

Saying goodbye to your horse

A practical guide for coping with loss

Coping with the loss of a horse*, whether through death or enforced separation, can be a very sad and difficult time. This guide, created with more than 25 years experience of pet loss support, offers you tips and advice during this difficult time.

Horse loss

At some point, losing a horse will be a reality for all owners. Yet it is an aspect of horse care that is often not given enough consideration. There are many different reasons why you may lose your horse. These could include:

- Illness or injury
- financial reasons
- old age
- ambiguous loss eg theft, straying
- sudden loss
- rehoming eg outgrown, change of circumstances

Sometimes in the event of an emergency, good intentions and planning are often not an option. You will find in this leaflet information about the facts as well as practical ways to help you through the grieving process.

Anticipatory grief and guilt

If the loss of your horse is expected, whether through a planned euthanasia or if they are being sold or rehomed, it's not uncommon to start the grieving process before the actual loss has happened. This time is often the hardest.

There are a variety of things that may help to ease the transition for you once you have made that difficult decision. Set a date for the planned euthanasia or rehoming. Try not to leave it too long, as prolonging this period may leave you with more questions and, worst case scenario, the situation may be taken out of your hands. Use the time you have left wisely. Spend more quality time with your horse, doing those things you enjoy together. Talk to your friends and family about how you are feeling.

Guilt is a very normal part of grieving. This is the time you may be wondering if you did the right thing, or whether there are things you could have done differently. Talking through with others or writing down your thoughts can help you work through what happened.

* For the purpose of this document all horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids will be referred to as a horse.

Accidents and emergency euthanasia

Horses can die in very traumatic circumstances. They run from danger, which means that they are more likely to have tragic accidents. The fact that they live outside, are ridden on roads and over fences are a few examples of why they are at high risk of having an accident.

They are large animals so illness such as colic or broken legs are expensive and may not be possible to treat. Their quality of life could also be compromised. For example, being confined to box rest in a stable may not be suitable for some horses.

Shock is often a response from an unexpected death or emergency euthanasia. You may have no control over the situation, and it may be in a public place or at an event. This can be very upsetting but you can't change the situation, so be kind to yourself and realistic about what could have been done differently.

Planned euthanasia

If your horse has been unwell for a prolonged period it is often hard to decide when the time is right to euthanise them. It's about your horse's quality of life and making an informed decision as to when this is being compromised.

A horse needs to be able to graze or forage for food most of the day, be able to get up and lie down unaided, walk, trot and preferably canter in a field comfortably. They must have suitable companions. If they are unable to do these things or you can't offer these facilities, it may be time to talk to your vet about whether it's time to say goodbye.

It's also a good idea to talk to friends, family and equine professionals who know your horse as they may be able to see the decline before you can. They can also support you in the decision making process.

If there is treatment available for your horse, the realistic questions you need to ask yourself are:

- Will the treatment improve your horse's quality of life?
- Are there any side effects of treatment?
- Can you afford it?

Your role in the euthanasia procedure

Once you have made the hard decision to euthanise you now have to decide on how, where, and what do you do with the body once they are gone.

Making all these decisions can understandably feel very daunting. Discuss all the options with your vet but remember, ultimately, these are your decisions, so take your time over them.

You will need to decide how? Lethal injection or free bullet.

You will need a suitable location. Remember removal of the body is often the most distressing part of the process, so the location needs to have easy access. The time of day you choose may be an important factor to avoid those busy times.

You can find more facts about the actual euthanasia process in our euthanasia leaflet, bluecross.org.uk/pet-advice/euthanasia-and-horses

Another big decision to consider will be; do you want to be present or not? If you have not been present at a horse euthanasia before, it's advisable to talk to someone with experience. They can let you know what to expect so you can make an informed decision on whether it's right for you and your horse. We are all different so don't feel pressurised either way.

If you do not wish to be present, there are other options you can consider:

- A friend your horse is familiar with could be present instead
- Friends at the end bhs.org.uk/our-work/welfare/our-campaigns/friends-at-the-end
- Let your vet know you are not going to be present so they can bring a vet nurse to assist them

You can change your mind at any time. It's ultimately your decision but remember you don't have to go it alone. Your vet, friends, family and Blue Cross's Pet Loss Support Service (PLS) are available to support you through this difficult time.

There are a few other things you will need to remember. You will require a death certificate from your vet to claim from your insurance. You are required to send back your horse passport to the agency within 30 days.

There are a variety of options for the disposal of the body. Do your research, as some options can be quite costly. There may be services out there that you are unaware of and services may differ in every region.

Talk to your vet. They can advise you of the options they use and the choices available, and can usually organise this for you. However, do not forget that there are other options for you to consider.

Burial can only be done if your horse is classed as a pet. You will need to contact your local environment agency to get permission to bury them. Also, think about the logistics of machinery and the space you will need to bury them. Is this a realistic option?

Equine End of Life Service can support you. They facilitate a nationwide service for the collection and disposal of the body. You can find all their information at equine-endoflife.co.uk

Pet Cremation Service will organise the collection and cremation of the body and then you have the choice of having the ashes returned to you. Costs and services will vary across the UK.

Once your horse has gone

Caring for a horse is a large part of your everyday life, so when they are gone it is often the loss of routine that is hard to deal with. There are many ways to help you cope in this difficult time, but remember we are all different so what is right for someone else may not be right for you.

Change your daily routine. This has probably been done for you already as you have no choice once they are gone. Use the extra time you have to do something different. Take up a new hobby. Spend more time with your family. A break from horses may be the space you need but alternatively you may want to surround yourself in the familiarity of the equine world.

Allow yourself time to grieve. Remember there is no timescale for grief. It will more than likely be with you forever but some of these things may help ease the pain and don't forget to ask for help, especially if you are finding it hard to accept the reality.

Companions

Your horse's companion may now have been left on their own. This can be distressing for both you and your horse.

If you are having a planned euthanasia, you can put some things in place to ease your horse's loss, like introducing a new companion, changing routine slightly, or doing things with your other horse separately so they get used to doing things on their own.

If you can, it is always advisable to let them see the body of the companion so they can sniff the body and this will help them understand. Be aware this may be difficult for you, but a natural process for your horse to be able to grieve for their lost friend.

Be patient, they need time to grieve too. They may take time to get used to a new companion, but if you feel their welfare is suffering contact your vet.

Blue Cross or other welfare charities may be able to help you find a new companion. For more information, visit bluecross.org.uk/rehome/horse or bluecross.org.uk/what-if-i-need-give-my-pet

Children and horse loss

Horse loss for children and young people through death or a pony being outgrown can be very difficult, potentially with feelings they may have never felt before. They may feel just as much grief for outgrowing their pony as from a death.

Always be honest with them. Include them in the decision making process and plan ways to say your goodbyes and how you are going to remember your horse.

For more information on how to support children, please refer to *Coping with loss leaflet* which gives more useful tips, bluecross.org.uk/download-our-pls-literature

Memorials

You may want some keepsakes to remember and celebrate your horse's life. Popular keepsakes include:

- Lock of hair
- Ashes
- Shoe
- Headcollar
- Memory box
- Favourite photos/videos

Pet memorial

You may also want to remember your horse in a special and lasting way, with a photograph or by writing a few words or a poem.

Visit: bluecross.org.uk/remember-a-pet to find out more.

Other useful websites

bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss

bhs.org.uk/advice-and-information/horse-ownership/euthanasia

worldhorsewelfare.org/Just-in-Case

Free confidential helpline and email support service

Blue Cross's Pet Loss Support Service is here to support everyone young and old through their loss and help you come to terms with it. We provide a phone support service which is open every day of the year, including bank holidays.

To make contact call: FREEPHONE 0800 096 6606

The confidential support line is open everyday 8.30am-8.30pm. For those who prefer to write we also have an email service.

plsmail@bluecross.org.uk

Expect a response from this within a 48 hour period.

Webchat (8.30am-8.30pm)

[Bluecross.org.uk/about-pls](https://bluecross.org.uk/about-pls)

For further copies of this leaflet, please contact:

Pet Loss Support Service

Blue Cross, Shilton Road, Burford, Oxfordshire OX18 4PF

Tel: 01993 867216

Email: plsteam@bluecross.org.uk