



# FACT SHEET

Department of Animal Science, University of Connecticut

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Effective Horse Management - Horse Management Series

## Say “Neigh” to Negativity: How Horses Can Help Us Find Lifelong Happiness

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As people that love horses, horses make us happy! This seems like a simplistic statement but when the pandemic hit I suddenly realized how much horses are a part of my own happiness. In the early days of the pandemic we weren't really allowed to be on campus but I would drive by where my favorite university horses were and have a 5 minute visit/treat session with them just because I missed them so much. It was not until around May of that year that I asked a horse friend if I could ride on the trails with her and then I realized how much a part of my happiness is due to horses and riding.

So, one thing I started to do was read a lot of inspirational books to help me stay grounded and happy. One I ran across was called The Happiness Project by Gretchen Rubin. After reading the book, I decided to apply the concepts to horses for a talk at the American Youth Horse Council Symposium. They didn't have enough slots for all of the proposed seminars so I agreed to give the talk on the bus on the way to and from the event. It was extremely popular so I thought I would share some of my ideas on how horses can help us to find lifelong happiness through their regular actions here:

- 🐾 **Lesson 1. Stay hydrated.** Water is needed for every metabolic activity that takes place in our body as well as the horse's body. If you don't drink enough water, it can lead to sleepiness, fatigue, confusion, headache and dizziness or lightheadedness. So drinking water is an easy potential solution to these problems.
  
- 🐾 **Lesson 2. Keep up on your exercise!** Exercise is not only good for the body, it has been found to make you better able to deal with present stress (who doesn't have some of that?) as well as more resilient toward future stress, improve your mood, improve spatial memory (like you use for directions or finding your way through a fun house maze), improved social skills (self-esteem, leadership and empathy), help

you achieve better sleep, and helps your brain create new neurons. Luckily as horse people we usually get lots of exercise!

- 🐾 **Lesson 3. Get enough sleep!** Sleep can boost our immune systems, help prevent weight gain, reduce stress, improve our mood, increase exercise performance, improve memory, increase productivity and lower our risk for serious health problems like diabetes and heart disease.
- 🐾 **Lesson 4. Find time for hugging.** One of my students taught the horse I used to ride to hug, so when you put your arms around her she puts her neck around you and holds you tight! It always feels so nice! Hugs have been found to protect people from increased susceptibility to the kind of stress that leads to infection. Hugs release oxytocin, often called the love hormone, which helps improve mood. Hugs can combat cortisol, a stress hormone.
- 🐾 **Lesson 5. Live in the now!** Some people were having a hard time during the pandemic but I think it's important to try to find something good in every day even now. Horses are animals that, like dogs, live in the present. They don't worry about the past or obsess about the future. It's okay to have some thoughts like that but try to look at every day as a gift. Instead of looking at what went wrong with your day, try to reflect on what went right! It will help you have a more positive outlook. Also, reading inspirational books and quotes can also help with that too.
- 🐾 **Lesson 6. Enjoy your food.** Horses know that by slowing down and savoring your meal or snack you will get more enjoyment from it (OK, maybe not all horses! lol). Slowing down will also help you feel better when you start to get full because your stomach will have more time to signal to your brain that it's had enough so that you can stop eating when you are comfortably full.
- 🐾 **Lesson 7. Spend time with friends.** You can talk to them on the phone, go for a ride (trail riding has pretty much always been a socially distanced sport, remember, we are supposed to keep a horse length away!), take a hike or you can Facetime or use Webex or Zoom to talk to your friends! Horses are social animals like us and definitely appreciate their friends.
- 🐾 **Lesson 8. Appreciate the steps along the way to a goal.** Maybe you want to ride in the Tevis Cup one day. Well, first you will need to start with shorter rides, make sure you enjoy those experiences. Or maybe you have a goal of being able to jump a course. Appreciate your success in jumping those cross rails before you get to the big fences.
- 🐾 **Lesson 9. Enjoy time outside.** The outdoors has fresh, clean air and can help lift our spirits during hard times. In Japan, they practice forest bathing or shinrin-yoku. It is simply being in nature and connecting with it through our senses of smell, sight, hearing, taste and touch. Give it a try! There are directions on how to do it below in the Sources and Resources section.

🐾 **Lesson 10. Find time to play!** Our equine friends know that playing relieves stress, stimulates the mind, boosts creativity and much more! Now is the time to go back to doing that paint by number you used to enjoy, play a game online with friends or strangers, play a board game at home with your close family or household, complete a see-a-word puzzle, or any of the playful things you enjoy.

Horses are great guides for how to live in the present. Horses don't dwell on their problems; they figure out how to deal with them and go on. Little lifestyle changes can make a big difference in becoming happier and less negative. Horses are always there to show us what to do! Thanks, and have fun with your horses!

### **References**

1. Gretchen Rubin. 2018. The Happiness Project. Harper Paperbacks, New York.
2. Happiness Downloads <https://gretchenrubin.com/books/the-happiness-project/resources/> Accessed 6/13/24.
3. Qing Li. Time. Forest Bathing is Great for Your Health. Here's How to Do it. <https://time.com/5259602/japanese-forest-bathing/> Accessed 6/13/24.

### **Reviewed by:**

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