

ENRICHMENT MAKES YOUR HORSE'S LIFE BETTER

NO BORED HORSES

Essential Enrichment for Happy Equines

OVER 30
DIY TOYS,
ACTIVITIES,
AND
STRATEGIES



AMANDA GOBLE Animal Behavior, Enrichment, and Training Specialist

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CHAPTER 2

THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF BOREDOM

Unmet behavioral needs and resulting boredom affect your horse in many ways. It can show up as changes in your horse's attitude, and it can cause or worsen bad habits and unwanted behaviors. It can also leave its mark on your barn, fences, or your horse's body.



2.1 Overactive or explosive horses may not intend to cause harm, but their behavior can be dangerous to themselves, their owners, and stable staff.

GETTING UNCOMFORTABLE (YOU, NOT YOUR HORSE)

Moving through this book may trigger a variety of feelings, including discomfort or disagreement. Maybe you were raised in a riding culture where keeping horses in stalls 24/7 was very common. Your horse might be a very valuable, highly trained show or work horse, kept in a sparse paddock for his own safety. Or some of the signs and symptoms of boredom covered in this chapter may resonate—and it may be challenging to see them as your horse's “cry for help” rather than a personality quirk or respect issue.

It's uncomfortable to come to the realization that your horse's real needs are different from what you have always considered “ideal horse-keeping.” So, it's normal for your first response to be a little defensive. After all, you care a lot about your horse and have likely put a lot of time and funds into his care. You could be housing him a certain way because of your riding discipline, or because your horse-housing options are limited due to where you live and ride, or your budget may dictate your choices.

Discomfort is normal. The most important thing to remember is that you're probably doing your best and will *continue* to do your best for your horse. This might mean making some changes or adjusting the way you approach horse care. It's okay to make changes and try different things, and it's also okay to have done

less-than-ideal things in the past. When you *know* differently, you can *do* differently. After all, our understanding of equine behavior and needs has evolved over the years and will continue to change as we learn more about the way horses experience the world. This book is here to help support you and offer ways for you to improve your horse's behavioral health and well-being, no matter your current situation or past experience.

PERSONALITY OR BOREDOM?

Let's look at a few horse personalities and situations, and the ways that under-stimulation and boredom play a role.

The Hyperactive Horse

This type of horse has excessive energy and always seems to be in motion. He may have plenty of “go” during training, but not enough “whoa” to match. During turnout, he can be rambunctious, even dangerous to himself and others, sometimes to the point that turnout time is restricted in order to prevent injury. Hyperactivity often comes with hyper-vigilance, so this horse may be spooky, “looky,” and hard to handle on the ground and under saddle.

The overactive horse's high energy levels and attempts to self-regulate can result in compulsive stall-walking or fence-pacing, especially when the stable is busy or it's time for food. Because of freshness during handling, this horse may have a reputation for being “rude” or “disrespectful.” If you work with or own a horse like this, you may find yourself using more correction or punishment than you do with other horses (fig. 2.1).

If this sounds like *your* horse, there's good

When to Call the Vet

It's important to note that any change in your horse's behavior and appearance—like a difference in energy levels, day-to-day activity, or personality—is worth a call to your vet. Many of the behaviors and evidence of boredom outlined in this chapter are caused (and worsened) because the horse's needs are not being met. However, some behavioral changes can signal illness or injury, so it's crucial to rule out pain, illness, or nutritional imbalances first.

Illness or injury should always receive medical attention as soon as it's noticed. Provide care and relief for the problem, rule out deeper issues, then turn to enrichment for better wellness moving forward.

news: your equine companion isn't behaving like a bottle rocket on purpose. His “extra” personality might be his only way to communicate that he's struggling.

Remember that horses evolved to travel long distances each day—more than most pastures can provide—constantly using their bodies and minds to find food and avoid predators. Today, there is a lot less daily movement, and many horses are fed energy-dense feed while training or competing. As a result, a domestic horse often has a surplus of energy.

A horse who isn't using his body and brain as much as he needs may release energy and seek stimulation wherever he can get it. Hyperactivity isn't a conscious decision. He is simply struggling to regulate intense emotions or sensations, and is

doing what feels good to him moment to moment. Unfortunately, we often respond to the hyperactive horse by punishing him, or further restricting turnout to prevent him from getting injured, which bottles up the problem.

Boredom relief (see chapter 9, p. 155, where I offer solutions) aims to meet the hyperactive horse's need for natural behaviors and help him use his energy in healthy ways. Lifestyle improvements alongside mental and physical enrichment can help him feel and behave more comfortably. It can even have a positive impact on his personality and energy levels overall.

The Angry Horse

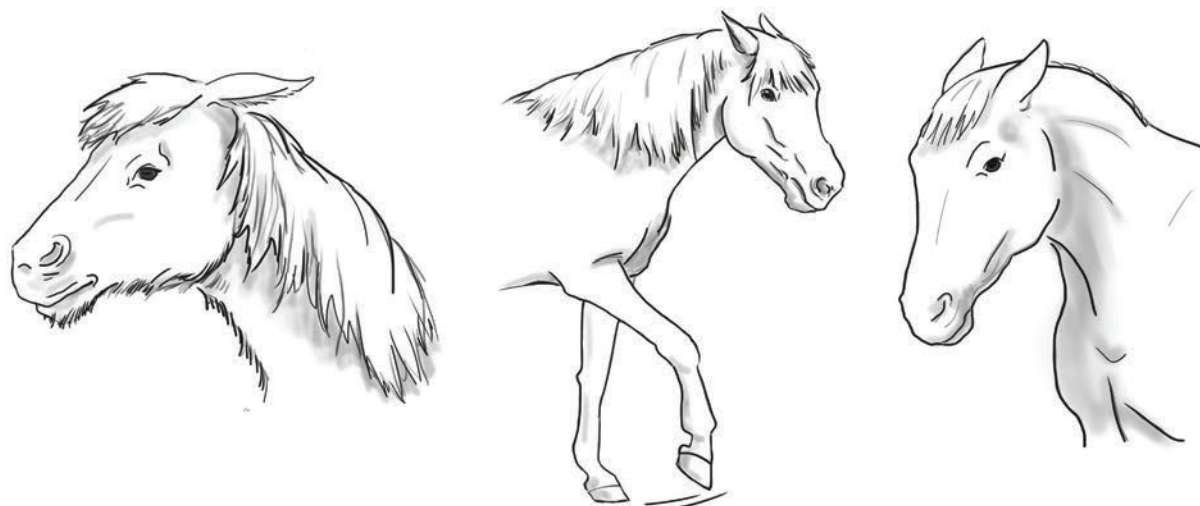
This horse seems always to be in a bad mood. He resents people, other horses, or both. With people, his body language is unpleasant when being handled inside and led from stall to pasture. Pinned

ears, a hard eye, and turning his back to you are all staples of this personality. Even when he is ridden well, he's just not very pleasant to be around.

This horse may show similar body language toward other horses, especially in the stable. Every horse has bad days from time to time, but this individual's troubled personality shows on a daily basis. He can be also be rough on his herdmates when turned out.

We don't know how closely a horse's experience with anger aligns with our own, but it is clear from observing horses that they can be in a state of "negativity" that seems very much like our irritation or even rage (fig. 2.2). What's harder to see is how, under the surface, behavioral boredom could be contributing to the problem.

We know in other animals—and people—that boredom and insufficient opportunity to behave normally can trigger angry emotions. It's



2.2 Equine anger and displeasure can be seen in body language. From left to right: rigid posture and tense, flared nostrils; pawing or stomping; hard stare and “pinned” ears folded backward.

frustrating to be bored, especially over the long term. Just as you may feel irritated while standing in a long line or struggle to respond gently to others after a day at your desk, monotony and lack of choice create negative feelings in horses, too. It's hard to maintain a positive mood in the face of extended boredom.

Just as with the hyperactive horse, if your horse struggles with an unpleasant, "angry" attitude it's easy to think that he's being deliberately sour. But frustration isn't a conscious choice for your horse. It's a mood change that can reflect a need for more stimulation, more options, and more behavioral opportunities.

It's crucial to keep in mind that angry or aggressive behaviors might also be indicators of physical pain. Behavior, boredom, and physical health can be intertwined, as you'll see in chapter 3 (p. 35). But as I mentioned earlier, it's necessary to rule out disease or injury as your first step in helping your horse. *Behavior is communication*, so when your horse seems angry or sour, get a veterinarian involved! After physical pain has been ruled out, boredom relief and equine enrichment may help give your horse the behavioral and emotional outlet he needs in order to feel and act his best, and possibly uncover the happier horse underneath.

The Lazy Horse

This horse's personality and behavior come the closest to your mental image of "boredom." The dull, lazy horse doesn't seem to take interest in much. On the plus side, he doesn't seem to put much wear and tear on pasture or stall structures. On the minus side, he doesn't seek out exercise on

his own and often lacks energy and enthusiasm when being trained or ridden. He may seem withdrawn or "in himself" during stall time.

Horses have individual personalities, and some are naturally quieter than others. But when a horse seems to have no enthusiasm for even self-directed activity, personality may not be the problem.

A lack of stimulation or being unable to meet behavioral needs sometimes causes a horse to withdraw. It's as if he learns that since there's nothing to do and no good options, there's no point in doing anything at all. After ruling out a physical problem that might be causing discomfort or a dietary imbalance that might be impacting energy levels, consider that your horse's dull personality may be a sign that he needs more horse-appropriate interest or excitement in his life. Bringing a horse like this out of his shell and seeing him interact happily with his environment is one of the best feelings an equestrian can have.

More Behavioral Indicators

The traits of each of the horse "personalities" I just described may be caused or worsened by behavioral boredom. Horses can't tell you directly that they need more stimulation in their stalls or pastures. Their only communication is behavior. Because of this, you need to be observant and remember to give your horse the benefit of the doubt. When dealing with problematic behaviors, assume the best of your horse: that he's struggling, not being bad, disrespectful, or causing problems just to spite you. By finding out why he looks and acts the way he does, you can give him the help he needs to succeed.



2.3 A horse cribbing on a fence rail. While this stereotypic behavior is not a personality flaw, it can damage property and impact the horse's quality of life. Photo credit: Carol Hamilton, Getty Images.

STEREOTYPIC AND UNWANTED BEHAVIORS (VICES)

Unwanted, unexplainable, or simply obnoxious behaviors are often the “calling card” of horses who need more boredom relief or a more horse-appropriate environment. Do you know a horse who displays any of these traits?

- Cribbing
- Windsucking
- Pacing

- Stall-walking
- Weaving
- Head-tossing
- Self-harm (biting the body)

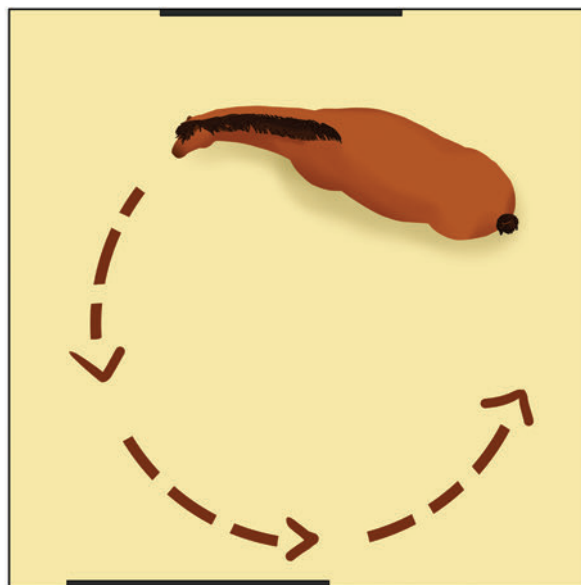
Chances are you've known or cared for horses with some of these unwanted behaviors (fig. 2.3). While not all of them are expressly caused by boredom or under-stimulation, almost all can be improved by boredom-busting lifestyle changes (see p. 47).

These seven behaviors are *stereotypic behaviors*. These are a special type of undesired behavior that are seen mostly in captive animals including domestic livestock. Stereotypic behaviors often appear compulsive and may not have an easily determined cause or purpose. In severe cases, they can consume so much of a horse's time and energy that the animal loses condition or suffers injury. Stereotypic behaviors can develop at any time, though many of them emerge early in life. In horses and other animals, they are usually a response to the mental pressures of life in human care. Some, like cribbing, may be influenced by genetics, making some horses at higher risk than others.

You might also know a horse who paws excessively, chews his herdmates' tails, eats manure, gnaws fences, kicks walls, or other aggravating behavior. All these are considered *unwanted behaviors* but usually are not stereotypic behaviors. It's sometimes difficult to tell the difference because both are unwanted and often unexplainable (fig. 2.4). However, most of the time, *stereotypic behaviors* are clearly repetitive and seem compulsive rather than "at will."

Helping your horse enjoy greater well-being usually doesn't require determining whether a behavior is a true stereotypy or not. The important part is recognizing that all these behaviors can signal an unmet need. This helps you move past the outdated label of *equine vices*, a phrase that puts the blame squarely on the horse and implies that your equine has a flawed character because he does an unwanted action from time to time.

The truth is that we don't observe these behaviors frequently in wild or feral equines. They



2.4 Stereotypic stall-walking can be distinguished from normal movement by its repetitive nature, with affected horses often walking extensively in a circular pattern.

are problems that mostly occur in captive animals, living with human environments and routines. This means that we should view them not as a personality flaw or bad habit, but as a signal that we can do better in their behavioral care.

Your best strategy is to recognize that all behaviors have some purpose, even if we can't easily tell what it is. Sometimes they signal a need for more movement or even that there is a specific nutrient missing from a horse's diet. Other times, they help a horse cope or regulate his stress levels. Our first response is often to try and stop the unwanted behavior, but preventing or punishing is almost never a good solution. The "bad" habit might be a crucial coping or self-regulating strategy. It often signals a need for more support and good alternatives for the behavior instead.

For all horses, make sure that the transition from stall to paddock is comfortable by investing in appropriate gear and insect protection (fig. 4.28). There's no need to keep a horse indoors due to flies or cold if they have the right sheets, blankets, and other clothing.

Movement and Exercise in Challenging Situations

Stall Rest

Providing the ways to fulfill the fundamental need for free movement and exercise can be a real challenge. When your horse is facing confinement during recovery from injury or illness, don't feel

as though you aren't doing a good job if your horse can't move around—healing comes first. Keep your injured horse occupied and stimulated by providing ample opportunity to forage and socialize, plus lots of enrichment items that encourage an appropriate amount of safe movement and play.

Small Spaces

What if there's little space for your horse to roam? Not everyone has ample acreage on hand. Most equestrians have relatively small patches of land, and in some areas, turnout space is so limited that small paddocks and corrals are the only available options. To encourage more movement in these



4.28 The horses on this track system wear a variety of fly masks and sheets to enable comfortable turnout during summer.

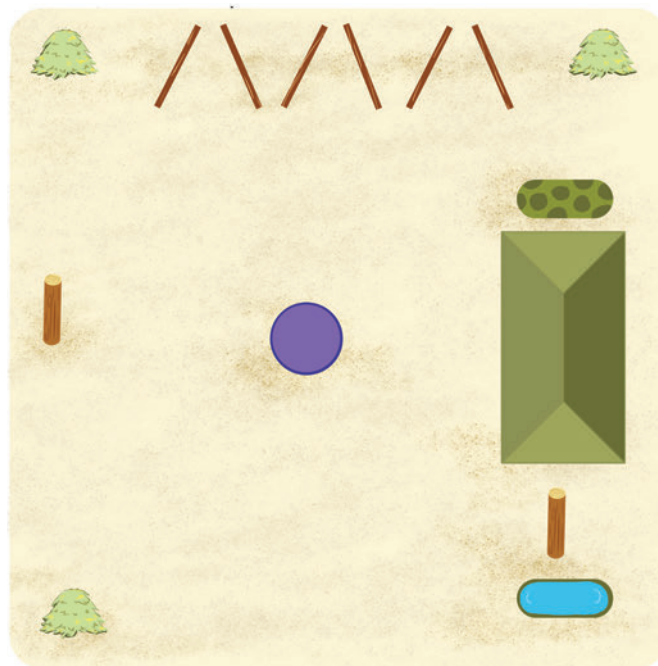
spaces, try to turn out with at least one other horse (see p. 62 for more on socializing) and make the environment as complex as you can. Create small but numerous hay stations, and place hay, water, and shelter at opposite ends so that your horse travels the length of the paddock instead of shuffling a meter here and there to eat or drink (fig. 4.29).

Empty Spaces

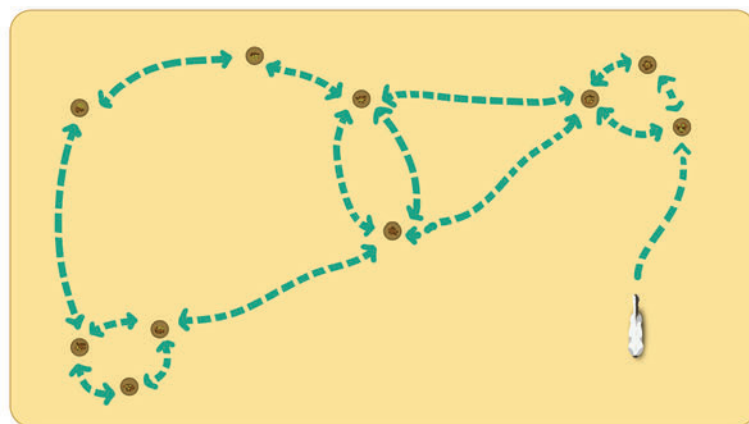
Horses evolved on grasslands, but that doesn't always mean *flatlands*. Horse owners with textured landscapes and hills have an enriched turnout space, no effort required. If your property already has texture, consider yourself lucky! When your horse's turnout space is manicured and flat, adding more interest can encourage more normal, healthy exercise.

Add structure, like additional troughs, feeders, poles, or barrels to an empty pasture to change your horse's movement patterns. Moving resources around regularly can mimic the way your horse's wild ancestors traveled to meet their needs. Separate resources from each other and place each one as far from the pasture gate as possible. Your horse will wander from shelter to hay feeder to water over the course of the day, maximizing passive exercise. For a simple way to encourage more movement, place multiple pans of grain or forage throughout the space so the horse walks between forage rather than standing at a hay feeder (fig. 4.30)

Toys and playthings can also encourage movement—either low-key and relaxed, or active and playful (see p. 165).



4.29 Encourage movement in a small paddock by creating “behavior stations” throughout the space. This dry lot features multiple hay stations, a kiddie pool for treat puzzles (see p. 180), textured slow-feeder for grain, and two scratching posts.



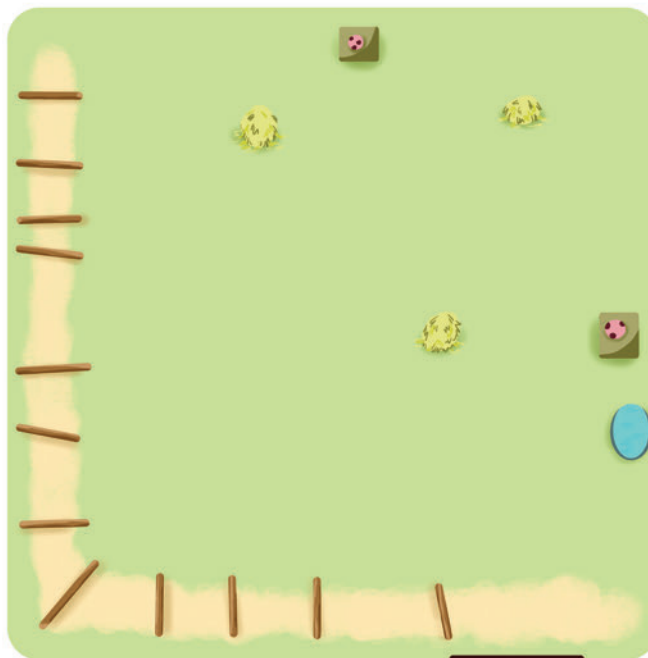
4.30 When several pans of plain forage such as soaked hay cubes are placed throughout the pasture, a horse tends to walk between them repeatedly, greatly increasing total distance traveled.

Hyperactive and Compulsive Movers

Some horses struggle with excessive movement rather than too little. Wild horses might travel 10 or more miles every single day, but usually at a gentle pace alongside their herdmates. Marching 10 miles up and down a fence line (sometimes called “pacing”), however, is a different story. Horses like this are often confined for part of the day and are attempting to squish a healthy 24 hours of activity into a short turnout period. They may also have a memory of prior confinement or traumatic memories and associations with turnout. Hyperactivity, especially in a small turnout area, can be stressful for all the horses and people dealing with it. Horses who pace the edges of their paddocks can also be prone to stall-walking while indoors.

These horses are getting the movement their bodies and minds need, but in a compulsive way that may not lead to being calm. Pacing can also take up so much of the horse’s time that it interferes with healthful behaviors like grazing or resting. Excessive walking can be a symptom of anxiety. It’s a natural result of the fight-or-flight stress response and can give the horse a sense of action that helps him feel calmer. This is why healthy, happy horses march along the edges of their pasture before mealtimes; as they anticipate food, their bodies need to express elevated energy.

Although pacing is problematic, simply “making it stop” shouldn’t be the goal. Addressing *its cause* and *what the horse is communicating* should be your priorities. The behavior may have a physical cause that needs veterinary diagnosis. It can



4.31 Break up a compulsive fence-pacer’s repetitive motion with poles by his fenceline while providing healthful alternatives throughout the pasture.

also be caused or worsened by boredom and not having access to important resources, like forage or friends. Cutting back on turnout time doesn’t provide an alternative or address possible causes, so it only masks the problem.

Instead, set the horse up for success. If he only receives a short turnout period each day, try keeping him out longer to see if he’s able to work out his energy or anxiety. Ground poles can be placed perpendicular to the fence line to encourage him to break up his compulsive walking. Support healthy movement by placing hay in multiple locations, apart from his favorite pacing fence. This creates a natural reward for walking other parts of the paddock (fig. 4.31). Also, make sure his other fundamental needs for *forage* and *friends* are met at all times during turnout.

Identify any triggers for the behavior by determining whether the horse travels excessively at most times of day, or perhaps only when people are present (such as feeding time). Give any information you gather to your veterinarian as you look for possible physical causes and look at ways to minimize triggering events. The enrichment strategies beginning in the next chapter may also help to redirect and refocus the desire for movement and self-regulation.

Older and Less Mobile Horses

Horses with injury- or age-related mobility problems still benefit from movement. It helps keep joints flexible, relieves stiffness, and maintains muscle tone alongside its crucial psychological benefits. When your horse can't get around as well as he used to, the best strategy is to give him the opportunity for as much movement as he wants, neither forcing nor inhibiting exercise.

When their other needs are met and their mental and physical health is otherwise good, most horses will self-regulate their activity levels. Tiredness signals to horses that it's time to stop and rest. Pain is also a natural signal from the body that an injured part shouldn't be overworked. These signals work together to help horses manage their bodies and be active at a healthy level.

Too much of either pain or fatigue can tip the balance in the other direction. Constant discomfort is different from the healthy, self-protective pain response of a recent injury. When an older or injured horse always feels pain, he may withdraw physically and emotionally and become less interested in all his natural behaviors, including

moving around. This is why this book encourages you to work with your veterinarian: for best quality of life, it's important to manage any diseases and injuries that cause your horse discomfort.

Once you've got a handle on age- or injury-related pain or fatigue, you can work on promoting a healthy, yet not excessive, level of exercise. Group turnout provides your mobility-challenged horse with motivation to move around. Just make sure the energy level of the herd is compatible with your less-active equine. At the same time, provide plenty of choices for movement and exercise in the paddock space. Give your old or unsound horse as much variety and texture as possible, introducing obstacles, ground poles, or different ground surfaces to keep him thinking and moving.

OTHER IMPORTANT BEHAVIORS

Eating, being with others, and moving aren't the only things a horse does all day. They're just of particular importance to horses in human care. These three fundamental needs are the most likely natural behaviors to be altered or eliminated by the way we manage horses today.

Other behaviors that are also important for your horse's well-being include resting, taking care of the body, and more. Most of the time, your horse takes care of these activities on his own when the need arises. When your horse struggles with any of them, you may need to encourage him by providing the right equipment or changing your horse's living space (see p. 198 for ideas). Knowing how wild horses engage in these underappreciated activities can help you get a better idea of how your own horse is doing.

CHAPTER 9

NO BORED HORSES: TOYS, ACTIVITIES, AND STRATEGIES FOR HAPPIER HORSES

This chapter covers horse toys you can buy or build, must-have enrichment items for pastures and stalls, and special activities your horse will love.

Don't forget the "hows" and "whys" of equine boredom and behavior covered in the first section of the book. Boredom relief for horses works best when it encourages the unique and fulfilling behaviors that make your horse so special. It can

give him extra opportunities to enjoy life, or fill in gaps that might otherwise cause problems.

Because healthy behaviors are crucial, the ideas in this section are arranged by the behavior they encourage. This will help you key in on how to meet your horse's needs. Of course, many enrichment items encourage several behaviors—for example, foraging as well as movement, or problem-solving alongside using the senses.

Index of Toys, Activities, and Strategies

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Sensory and Forage Walks (p. 171)	Positive Reinforcement Training (p. 188)	Stall Scratch Pads (p. 206)

Some of the items and supplies in this section are marketed for equine boredom relief and you can purchase them in shops. But enrichment shouldn't be limited by budget, so you'll find plenty of DIY alternatives and projects that involve repurposed materials or upcycled supplies. Your skill level and the tools you have available can affect what horse toys you can create, so you'll find options for great boredom relief that use no tools or basic tools, and a few more complex ideas that need specialist equipment.

Your horse's enrichment activities are limited only by your creativity. Feel free to modify any of the ideas here to make them more appealing or applicable to your horse's situation. Just keep basic safety in mind, and never change a toy's design in a way that could make it risky for your horse.

FORAGING

One of the most fundamental and important equine behaviors, foraging (feeding) takes many forms. Foraging and eating behaviors allow your horse to use his body, mind, and senses, so letting him seek and enjoy food is one of the most powerful boredom-busting tools in your arsenal.

Horses don't just graze, eating grassy plants at ground level. When they have the opportunity, they'll happily browse for plants above ground level, including tree leaves overhead. Horses can snuffle through tall grass using their noses or paw with a hoof to uncover edible plants under dead leaves or snow. They might also chew bark. Because horses have so many behaviors available to access food, there are lots of ways to provide enjoyable food-based enrichment.

Finding new food sources requires horses to use their senses. Think of wandering wild horses smelling healthy grass from far away, using their sensitive whiskers to point the way to the most nutritious plants, and tasting different options to determine what's edible and what to avoid. You can provide your horse with a wide range of sensory experiences using food-based enrichment.

Best of all, equine enrichment using food is naturally rewarding. Horses love the opportunity to seek out and enjoy their own food and will happily spend extended periods working on a food puzzle or slow-feeder toy. Toys and other enrichment involving food should be at the core of your equine boredom-busting efforts.

Hay Balls

BEHAVIORS	Grazing, Movement
WHERE TO USE	Stall, Turnout
BUY OR DIY?	Buy

Hay balls are available commercially. These sturdy, hollow, plastic balls feature holes all over the surface from which horses can graze. They often have flattened sides, a little like a soccer ball, that help control how much they roll. Fill this toy with hay for a fun, stimulating grazing experience. You can use a single hay ball for enrichment—or several balls—to provide the horse's entire daily forage ration.

Best For: All horses. This toy is a real workhorse and is beneficial for all equines.

Where to Get It: Purchased online or in some large tack and feed stores. In-store availability varies by region. The biggest and highest quality hay balls can be purchased online. Several companies manufacture hay balls.

How to Use:

1. Remove any tags, stickers, and extra packaging wrap.
2. Remove the upper lid, if there is one, and add handfuls of hay.
3. Pack the ball tightly with hay.
4. Pull a few strands out of the ball to get things started, and place on the ground in a stall or pasture.

Stuffing the hay ball with as much hay as possible maximizes the time your horse can enjoy the toy and makes it easier to use. Tightly stuffed hay acts like tissues in a tissue box: each time the horse lifts away a bite of hay, the motion pulls a few more strands out of the hole.

Variations:

- Add handfuls of several hay types. Each bite of hay can contain different grasses.
- Hang the hay ball using a sturdy clip and swivel.
- Use several small hay balls for extended feeding.

Safety:

1. Supervise horses the first few times they enjoy this toy.
2. Check for cracks or sharp edges before each use.



9.1 A hay ball, filled with forage, and ready for use.



9.2 High quality hay balls feature wide lids to make adding forage easier.



9.3 This rescued horse, Marley, shows relaxed body language when interacting with her hay ball.

Scratching Posts

BEHAVIORS	Scratching, Sense of Touch
WHERE TO USE	Turnout
BUY OR DIY?	DIY project with purchased materials

A *scratching post* is a must-have enrichment for your horse's turnout space. Without it, horses turn to any solid object to scratch itchy spots and they can damage fences, trees, and their own skin! A scratching post provides a safe and effective place for itch relief and is one of the most important turnout enrichment items for horses.

Best For: All horses

How to Do It:

1. Buy a sturdy wooden post or pole that's one-and-a-half times your horse's withers height: the post will stand at the height of your horse's withers; the extra length is anchored in the ground.
2. Dig a hole at least one-third the depth of the wooden post and twice the post's width. Place a few inches of gravel at the bottom of the hole.
3. Place the post in the hole and adjust with a level until it stands true. Brace the post in position and pour in concrete mix. Allow to cure completely before adding texture or allowing horses to explore.
4. Add scratching texture using a drill and screws. Commercially made livestock

scratching pads are an easy solution. You can also use rough scrub brushes or used horse brushes.

How Often: Always available

Variations:

- Wrap post with rough manila rope for a texture that mimics tree bark.
- Use a rubber doormat for a grippy but gentle texture that won't damage skin even with intense rubbing.



9.71 A scratching post made from a rough stadium turf. The turf is positioned on the post to allow scratching from chest to ears.



9.72 A wide, firm-bristled floor brush makes a durable and effective scratching post.



9.73 Preparing a DIY scratching post by pre-drilling holes in the brush for easier attachment to the post.

- If you can't install a freestanding post at a boarding facility, you can install scratching material on wooden fence posts (be aware this may cause damage or leaning posts) or the walls of pasture shelters.

Safety:

1. Make sure the post is solidly anchored in the ground using plenty of concrete and a deep hole. If you don't have the tools for the job, hire a contractor to set the post correctly.
2. The post must be your horse's withers height or taller to prevent the horse from accidentally falling on it.
3. Make sure all scratching material is correctly installed with no exposed screws or nails that could cause cuts.

Deep Bedding

BEHAVIORS	Sleep, Resting, Rolling
WHERE TO USE	Stall, Turnout
BUY OR DIY?	DIY

A *deep, fluffy bed* of shavings, straw, or other material makes a stall much more welcoming. A stall without enough bedding subjects a horse to urine splash and odors, and makes it less comfortable to lie down and sleep. Increase your horse's comfort during stall time by investing in a deeper bed and removing only soiled material with each cleaning.

Best For: Elderly horses, injured horses