

## Loneliness and digestive disorders

Christine King BVSc, MACVSc, MVetClinStud

Deepak Chopra MD, one of our modern pioneers of mind–body medicine, describes the colon as “the organ of emotion.” (That always makes me smile... what would *that* Hallmark card look like?!) I would have to concur, having a rather sensitive digestive tract myself, and I believe that this association holds true for horses, as well.

Recently, a couple of patients in my practice have made me take a fresh look at digestive disorders—a subject I thought I knew a fair bit about. In particular, these two horses made me realize the importance of emotional well-being for digestive health—a connection I well knew from personal experience, yet hadn’t quite managed to translate to my equine patients. These horses have also demonstrated to me, in no uncertain terms, that psychosomatic illness is very real in horses and needs to be factored in to our list of possible diagnoses and to our treatment approach.

By most people’s yardstick, both of these horses are well loved and well cared for. They live in well maintained boarding facilities and are fed a high-forage, grain-free diet, along with high-quality multivitamin-mineral supplements and various herbal or nutraceutical products. They are on adequate parasite, dental, and hoof care programs, too.

Both horses have their own stall in a barn with several other horses, and they get at least a couple of hours of pasture turnout with at least one other horse every day. Both are in training with professional trainers, but they are primarily used for pleasure riding, so their training is fairly basic and could not be considered anything more than “light.”

While the purists among us would not consider this a perfect situation, the pragmatists would point out that it’s not too bad, even pretty darn good, as modern horsekeeping goes. These horses, though, would side with the purists. Both horses periodically have bouts of digestive upset—loose manure, picky appetite, lethargy, and sometimes even low-grade colic—that have no clear pattern other than coinciding with changes in the horse’s housing or social situation.

In fact, both are quite eloquent on the subject. The first horse (a young mare) develops loose manure and a woebegone look and manner whenever she is confined to a stall. She is better when kept in a stall which has a yard attached and the external stall door remains open, allowing her to go outside and interact across the fence with the horse next to her. She is best when kept at pasture with a friend.

The other horse (a teenage gelding) has similar bouts of loose manure and vague malaise whenever he’s upset. (He has been diagnosed with a gastric ulcer which his history suggests has been present for at least 18 months.) As if to punctuate the point for us, he recently had an episode of diarrhea when his best pasture buddy was confined to a stall because of an injury. The diarrhea continued until his buddy was once again able to be turned out with him and the other horses in their turnout group.

Both of these horses had been treated with various digestive aids, including probiotics, aloe vera, antacids, herbal supplements, and even chiropractic manipulation and acupuncture. And yet the problem persisted or returned each time the horse was under some sort of emotional stress.

I use medical intuitive evaluation in my practice, along with more conventional means of diagnosis, so I felt comfortable that we hadn’t missed anything with regard to the possible physical causes of these symptoms. A sense of emotional disorder (sadness, loneliness, isolation, vulnerability, ungroundedness, a lack of belonging) was very strong when I evaluated both of these horses, and I felt that the solution to their physical problems lay in that direction.

We changed what we could in the way of diet, housing, turnout, and training/exercise regimens, given the limitations of a boarding situation, and we continued to work on the horses’ emotional health, including the use of selected Bach flower essences. The gelding is now doing well. The mare continued to have problems despite these changes, so her person decided to move her to a different boarding facility, one where she would have virtually unlimited pasture

turnout with compatible company and none of the stresses of her previous training/boarding barn. In other words, she'd be able to develop solid social bonds with a relatively stable group of horses and otherwise live a more natural lifestyle. This mare is now happily settled in her new home and her manure has been well formed since the move.

There are many possible causes of digestive disorder in horses. I'm not saying that these problems are psychosomatic in all cases; just that this possibility should be considered when no other physical cause can be found and all appropriate improvements have been made to the horse's diet and management (housing, training and exercise regimen, parasite

control, sand control, dental care, etc.). Simply addressing the horse's social needs resolved the long-standing digestive complaints in these two horses. Both may continue to have episodes of loose manure and other signs of digestive disorder from time to time. But rather than seeing it as an unresolved and on-going problem, these bouts can be seen as a *sentinel*—a signal that something is not quite right in the horse's world and needs to be addressed.

(For an excellent overview of the horse's social needs, take a look at Mary Ann Simonds' article "What is 'Natural'? Fact vs. Fiction" in the summer 2005 issue of *Holistic Horse*.)

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