



Pets change lives
We change theirs



Saying goodbye to your horse

A practical guide for coping with loss

Coping with the loss of a horse*, whether due to death or enforced separation, can be very sad and difficult. This guide, created with more than 30 years experience of pet loss support, offers practical tips and advice to help you through this painful time.

Horse loss

All owners will experience the heartbreak of losing a horse at some point. There are many different reasons why you may lose your horse. These include:

- Illness or injury
- financial reasons
- old age
- ambiguous loss eg theft, straying
- sudden loss



Anticipatory grief and guilt

When you expect to lose your horse, perhaps due to planned euthanasia or rehoming, it's not uncommon to start the grieving process before the actual loss occurs. This period of 'anticipatory grief' is often the hardest.

There are a variety of things you can do to ease the transition once you've made that difficult decision. Firstly, set a date for the planned euthanasia or rehoming. Try not to leave it too long, as if you prolong this period you may find yourself worrying and agonising over the decision. And, in the worst case scenario, if you wait too long the situation could be taken out of your hands. Use the time you have left wisely. Spend more quality time with your horse, doing things you enjoy together. Talk to your friends and family about how you are feeling.

A sense of guilt is a very normal part of grieving. You may be wondering if you did the right thing, or whether there are things you could have done differently. Writing down your thoughts or talking them through with someone you trust 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. Living outside, being ridden on roads and over fences, and the tendency to run from danger all put horses at a high risk of having an accident.

They're large animals with specialist vet needs, so illness and injury is expensive, and not always possible to treat. And treatment can compromise their quality of life. For example, being confined to box rest just isn't suitable for some horses.

If your horse dies, or needs to be euthanised, suddenly, it's normal to feel deep shock. You may have no control over the situation, and it may happen 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 can be hard to know when it's the right time to say goodbye. The main thing is to prioritise your horse's quality of life and make an informed decision about when it's being compromised.

A horse needs to graze or forage for food most of the day, be able to get up and lie down unaided, and walk, trot and, ideally, canter in a field comfortably. They also need suitable companions. If they're unable to do these things for any reason, it's best 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 you are able to treat your horse, the questions you need to ask yourself are:

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

Your role in the euthanasia procedure

Once you've made the hard decision to euthanise your horse, you'll have to decide on how and where you'll say goodbye and what you'll do with their body once they're gone.

Decisions you need to make

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

You'll need to decide how – by lethal injection or free bullet?

You'll need a suitable location. Remember, removing the body is often the most distressing part of the process, so the location needs to have easy access. You may also want to think about timings too to maximise your privacy.

You can find more information about the actual euthanasia process in our euthanasia leaflet which can be found on our website. Please refer to the back page of this booklet for address.

Another big decision is whether you want to be there when it happens or not. If you've not been present for a horse euthanasia before, it's a good idea 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're 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
- BHS Friends at the End may be able to support you:
- You can let your vet know you won't be present, so they can bring a vet nurse to assist them

There are a few other things you'll need to remember. You will require a death certificate from your vet to claim from your insurance. And you must send your horse passport back to the agency within 30 days. 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 all there to support you through this difficult time.

After body care

You have several options for laying your horse's body to rest. Take time to do some research, as there may be services you weren't unaware of and some options can be costly or differ across regions.

Talk to your vet. They can advise you of the options they use and the choices available, and they can usually organise things for you. But don't forget this is not your only option.

Your horse can only be buried if they're classed as a pet. And you'll need to contact your local environment agency to get permission to bury them. Also, think about the logistics of machinery and the space you'll need for burial. 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 on their website, please refer to the back page of this booklet for address.

Pet Cremation Services will organise the collection and cremation of the body, and you can choose to have 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, and when they're gone, the loss of routine can be very hard to deal with. There are many ways to get through this difficult time, but remember we are all different, so what is right for someone else may not be right for you.

If it hasn't already been done for you, try changing your routine. 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 give you much-needed space, but you may find it's comforting to surround yourself in the familiarity of the equine world.

Allow yourself time to grieve. Remember there is no timescale for grief. You may find it never fully leaves you, but following some of the suggestions here may help ease the pain. And don't forget to reach out for support, especially if you're struggling to accept the sad reality you now face.

Companions

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

If you are having a planned euthanasia, you can put some things in place to ease your other horse's loss, like introducing a new companion, changing their routine slightly, or spending time with them 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 their companion, so they can sniff the body - this will help them understand. Be aware this may be difficult for you, but it's a natural process that will help your horse properly grieve for their lost friend.

Be patient – your surviving horse needs time to grieve too. It may take them a while to get over the loss and/or 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 our rehoming page.

Children and horse loss

Losing a horse or pony can be very difficult for children and young people, potentially bringing on feelings they've never experienced before. They may feel just as much grief from outgrowing their pony as from a death.

Always be honest with them. Include them in the decision making process and plan special ways to say your goodbyes and remember your horse together.

For more information on how to support children, please refer to our Coping with loss leaflet which gives more useful tips.



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 commemorative photograph or by writing a few words or a poem. Visit our website for ideas and inspiration.

Websites

Euthansia	bluecross.org.uk/advice/horse/health-and-injuries/euthanasia-and-horses
	bhs.org.uk/advice-and-information/horse-ownership/euthanasia
After body care	nfsco.co.uk/equine-endoflife
Companions	bluecross.org.uk/rehome/horse
Children and horse loss	bluecross.org.uk/download-our-pbss-literature

Other useful websites

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

worldhorsewelfare.org

Free confidential helpline and email support service

Blue Cross's Pet Loss Support service is here to support everyone young and old through loss and help you come to terms with the grief. Our free phone support service is open every day of the year, including bank holidays.

Phone:

FREEPHONE 0800 096 6606

Our confidential support line is open everyday 8.30am-8.30pm.

Webchat

Open everyday 8.30am-8.30pm.

If you'd prefer to write, we also have an email service.

plsmail@bluecross.org.uk

You can expect a response in 48 hours.

