

HorseNet Horse Rescue

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Caring for the Abused or Neglected Horse *A White Paper by Elle Williams*

This white paper is being written because there doesn't seem to be anything out there in the publishing world that addresses these types of problems. There are books on basic horse keeping, keeping a horse in your backyard, different riding disciplines, but nothing on rehabilitating a horse in distress. I'm going to try to put to paper some of the things we have dealt with in basic terms. Many times you will just need to put yourself in the horse's place and your initial instinct will let you know how to proceed; Basic common sense is always a good teacher.

Working with an abused and neglected horse isn't all that different from working with a so-called "normal" horse. When doing horse rescue you need to remember that you need to step back and start at the beginning. The horse you see in front of you did not start out in that condition, but came to be in that condition through months or maybe years of things being ignored.

There are two types of abuse, passive and aggressive:

"Passive" abuse is the term I use when a horse doesn't get wormed for a long period of time, get regular hoof care, get regular teeth floating, get enough grain or hay to maintain body weight.

"Aggressive" abuse is the term I use for beatings or anything where a person is inflicting immediate pain and distress on a horse.

A horse coming back from passive abuse only knows that it is hungry and does place blame to any one person while a horse recovering from aggressive abuse doesn't trust people, has no reason to trust people and has every reason NOT to trust people. Needless to say horses that suffered passive abuse are the easiest to rehabilitate, but horses suffering from aggressive abuse take longer to rehabilitate, but sometimes they have suffered too much and refuse to let anyone get close again.

Basic Care

Horses have survived in the wild for thousands of years, but since domestication now rely on their domesticators for care. The care of a horse is not complex if you follow some basic principles and throw in some common sense.

A horse requires the same basics as people:

Food:	Roughage in the form of grass and/or hay and grain (if necessary)
Water:	Clean and fresh available 24 hours a day
Shelter:	A three sided structure to shelter them from in climate weather

Without any or all of these, life can become difficult and painful.

The neglected or abused horse can have many problems. Most can be corrected with common sense, patience and tender loving care although a good veterinarian is a definite plus! Obviously it took time to create the problems that you see, and it will take a lot of time, patience and caring to correct them. Horses are not quitters and will most times "bounce" back if given the opportunity. Do yourself a favor and take pictures every 2 weeks or so. You will be amazed in the difference by comparison!

Obviously a Vet needs to be called out to see the horse. They can point out specifics that you might not have noticed and guide you in the best ways to proceed. The horse needs to get their shots brought up to date to protect them and the rest of your herd. Remember, the horse is most probably not used to being touched – or may have been beaten. Proceed gently and quietly for the best results. Basics – lots of fresh water and clean good quality hay – as much as they want and a clean-bedded area helps. Keep the new horse away from the others just in case they

might have something contagious. Quarantine the new horse for at least a week or two if your Vet suggests it. It's easier for a new horse to become used to his new surroundings a bit at a time, especially if the new horse has had a rough time of it. Do not put a new horse that is weak into a field with healthy horses. They would not welcome him with open arms, but instead with chasing and kicking. To a weak horse, that could mean serious injury. If the new horse has problems standing up, then putting him out with other horses would not be wise. If the horse has open oozing wounds, then putting him out with other horses would not be wise. If your horse has mobility problems of any kind then seriously think about it. Your Vet will advise when you can add more activity to his regime.

Feed

Feeding all types of horses is basically the same, but you must use your brain because you are responsible for your horses' health. For a normal horse, their needs change as they age – and as their physical activity changes. A horse that is growing – a baby will need more protein and more of it than an older horse. An older horse will most probably need senior feed because they don't have the teeth to grind and they probably have scarring in their intestines that will prohibit absorption to a certain degree. The horse that just hangs around the field all day with nothing to do most probably will not need that much feed to maintain his weight – depending on his specific problems. A horse that is being worked a lot needs more feed to maintain his body weight. If you see ribs and hip bones then the horse needs more food!

Some breeds of horses require more grain just because their metabolism burns the calories faster. Depending on the horse you might be better giving lower protein grain rather than the "high test" type. If the horse becomes hyper and hard to handle it could be the grain making them that way. They tend to store up the energy produced by the protein if not exercised enough to work it off. Thoroughbreds and Arabians tend to be naturally on the hyper side with higher metabolisms. They may need the grain to maintain their weight, but not high protein grain and can exist just on hay and grass. Each horse must be evaluated as an individual and you should not expect every horse in the barn to maintain his or her weight with everyone getting the same food. Each is different, metabolisms are different, ages, build, sex and all those factors come into play and should be taken into account when planning your feeding schedules. A young horse will need different feed than an older horse that you are trying to put weight on. It's the same with people – you can't eat the same thing at 50 years of age that you could when you were 16 years old.

Pregnant mares require more protein and feed because they are feeding two. After the foal is born they need high protein grain because they are nursing and the baby need to have plenty of milk. A young horse needs higher protein feed to grow. This combined with plenty of room for exercise makes for a healthy, happy strong baby.

Because baby horses grow rapidly – make sure you check their halter regularly as they quickly grow to fill them. That is something that is seen quite frequently because babies are not handled enough and they quickly outgrow their halters. The problem being that the halters are not changed or expanded to handle their expanding frames. Sometimes the halter will need to be removed by a Vet and you will end up with a nasty scar. The horse may not want you near his head with good reason. It is a small thing to take the time to handle a baby a few minutes a day and just slip your hand between his face and the halter. If you can't get it in there then it's getting too tight!

Protecting Grain

Keep all grain secure so the horses cannot "accidentally" get into it. Horses will eat themselves to death if given a chance. Horses in the wild graze and move from place to place. A little grass here, a little there they move around. They do not have the problem of too rich grass, or too much grain, so when they have the chance to make gluttons of themselves they will do it. If your horse doesn't seem to be acting just right call a Vet. Many times early detection can save your horse and no one knows your horse as well as you do, especially if you have spent lots of time caring for him.

Older Horses

An older horse, as an older person, has special needs and requirements. Because their teeth get worn, they can wear points on their teeth that may cause them to drop grain when they eat. They can't chew it because there is no grinding surface anymore. Your Vet, Blacksmith or Dentist can "float" or file down your horses teeth so they can eat the grain easier by having a surface to grind against again. Sometimes even younger horses need to have their teeth floated, so have your Vet check it out!

If your horse is older, they sometimes cannot digest grain anymore and you may start to see it showing up in their manure. Making a mush out of pelleted or complete grain (pellets covered with water) can be the answer to keeping weight on them. Senior feeds are pre-extruded or pre-cooked. That means they are in a softer form and are easier for the horse's body to break down and absorb. If they use up all their energy digesting the food they eat then it's going to take that much more to put it on. We use a very finely ground sweet feed, a scoop of pellets for seniors and

a scoop of beet pulp (already wetted) and then covered with water. The feed soaks up the water and makes it easier for them to get it into their face, makes sure they get enough water (dehydration) and it's easier for them to digest. You must be careful with beet pulp and let it soak at least 15 minutes before you feed it to your horse. Do not feed it dry. If you do, it will soak up the liquid in your horses' stomach and cause major problems. Steamed rolled oats (oatmeal) can sometimes help put weight on an older horse and there is no hull for them to have to grind away.

Dehydration and Food

When you pinch some skin on the horses' neck it should bounce back immediately. If it stays "tented" the horse is dehydrated and needs liquids. This can be accomplished several ways. You can add electrolytes to their feed but some horses will not eat them, or regular non-iodized table salt about a teaspoon to their feed will make them drink. We use loose mineralized salt. A salt block is good for cows, they have a rough tongue, but a horse has a soft tongue. They will stand and lick and lick and many times will walk away even though their bodies still need salt they get tired. The loose salt looks like sand and when they stick their tongue in it they get a tongue full. Putting a little handful on your horses feed every feeding will help make them drink. You can also hang a bucket of loose salt in your loafing shed and the horse will take what they need. They may take a lot when it is first available to them, but their systems will level out and then they won't need as much.

If the horse you are dealing with is dehydrated, he may have ulcers inside his mouth where the inside of his lips have stuck to his teeth. That would tend to make his mouth sore and he would not necessarily feel like eating. Adding 2 oz of Aloe Vera Juice to his feed will help aid in digestion and help heal him from his mouth all the way through his body. It will help with stomach ulcers as well.

Make sure the water your horse has is readily available and clean. In the winter it's extremely important that the water not freeze. A horse needs water in the winter as in the summer. Make sure the water tub is scrubbed and cleaned regularly to keep algae from growing and keep it heated in the winter. Drinking cold water in the winter lowers the horses' body temperature. It's already cold – why drink and get colder? In the winter it's even nice to make your horses feed up with hot water. That gives them a warm fuzzy going into the night!

If you are dealing with a young horse that is starved, small meals many times a day may be the way to go. Your Vet could advise you how much and what protein of grain to use. You may only be able to offer a handful of grain at a time and work your way up to a ½ scoop then to a whole scoop at a time. It must be increased slowly to allow for the horses stomach and system to be able to handle it. If the horse has been starved and their system has started shutting down, the horse can only handle little meals. Like a person that has been starved, they might want a steak, but their stomach says oh no, just light food for a while thanks. You may find that you will need to feed the horse 6 times a day – maybe 4 times a day, but a regular schedule is necessary and eventually you will be able to cut down the number of feedings and up the quantity of each meal.

No matter what age horse you are dealing with free choice hay is a must. Yes, they will throw it all over the stall and make a mess. But the main thing is that they have the hay to help get their system working again and you want their system working all the time to get that weight back. You may need to go to a softer hay when dealing with older horses – orchard grass works well as it does not get too stemmy and is easier for them to pick out the soft leaves. Basic rule of thumb for hay is a bale a day per horse. There are several products on the market that is actually hay cut into 1" pieces. This can be left in a tub free choice just like regular hay and is easier for them to eat because it is small pieces. Make sure whatever hay you feed that it is not moldy or dusty. Moldy hay may make your horse sick. Also, make sure the hay does not have thorns and trash. You wouldn't want to stick your face in it – why expect your horse to?

If you need to get weight on a horse you want high fiber content and high fat. Wheat germ oil is high in fat = a little on the feed will help. Buckeye feed has a product called Ultimate Finish – it is 20% fat and you just put a handful on each meal. Dynamite has a product called Dynapro. It makes the environment in the hindgut friendly for the good bacteria to grow so the horse can get the most benefit out of what he eats.

If the horse is thin and it is winter just putting a blanket on him will help keep his body heat in. You don't want him burning up his meals just keeping himself warm. It's an easy fix to a problem that could cause other problems.

Teeth

Have your Vet check your horse's teeth. This will give you a better idea of the horse's age and a clue to the care needed. Also, if the teeth need to be floated your Vet can do that for you. Without a grinding surface the grain goes in, but cannot be broken up so the stomach can absorb it. The grin will come out in the manure whole and the horse gets no nutrition. Your horse can have other problems that are caused by bad teeth. He could have a cracked tooth,

or an abscessed tooth, or a tooth could have a rough edge on it and be cutting into the inside of his mouth. He could have a molar that grew 1½ inches into his upper gum and had to be snipped so he could open his mouth. It's a good move to have the Vet there at the same time if you are using a dentist so if the horse needs to be tranquilized you can get it all done at once. Horses that have sore mouths are not always cooperative, again, relate to how you feel when you have a toothache!

Eyes and Nose

Eyes should be clear with no swelling or discharge. Your Vet can tell you if there are any problems with cataract or moon blindness if you see any film in the eye. If the horse seems to have some eye problems an aspirin bolus a day or sometimes even just ½ a bolus will help keep it under control. Check for discharge from the nose; Thick yellow discharge could be a cold. Have your Vet check it out.

Coats and Sores

A bath may be in order – use a bucket and sponge and work slowly – if weather permits. A betadine/aloe shampoo will do wonders. Bathing the horse may also make it easier to see what you have to work with. Any unusual swelling or sores should be thoroughly cleaned out and inspected. Remember – if it is a “SORE” – it is SORE! Be gentle. A sulfur-based salve will help draw out any infections. Any deep wounds need to be kept open so they can drain and heal from the inside out. You do not want the outside to seal over and keep the infection inside to fester and break out again in another location.

Rain Rot

A by-product of pollution. It is caused by the rain mixing with the dirt and oil in the hair. This clogs up the pores and forms a type of scab. With no air to the skin, infection sets in and causes pus underneath the scabs. A sulfur salve will soften the scabs making removal easier and less painful to the horse. Continue to apply the salve as it will keep the rain rot from spreading and help new hair growth. Regular brushing and grooming can keep this under control. Remember if the horse is skinny use a soft brush because there is no meat between their skin and their bones. If not tended to, rain rot will not just go away. It will, however continue to spread and before you know it you will have a bald horse. If you find it – fix it!

If the horse you are working with has been starved, don't be surprised that when they shed out their hair is a different color and they may look like a plucked chicken for a while. Their hair may come out in big clumps, but it's ok, it'll grow back in shiny from all the good nutrition they are now getting.

Your horse should shed with the seasons. If the winter hair doesn't shed worming may help. A thick winter coat can hide a thin body and many other problems. Normal coats are slick and shiny – if not consult with your Vet as there may be other problems. Your horse's body, mane and tail need to be brushed to keep it clean and to keep burrs from tangling the hair. Do not cut the forelock, mane or tail with scissors – the horses depend on their manes and tails to protect them from flies. If the horse you are dealing with has burrs matted in their mane and tail – don't worry, there's an easy way to fix it. Baby oil. Just put some in your hands and rub it into the tail a few times and comb gently, and before you know it the burrs will be gone.

Worming

Worming a horse that has not been kept on any regular worming schedule can be tricky. The natural response would be to give the horse a strong wormer that would kill all the parasites. This could be dangerous. You must remember that the horse is in a weakened condition and that by killing all those worms at one time could prove too much for his system. Dead worms produce a protein that is foreign to the horse's system. It could cause hives or could throw your horse into shock. Bodies of dead worms could also clog arteries and veins causing other problems. Proceed a step at a time and things will be easier for the horse.

First, use a wormer that only kills Strongids. That will kill off a portion of the worms. Wait 2-4 weeks (depending on the weakened state of the horse) and then use an Ivermectin wormer. That will kill everything. Doing it in stages is much safer. If your horse still does not respond by gaining weight ask your Vet how to proceed. A “wormy” horse has several distinctive signs: lack of weight on the top line and obviously large belly, long, thin wispy hair around the sides and stomach, and/or eating enough food but not gaining any weight. After worming, that extra hair should fall out and a sleek, shiny coat will be evident. Winter hair that does not shed could also be a sign of a thyroid or pituitary problem in an older horse and your Vet can advise you how to proceed.