxes. Loosely fold or wrap the towel at first, until your horse works out how to access the treats. Suitable, non-poisonous shrubs can be cut and placed amongst your horse's forage ration. Horses love cow-parsley, cleavers, mint and dandelions – find out what your own horse enjoys the most and cut something different for him every day.
- Studies have shown that given a choice of bedding, horses prefer a big straw bed to rummage through. Hiding strips of root vegetables or grass nuts in their bed and hay ration will extend foraging time.
- While you can buy a stable toy, make sure it's easy for him to do. Some horses can become frustrated if it's too difficult to access the treat.
- Always use your common sense and supervise your horse, and don't provide anything that could cause him to choke. If your horse is laminitic or overweight seek advice before providing sugary treats.