

KEY EQUINE NEEDS

The Equid Ethogram

The term “ethogram” comes from the word “ethology”, which is the study of natural behaviour. Behaviourists use an ethogram to describe the range of natural behaviours displayed by a species in the wild. Unless we as horse owners know what the horse’s normal ethogram is, we cannot identify abnormal behaviour.

Understanding the horse’s ethogram is vital if we are to meet the natural, biological and social needs of our horses.

The Five Freedoms

In the UK, government guidelines for farm animals identify five basic freedoms that are the minimum that each animal should experience:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst
- Freedom from disease
- Freedom from excessive heat or cold
- Freedom of movement
- Freedom to act out normal behaviours



Photo: Emily McDonald

The Equine Hierarchy of Needs

Horses, like people, have a hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy takes the form of a pyramid, with the most important need at the base of the pyramid, and higher level needs at the top. Higher level needs are not addressed until fundamental lower level needs have been met. The equine hierarchy of needs has *safety* at its base. As a prey animal, this is the horse’s most basic, fundamental need. It is the reason why horses have such highly developed reactions/responses to threat, and why they have such strong affiliative needs – there is safety in numbers. The full hierarchy, highest need at the top in this table is:

- Safety
- Eating/drinking
- Physical maintenance – self grooming, rolling, defecation, urination
- Rest/sleep
- Movement – play, exercise
- Exploration/investigation
- Use of own and herd space
- Association – play, pair-bonding

Safety

Horses need to live in a social group that is settled and constant. Individual horses need to have a pair bond for mutual protection.



Photo: Emily McDonald

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Eating/drinking

Horses need to be able to eat and drink in an environment as close as possible to how they would eat and drink in the wild. This includes 24 hour access to grazing and browsing (up to 10% of a horse's natural diet is made up of browsing on logs, branches, twigs and leaves). Eating/drinking is not the fundamental evolutionary need of the horse, and horses who do not feel safe may often stop eating or become fussy eaters.

Physical maintenance – self-grooming, rolling, defecation, urination

Horses should have the opportunity to groom themselves, by rubbing against trees or posts or rolling, and should feel safe enough to defecate and urinate normally. They should also be able to regulate their own temperature by feeling safe and being able to move to sunlight, shelter or shade.

Rest/sleep

Horses need to feel safe in order to act out their normal sleep patterns, so they need the safety of a group or pair bond in close proximity to be able to do this. Horses are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk) with polyphasic sleep patterns (sleeping, idling, dozing or resting for short periods of time throughout a 24 hour period.) They should be able to mirror these patterns in their domestic environment.

Movement – play, exercise

Horses should have sufficient space to choose to perform movement behaviours that are key elements to their ethogram, including walking, running and playing with other herd members.

Exploration/investigation

Horses should feel safe and have space and opportunity through movement and object play (exploration/play with nose, lips and mouth) to explore their environment(s) including field, yard, school, new places and new things that are introduced to their environment.

Use of own and herd space

Horses need to have enough space to retain their personal distance and move within their flight zone, and they should feel safe enough to establish personal space, pair bond space and herd space.

Association – play, pair bonding

Horses should have the opportunity to form pair bonds and feel sufficiently safe to play, groom and interact with their pair bond and other established herd members.



Photo: Emily McDonald