

# BEHAVIOURAL EUTHANASIA OF THE HORSE

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**“WHILE BEHAVIOURAL EUTHANASIA OCCURS LESS FREQUENTLY IN EQUINE PRACTICE THAN IT DOES IN COMPANION ANIMAL PRACTICE, IT IS IMPORTANT FOR EQUINE VETERINARIANS TO UNDERSTAND WHEN BEHAVIOURAL EUTHANASIA MAY BE WARRANTED.”**



Not all horse behaviour problems can be safely or permanently resolved, which may require veterinarians to counsel clients about behavioural euthanasia.

**A**lthough never an easy task, recommending euthanasia to a client is made somewhat easier if a horse is physically suffering, and their quality of life is poor. But what if the client's horse is otherwise healthy and sound, and instead has a serious behaviour problem? While behavioural euthanasia occurs less frequently in equine practice than it does in companion animal practice, it is important for equine veterinarians to understand when behavioural euthanasia may be warranted.

There is scant information available on equine behavioural euthanasia for horse owners and veterinarians. However, the Ohio State University (OSU) Veterinary Medical Center has created a set of guidelines on behavioural euthanasia for companion animal owners. I have found these guidelines useful when consulting with owners of horses with severe behaviour issues, and I recently presented on this topic at the Progressive Equine Behaviour and Training Forum in Florida.

The OSU guidelines suggest three alternative options to consider before euthanasia, and these can be adapted to equine practice.

## RULE OUT MEDICAL CAUSES

Pain is a common cause of unwanted behaviour in horses. A horse displaying unwanted behaviour should always be examined by an equine veterinarian for evidence of pain. Even behaviours which, at first glance, may appear to be training issues can have underlying physical causes. For example, the horse who refuses to trailer load may have stifle or hock pain, or the girthy horse may have undiagnosed gastric ulcers. Unwanted behaviours which have a sudden onset, or those which involve displays of aggression or evasion, such as bucking under saddle, particularly deserve a thorough workup.

## SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Academically-trained animal behaviour professionals should be consulted when dealing with behaviour problems in horses, particularly for issues that involve aggression, anxiety, or fear. The use of punishment-based training protocols is generally not recommended, nor necessary, to resolve most behaviour problems in horses, and their use may worsen existing problems or create new ones. As the horse

training industry is unregulated, and training methodologies are not standardized, veterinarians should refer clients to behaviour professionals with appropriate education in the use of evidence-based protocols, such as counter-conditioning and systematic desensitization.

While the use of psychopharmacological agents to support behaviour modification work is less common for horses, certain anxiolytic drugs, hormones, pheromones, or nutraceutical products may prove helpful when used in conjunction with behaviour modification protocols.

## CONSIDER FINDING A NEW HOME FOR THE ANIMAL

Managing and retraining a horse with behaviour problems may sometimes be best accomplished by rehoming the horse. The existing owner may not have the time, experience, or financial resources to aid in resolution of the problem. Unfortunately, these qualities may also be challenging to find in a new owner.

When rehoming a horse with behaviour issues, full disclosure of the problem may reduce any potential liability if future displays of the behaviour result in human injury; disclosure also affords the horse the best opportunity to get the help it needs to overcome the problem.

Ideally, prior to enlisting the help of an appropriate trainer, any new home should ensure the horse has had a thorough veterinary workup to rule out physical causes for the behaviour. As moving homes can be stressful for horses, allowing sufficient undemanding downtime for the horse to settle in prior to retraining can be helpful.

If none of these options are viable, the OSU document lists four factors to consider when making the decision to euthanize.

## ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

A comprehensive behaviour modification plan often includes changes in the environment or management of the horse to avoid triggering the problem behaviour during retraining. For example, a horse who kicks at anyone entering its stall may be taught to present its head over the stall door so that it may be haltered safely from outside. These changes are usually short-term, but may be permanent in rare cases, and they may be difficult or impossible for an owner to implement at their current or future facility.

Relapse of the problem behaviour may also occur during behaviour modification, making liability a serious concern for owners of horses with behaviour problems that are potentially injurious. Some owners may simply be unable to comply with the changes required to avoid relapse, or relapse may occur despite their hard work.

## “REHOMING HORSES WITH KNOWN SERIOUS BEHAVIOUR ISSUES CARRIES ETHICAL AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS.”

Rehoming horses with known serious behaviour issues carries ethical and legal implications. Failure to disclose known issues can result in injury, or even death, to an unsuspecting new owner. In light of this, most reputable companion animal rescue organizations will not accept animals with specific behaviour problems such as aggression, rather than assume the liability associated with rehoming. It is feasible, and understandable, that horse rescues in Canada may adopt similar policies.

## REHOMING IS NOT AN OPTION

Despite the availability of qualified help and the best intentions of an owner, some behaviour issues cannot ever be permanently resolved. Horses with specific issues may realistically be unsafe in any environment.

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## SUFFERING

Many behaviour problems in horses are a result of underlying stress or fear, which can impact their mental and physical health. They may also suffer from further stress and a decreased quality of life due to misguided attempts to manage the problem, or when subjected to last-ditch efforts involving aversive and unproven training practices. The fact that this is a common occurrence in the horse world underscores the need for veterinarians to help owners find qualified professionals to help with behaviour problems.

Horses with behaviour problems may languish in inadequate facilities, physically and mentally unstimulated, especially if their owners become fearful of working with them. Horses may also experience neglect when given away to companion-only homes if the new owner has limited knowledge of horse care.

## SEVERITY OF THE PROBLEM AND PROGRESSION OF SIGNS

Unwanted behaviours which result from pain or fear may increase in frequency, or worsen, if the root cause is not addressed. They may generalize or begin to occur well in advance of the initial triggers that prompted the behaviour. Behaviour problems that have been occurring for an extended period of time are often more resistant to change, resulting in a poor prognosis for resolution.

It is important to remember that while a humane death is not a welfare issue, for horses with serious behaviour problems, living may very well be. Horses with behaviour problems are frequently passed from owner to owner, subjected to aversive training, and/or neglected. Some behaviour problems present a real risk of injury or death to those working with the horse, and thus rehoming such horses may be a future liability to private owners or rescue organizations.

As with companion animals, horse owners may feel guilty when considering euthanasia for behavioural reasons, especially if the animal is otherwise healthy and sound. Owners may feel they will be judged for their decision and may find it difficult to discuss the topic with friends and family. Guiding clients toward supportive resources should be part of a euthanasia consultation. At a time when owners are feeling conflicted and need professional advice about such a difficult, emotional decision, it is important for the veterinarian to have a clear perspective of the factors that must be considered when deciding if euthanasia is warranted.

The full OSU document can be found here: <https://vet.osu.edu/vmc/sites/default/files/import/files/documents/pdf/vmc/Behavioral%20Euthanasia%20fact%20sheet.pdf>. [WCV](#)