

The stages of grief

There are many stages of grief, and not everyone experiences them all or in the same order. You may experience denial, anger, guilt, depression, and acceptance and resolution.

Your first reaction may be

denial—denial that your horse has died or that death is imminent. Denial may begin when you first learn the seriousness of your horse's illness or injuries. Often, the more sudden the death, the more difficult the loss is to accept.

Anger and guilt often follow denial. Your anger may be directed toward people you normally love and respect, including your family and your veterinarian. People coping with death will often say things that they do not really mean, perhaps hurting those whom they do not mean to hurt. You may feel guilty or blame others for not recognizing the illness earlier, for not doing something sooner, for not being able to afford other types of or further treatment, or for being careless and allowing the horse to be injured.

Depression is also part of the range of emotions experienced after the death of a special animal. The tears flow, there are knots in your stomach, and you are drained of all your energy. Day-to-day tasks can seem impossible to perform. Sometimes you may even ask yourself if you can go on without your horse. The answer is yes, but there are times when special assistance may be helpful in dealing with your loss.

Eventually, you will come to terms with your feelings. You can begin to **resolve and accept** your horse's death. Even when you have reached resolution and acceptance, feelings of anger, denial, guilt, and depression may reappear. If this does happen, these feelings will usually be less intense, and with time will be replaced with fond memories.

Although the stages of grief apply fairly universally, grieving is always a personal process. Some people take longer than others to come to terms with denial, anger, guilt, and depression, and each loss is different. If you understand that these are normal reactions, you

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will be better prepared to cope with your feelings and to help others face theirs. Family members should be reassured that sorrow and grief are normal and natural responses to death.

They may not understand

Sometimes well-meaning family and friends may not realize how important your horse was to you or the intensity of your grief. Comments they make may seem cruel and uncaring. Be honest with yourself and others about how you feel. If despair mounts, talk to someone who will listen to your feelings about the loss of your horse. Talk about your sorrow, but also the fun times you and the horse spent together, the activities you enjoyed, and the memories that are meaningful.

The hurt is so deep

If you or a family member have great difficulty in accepting your horse's death and cannot resolve feelings of grief and sorrow, you may want to discuss these feelings with a person who is trained to understand the grieving process. Your veterinarian certainly understands the relationship you have lost and may be able to suggest support groups and helplines, grief counselors, clergymen, social workers, physicians, or psychologists who can help.

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How Do I Know It Is Time?



Equine Euthanasia

Perhaps the kindest thing you can do for a horse that is extremely ill, severely injured, lame, or dangerous is to have your veterinarian induce its death quickly and humanely through euthanasia. Your decision to have your horse euthanized is a serious one, and is seldom easy to make.

What should I do?

Your relationship with your horse is special and may be different with each horse you have. When you acquired your horse, you assumed responsibility for its health and welfare. Owners are sometimes faced with making life-or-death decisions for their animals. Such a decision may become necessary for the welfare of your horse and your family.

Although a personal decision, it need not be a solitary one. Your veterinarian and your family and close friends can help you make the right decision. Consider not only what is best for your horse, but also what is best for you and your family. Quality of life is important for horses and people alike.

How will I know when?

If your horse can no longer experience the things it once enjoyed, cannot respond to you in its usual ways, appears to be experiencing more pain than pleasure, is terminally ill or critically injured, or if the financial or emotional cost of treatment is



beyond your means, you may need to consider euthanasia. Your veterinarian is best qualified to examine and evaluate your horse's condition and to discuss with you potential disabilities and long-term problems.

Because your veterinarian cannot make the euthanasia decision for you, you need to understand your horse's condition. If you do not understand the diagnosis or the implications for your horse's future, ask to have them explained again. Rarely will the situation require an immediate decision and usually you will have some time to review the facts before making one.

Once the decision for euthanasia has been made, you may wish to discuss the final disposition of your horse's body with your veterinarian and your family. Your veterinarian can provide information about burial, removal, cremation, and other alternatives.

What if the horse is healthy?

If your horse has become dangerous, unmanageable, unserviceable, or difficult to maintain, euthanasia may be necessary. Some undesirable and abnormal behavior can be modified, so it is important to discuss these situations with your veterinarian. Economic, emotional, and space limitations may also force an owner to consider euthanasia for a horse if a suitable home cannot be found. Discussing all possible alternatives with friends, family, and your veterinarian will help you feel more comfortable with your decision.

How do I tell my family?

Family members may be aware of the horse's problems. You should review the information you have received from your veterinarian with them. Long-term medical care can be a burden that you and your family may be unable to bear emotionally or financially, and this should be discussed

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openly and honestly. Encourage family members to express their thoughts and feelings. Even if you have reached a decision, it is important that family members, especially children, have their thoughts and feelings considered.

Children have special relationships with animals. Excluding or protecting children from this decision-making process because they are thought to be too young to understand may only complicate and prolong their grief process. Children respect straightforward, truthful, and simple answers. If they are prepared adequately, children usually are able to accept an animal's death.

Even if you have reached a decision, it is important that family members, especially children, have their thoughts and feelings considered.



How can I say goodbye?

Saying goodbye is an important step in managing the natural and healthy feelings of grief, sorrow, and loss. Your horse is an important part of your life, and it is natural to feel you are losing a friend or companion, because you are.

Once the euthanasia decision has been made, you and other family members may want to say goodbye to your horse. Spending some special time with your horse may be appropriate. Family members may want to be alone with the horse. Once all the necessary information is available and the decision has been made, it is best not to wait too long before having your horse euthanized. Farewells are always difficult.

Will it be painless?

When the horse is euthanized, death will be quick and painless. If the horse is standing when the death-inducing drug is given, the horse will become unconscious and unable to sense fear or pain while still standing. After the horse has fallen to the ground, unconscious, death will ensue.

How can I face the loss?

After your horse has died, it is natural and normal to feel grief and sorrow. For some people, spending some time with the horse after euthanasia is helpful. The grieving process includes accepting the reality of your loss, accepting that the loss and accompanying feelings are painful, and adjusting to your new life that no longer includes your horse. By understanding the grieving process, you will be better prepared to manage your grief and to help others in the family who share this loss.

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Should I get another horse?

The death of a horse can upset you emotionally, especially when euthanasia is involved. Some people may feel they would never want to own another horse. For others, a new horse may help them recover from the loss more quickly. Just as grief is a personal experience, the decision of when, if ever, to bring a new horse into your life is a personal one. If a family member is having difficulty accepting the horse's death, getting a new horse before that person has resolved his or her grief may imply that the life of the deceased animal was unworthy of the grief that is still being felt. Family members should agree on the appropriate time to acquire a new horse. Although you can never replace the horse you lost, you can obtain another to share your life.

Remembering your horse

Death is part of the life-cycle. It cannot be avoided, but understanding and compassion can help you, your family, and your friends manage the grief associated with it. Try to recall



and treasure the good times you spent with your horse. You may also wish to establish a memorial of some type or contribute to a charity in honor of your horse.

What makes the grief process so complicated?