

Horse&Rider **MONTHLY**

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Horse Life



TRAIN / HEALTH



TRAIN

Senior Performance Horse

DO YOU OWN A VETERAN SHOW HORSE?

Well-trained senior horses are among the most rewarding of all mounts when it comes to competitive success and the sheer enjoyment of riding. For that reason, they're worthy of special consideration in how you ride and manage them.

Here, I'll share the approach that's working well with a senior performance horse in my barn: Smart Like Steady, or "Oscar," a 16-year-old Quarter Horse. We acquired Oscar in 2017, and in 2018 my wife Robyn showed him successfully in the World Equestrian Games, where he was the oldest equine competitor. He was also the most senior horse in the non-pro division at the 2019 Run for a Million reining.

To learn how to apply Oscar's special-care plan to your good senior horse, read on.

1. If it ain't broke....

With a well-trained senior horse you've acquired, think in terms of adapting your riding to fit his program, rather than the other way around. If it's something that's simply a difference in, say, cueing (as in how you ask for a lead change), stick with what the horse already knows. Sometimes when you change "just that one thing," it can inadvertently change something else, and now you have an issue to deal with.

If he's been doing his job well, then you make the change to go along with his program.

2. Let him have his quirks.

Oscar is a cinchy sort of horse. If you were to draw up the cinch suddenly, he might even flip over backward. Or you'd think by looking at him that he was somehow "broken" and could no longer walk. So we accommodate that quirk of his by cinching him up extremely gradually, in tiny increments.

If he were a younger horse, maybe we'd try to resolve this issue. But in deference to his age and otherwise good behavior, we just go along with it and cinch him up the way he prefers. This degree of indulgence is what a senior performer deserves.

3. Work **with** him to fix problems.

Yes, I did say to accommodate a senior's "issues" to the extent possible. But if he has a problem that does require fixing, go about it in a way that honors his experience and seniority.

For example, Oscar had the problem (not uncommon in reining horses) of overbridling—that is, over-flexing vertically when we picked up on the reins. Rather than focusing directly on his head carriage, we worked him in a variety of exercises, including zigzag leg-yielding, that naturally required him to maintain a correct degree of

★ Your veteran show partner deserves a little special consideration. Here's what a senior performance horse needs to keep competing in top form.



PHOTO BY DEAD OR ALIVE, COURTESY OF WARWICK SCHILLER

flexion through his neck. (For details on how we did it, see the "Watch Warwick" note at the top of this page.)

4. Don't over-drill.

This caveat is true for any horse, but especially with a senior mount that knows his job well. Too much repetition can bring on resentment and sourness in a veteran. Instead, try working your veteran show horse in a different discipline to change things up and keep him fresh.

With Oscar, we did very little reining to prepare him for competition, opting instead for a variety of dressage maneuvers to keep him tuned and responsive.

Trail rides and obstacle work are also beneficial—anything to keep your veteran active without drilling on him.

5. Provide '10-year-old-girl training.'

That's what I call just hanging out with a horse without asking anything of him. Take him for a walk in hand, for example, and let him eat grass. Just be his good friend.

Typically with older horses, whenever we come for them, we're going to ask something of them. So occasionally it's good just to let your veteran relax and enjoy being with you.

6. 'Forage, friends, freedom.'

Pamper your good senior horse by letting him live like a horse to the extent possible. Oscar was in a stall most of his life, but now he has the luxury of living outside, with our other reiner as a pasture-mate. Here in California we don't have year-round grass, but we use slow-feed hay nets to extend our horses' "chew time"—which keeps them content and wards off ulcers.

Having access to forage, friends, and freedom encourages the socializing and other natural behaviors that can keep your older horse mentally sound and all-around happy. And that, as much as anything, will keep him performing at his best. ★



HEALTH

Senior Horse Care Checklist

SENIOR HORSES—those in their midteens and older—Can continue to live healthy, productive lives if given the special care they need. We asked Barb Crabbe, DVM, *Horse&Rider* magazine's consulting veterinarian for her advice. She stressed that older equines need all the same basic care other horses do, including regular vaccinations and deworming, plus routine hoof care. Beyond that, here's what she recommends you do to keep your senior horse going strong.

Keep him moving.

As with humans, exercise benefits an aging horse in multiple ways, including keeping muscles strong and joints operative (which preserves his ability to rise from the ground after resting). Full-time turnout (with appropriate pasture mates that won't haze or injure him) is ideal. With under-saddle exercise, keep expectations realistic. A 25-year-old horse is roughly comparable to a 75- to 100-year-old human. And while there are some 80-year-old humans running marathons, many others are already in wheelchairs. So stay aware of your own senior horse's changing capabilities and energy levels as you continue to ride him.



PHOTO BY MICHAELA JAYCOX

Mind those teeth.

Tooth problems, common in older horses, can contribute to malnutrition, weight loss, and colic. Periodontal disease is also a hazard as horses age. Schedule once- or twice-a-year checks by an equine dentist or veterinarian, and watch for trouble signs: difficulty chewing, dropping food, a bad smell from the mouth.

Feed with care.

The simplest way to achieve good nutrition for your older horse is by providing a commercial feed specially formulated for senior horses. Feed such pellets in addition to forage (grass or hay); or, if the horse has severe dental problems, use the product as a complete feed, moistening with water as necessary.

Get him vet-checked.

Your vet can watch for conditions and diseases common to older horses, including digestive difficulties, Cushing's

★ Older equines need all the same basic care other horses do, including regular vaccinations and deworming, plus routine hoof care.

disease, insulin resistance, melanomas, and kidney or liver problems. Schedule vet visits once or, even better, twice a year.

Watch for vulnerabilities.

Older horses have decreased reserves and increased susceptibility to serious infections and colic caused by dehydration or impaction. They're also more attractive to biting insects, and may be more sensitive to temperature extremes (though you needn't necessarily blanket your senior horse except in the most extreme cold- see below). Watch for signs of illness, and act promptly; provide adequate pest protection; and make sure your oldster

has accessible shelter (where other horses won't drive him away).

Ease the joint pain.

Work with your vet to address arthritis and other bone/joint difficulties. Joint-health supplements (containing glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, and MSM) and judicious use of the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory

bute at your vet's discretion may be helpful. (Note that the overuse of bute can cause kidney and gastrointestinal problems.)

Groom him.

A daily grooming promotes circulation, helps head off skin problems, and enables you to catch the start of small troubles before they become problematic. Especially during the winter, run your hand over your senior horse's barrel regularly to check for ribbiness that might not show under a long haircoat.

A word about blankets:

If severe weather dictates that you blanket your older horse, be sure to remove and replace the blanket once a day to check for trouble. In my practice in the Northwest, I see more problems from older horses wearing blankets that never get removed, resulting in injuries and bad blanket rubs or sometimes severe undetected weight loss. Many older horses living in pastures with good shelters and plenty of fiber (the digestion of which helps generate warmth) don't need blanketing. If you're in doubt, ask your vet. ★

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Advances in equine health care have extended your horse's potential lifespan. What should you expect as he grows older?

30
IS THE NEW
20

PHOTO BY MALLORY BEINBORN MAY

Tigger's 32 this year! Doesn't he look great?" my client proclaims. "He does seem to be slowing down just a little bit though—especially on long trail rides. Sometimes he even seems a little sore. What can I do to keep him going?"

"Wow," I think. "Age 32 and slowing down? I remember when we thought 20 was old. Now my clients want to know how to keep a 30-year-old horse moving down the trail."

With advances in equine medical care, your horse has a much better chance of leading a happy and productive life well into his third (or even fourth) decade than his predecessors did 20 years ago. That's right: 30 really is the new 20.

In this article, I'll tell you about five major factors that have revolutionized your horse's potential to live a healthy and productive life as a super-senior. Along the way, I'll identify signs he might need help. Finally, I'll give you the tools to determine when enough is enough when it comes to your efforts to keep him going.

Five Longevity Boosters

Why are horses living longer, healthier lives than ever before? The following five factors have each clearly played a role.

Nutrition

Then: Decades ago, your horse's daily ration consisted of hay and grain, with a multivitamin thrown in for good measure. Hay was chosen based on availability and outward appearance. If it was green and clean, it was probably good enough. Grain typically consisted of oats, corn, and barley—either plain or mixed with molasses in a sweet feed or a livestock blend. As horses aged and chewing became difficult, the best available options might've included beet pulp, a bran mash, or soaked alfalfa pellets.

Now: "Grain" has been replaced by "concentrates," or combination feeds carefully designed by equine nutritionists to meet your horse's specific needs, especially for seniors.

Is he approaching 20? Choose one of many easily chewable, high-protein

senior feeds balanced with vitamins and minerals to meet his increasing demands. Has he been diagnosed with equine metabolic syndrome or "insulin resistance"? You can find a low-carbohydrate concentrate that might help him. Add to that the wide variety of supplements available to help with any health condition—from arthritis to airway disease—and it's no wonder your horse's condition is better than ever.

Of course, good-quality hay and pasture remain the most important parts of any horse's diet, and you can run a hay analysis to determine which forage provides the best nutrition for your horse. Science has even helped hay growers produce different types of hay to meet different nutritional demands.

What to watch for: How can you tell if your horse needs a diet adjustment as he grows older? First and foremost, keep an eye on his condition. If he's losing weight, he may need a higher-calorie concentrate. If you notice a lack of muscling along his topline, it might be time to increase the protein in his diet.



Advances in equine dentistry could be the most influential longevity booster for senior horses. A yearly dental exam allows your vet to recognize potential problems and remove rotten teeth—without general anesthesia.

PHOTO BY SHELLEY PAULSON

Does he have trouble chewing? Look for an easy-to-chew senior diet designed to meet all of his needs, even if he can't eat hay. Finally, if your vet diagnoses a medical condition such as pituitary pars intermediary dysfunction (PPID, also called Cushing's disease) or kidney failure, a specially designed diet can help improve your horse's health.

Dentistry

Then: Thirty years ago, your horse had his teeth floated with a handheld file, usually for the first time when his age was well into the double digits. Your vet or dentist filed down the sharp edges that formed along the outside of his upper molars and inside of his lower molars every year or two. Rotten teeth could be extracted, but this was often a complicated procedure that required general anesthesia. Not many other dental treatments were available.

Now: Perhaps nothing in equine veterinary care has changed more than dentistry. These days, your horse's dental care begins when he's just a baby. Most dental practitioners recommend a first dental exam at 1 or 2 years of age to check for baby teeth your horse might not be losing normally. By identifying and treating these problems early, your vet can prevent problems from developing as your horse matures.

A dental exam and balancing is typically recommended every year. Your practitioner inserts a speculum to hold your horse's mouth open and ensure that every tooth can be examined and treated. Power tools expedite adjustments and can correct major problems arising from missing teeth or other misalignments. As your horse grows older, your vet can recognize and treat periodontal disease or even perform a root canal to save a damaged tooth. And better tools mean most rotten or dam-

aged teeth can be removed with your horse standing up, eliminating the need for general anesthesia.

What to watch for: A yearly dental exam allows your vet to recognize and treat any dental abnormalities before they cause a serious problem. If you notice your horse has a difficult time chewing, he's "quidding" (spitting out balls of feed), or you detect a foul odor coming from his mouth between exams, it's time to make a call. Thanks to senior diets, even older horses with no teeth can thrive for many years. There's no doubt about it: Improved dental care has a major impact on your horse's longevity.

Parasite Control

Then: Decades ago, your veterinarian visited your farm once or twice each year to administer a toxic substance directly into your horse's stomach through a nasogastric tube. Very few deworming medications were available, and although they were effective against the parasites, they were also hard on your horse.

Over time, medications were developed that could be administered orally, first as a pellet added to your horse's feed, and later in a paste formulation that helped ensure your horse got a full dose with every treatment.

Deworming programs involved giving these medications every other month, targeting primarily the large strongyle, a parasite that causes severe damage with devastating health consequences.

Now: The good news is that the large strongyle has largely been eliminated as a health threat, leaving other, less-damaging parasites such as the small strongyle as the focus of deworming programs. The bad news is that these remaining parasites have developed resistance to deworming medications.

Modern deworming programs are strategically designed to control para-

site populations while protecting the effectiveness of available dewormers. Well-designed programs involve regular monitoring of your horse's parasite load through fecal egg counts, and only call for deworming twice per year unless your horse has poor natural immunity and harbors a high parasite load. Control programs have also begun to recognize and target equine tapeworms that can cause serious colic episodes.

Finally, better husbandry—such as pasture cleaning, pasture rotation, and age-group segregation—helps minimize parasitic impact and encourages a healthier environment for your horse overall.

What to watch for: If you follow recommendations for strategic parasite control, you can avoid the consequences of parasite problems altogether. High fecal egg counts will immediately identify problems with resistance to dewormers and shortcomings in your horsekeeping practices. Even if you're doing everything right, parasites can be a problem. If your horse loses weight, experiences chronic diarrhea, has colic episodes, or simply seems unthrifty, it might mean it's time to discuss the possibility of parasite problems with your veterinarian. Additional fecal egg-count testing might be recommended.

Diagnosing and Treating PPID (Cushing's Disease)

Then: Diagnosed in humans for over a century, the disease then known as Cushing's wasn't recognized in horses until the 1960s. For many years, a diagnosis depended on recognizing clinical signs such as a long haircoat and loss of muscle tone. If Cushing's was suspected, your vet might've recommended routine blood work to detect an increased glucose level. No specific treatment was available; Cushing's management included body clipping, vigilant hoof care to reduce risk of laminitis, and careful monitoring for skin infections that can accompany the disease.

Now: Now more specifically named, PPID can be diagnosed with a blood test,

These days, your horse's dental care begins when he's just a baby.

and medications are available to help control symptoms. Most commonly, your vet will perform a test that measures ACTH, a hormone that's elevated in horses with PPID, to make the diagnosis. Other tests are available, including a stimulation test that's even more sensitive and can specifically diagnose PPID earlier in horses showing symptoms. Although the disease can't be cured, early diagnosis and specific treatment helps control symptoms, which might help your horse live a longer, healthier life.

What to watch for: Estimates say that 20 percent of horses older than age 15 have PPID. With that in mind, it makes sense to put it on your radar simply because your horse is growing older. Consider including a screening test as a part of your annual health-care plan. If your horse develops a long, curly hair coat that doesn't shed out in the spring; chronic skin infections; or recurrent dental problems, it might also be time to request a test.

If your horse is diagnosed with PPID, don't delay in starting the recommended treatment. Pay attention to ongoing research about this disease to keep yourself informed. Veterinarians and researchers are learning more about PPID every day.

Lameness Diagnosis and Treatment

Then: Just like humans, previous injuries and a lifetime of wear and tear can haunt your horse as he grows older. In decades past, a lameness diagnosis often depended on a good clinical exam, nerve blocks, and possibly some radiographs. Treatment was typically limited to rest, some kind of corrective shoeing, and perhaps a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medication (such as phenylbutazone, commonly referred to as "bute"). Controlled rehabilitation programs following injuries were uncommon, and many a suspected tendon injury was managed with a year of turnout—nothing more. Alternative therapies, such as

acupuncture, shockwave therapy, and bodywork to help maintain soundness, weren't widely available to horse owners. Preventive treatments were few and far between. Horses depended on good, old-fashioned horsemanship to keep them sound.

Now: Good, old-fashioned horsemanship is still important, but these days the ability to specifically diagnose a lameness and apply a range of targeted treatments mean horses are staying sounder, longer. If your horse experiences an injury, diagnostic tests—such as detailed ultrasound examinations, nuclear scintigraphy, and MRI—provide a good chance of precisely identifying the specific damage. With a precise diagnosis, you can take advantage of injury-specific treatments, including platelet-rich plasma and stem-cell therapy. This means a better outcome, and a better chance your horse will heal completely so his injury won't come back to haunt him as he ages, which is vital for senior horses to thrive.

Advances in surgical techniques also play a role in successful treatment, ranging from the arthroscopic cleanup of an osteochondrosis lesion in a young horse that'll allow him to stay sound to the repair of a broken bone following a catastrophic injury.

Finally, the wide range of preventive therapies available means your horse is less likely to be injured in the first place and gives you tools to help keep him comfortable as he ages.

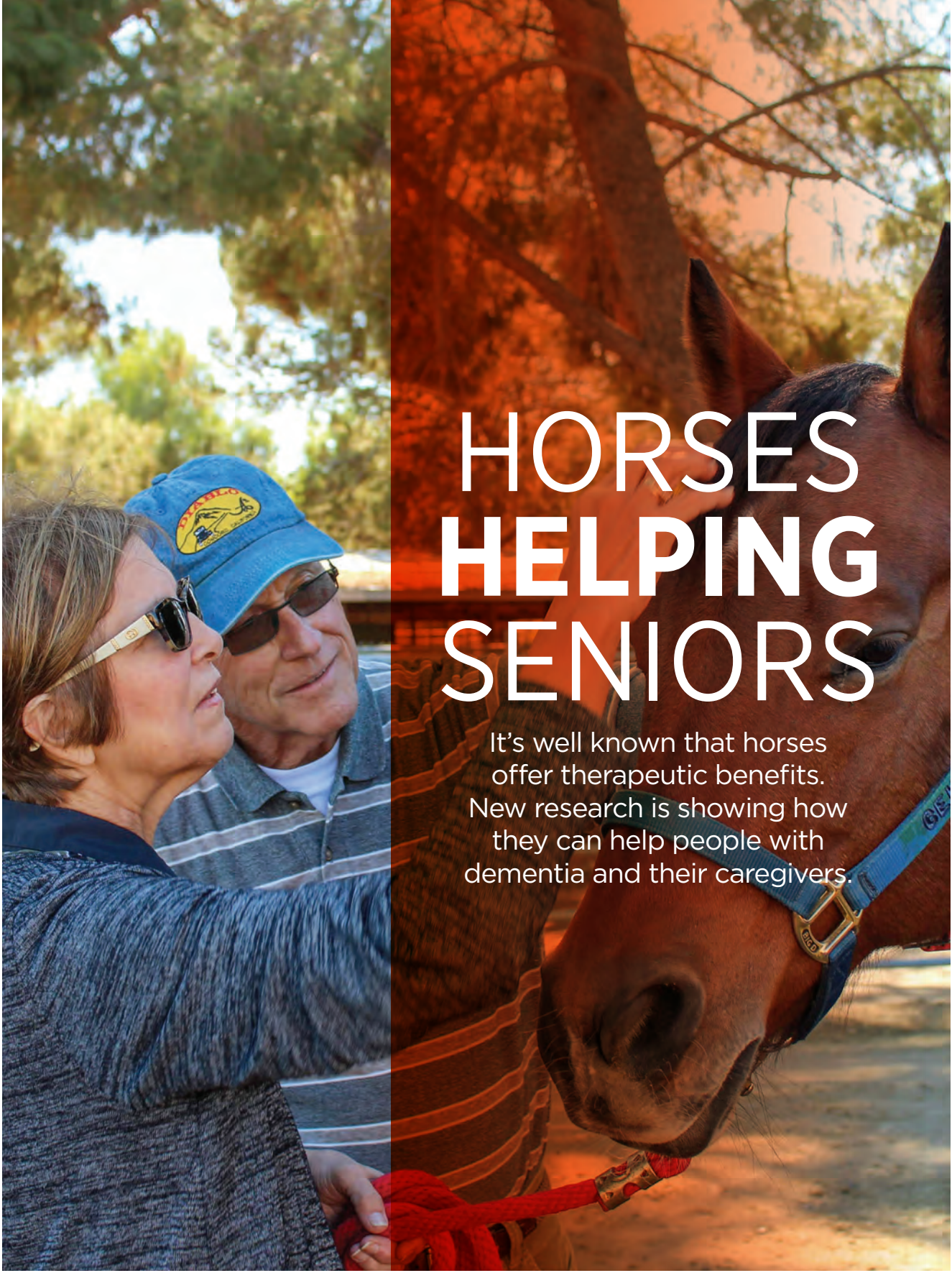
What to watch for: Ask your vet to perform a yearly soundness evaluation as your horse grows older. This will allow you to identify smoldering injuries as early as possible and take advantage of all of the diagnostic tools and treatment options available. You can also discuss the appropriate time to initiate any preventive therapies your vet might recommend.

With all that's now available, it's no wonder your horse could still be traveling down the trail well into his 30s. No doubt about it, 30 is the new 20. ★

How Much Is Too Much?

While most of the time it's a good thing that our horses are staying healthy into their golden years, there are times when I find myself wondering about our expectations for our aging partners. Is it fair to expect a 30-year-old horse that's stiff and sore to tackle mountainous terrain on a rigorous trail ride? Or for a horse in his mid-20s to hit the road traveling on a busy show circuit? Sometimes yes; sometimes no. Deciding when it's time to call it quits is one of the hardest decisions horse owners face.

Think of it this way. When you're riding your 30-year-old horse, it's a lot like taking your 90-year-old grandmother on a hike. And while some in their 90s might relish the idea, most would probably prefer a somewhat less-demanding activity. If your 32-year-old horse seems to be "slowing down," give him a break! Instead of asking what you can do to keep him going, consider what he might like to do instead.



HORSES HELPING SENIORS

It's well known that horses offer therapeutic benefits. New research is showing how they can help people with dementia and their caregivers.

Thinking back, Gloria Passarella estimates her husband, Rich, has been in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's for about 10 years. Subtle changes in his personality, forgetfulness, and less excitement about things that once interested him offered small clues that something was changing.

Every 65 seconds, someone in the United States develops dementia, according to the Alzheimer's Association. Medical advances have helped doctors diagnose dementia much earlier, but families are often faced with the "now what?" effect.

After Rich was diagnosed, Gloria was open to trying anything to help her husband, even if it wasn't conventional or proven. When a friend recommended the Connected Horse, Gloria jumped at the opportunity. The Connected Horse is a non-profit organization founded by lifelong California-based horsewomen Nancy Schier Anzelmo and Paula Hertel. Both have dedicated their professional careers to caring for older adults and memory care residents. The Connected Horse is designed to facilitate the journey people with dementia and their care partners experience after diagnosis.

During the past two years, Gloria and Rich have completed three different sessions of the Connected Horse program. They enrolled in a multi-week program that included regular extended trips to the barn and embarked on an experience that has changed their lives and their relationship.

"I'd only been on a horse one time in my life. It was years ago, a ride on the beach in Mexico," she said. "I've been really open to finding alternative care options to benefit Rich, and so we signed up. I never thought I'd benefit from it as much as he would."

A DEVASTATING DISEASE

Chances are you know someone—a close family member or friend—who's been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or dementia. Nearly six million people in United States are living with the disease,

according to the Alzheimer's Association. That figure will nearly triple in 30 years if current rates continue.

It's the sixth-leading cause of death among Americans. It kills more people than breast and prostate cancer combined. And it's the only leading cause of death that essentially has no effective treatment.

"This means that right now most of what we have in terms of treatment is palliative and focused on helping

ments, and have owned horses nearly all their lives. In 2015, they founded the Connected Horse a nonprofit organization focused on equine-guided services for people living with a dementia diagnosis and their care partners.

The program consists of horse-assisted learning activities and discussion groups for people with memory loss, mild cognitive impairment, and early-stage dementia diagnoses and their care partners. All the work is done from



Something as simple as cleaning a hoof can help restore self-worth and provide a feeling of togetherness.

those affected by the disease (patients and their caregivers) maintain a good quality of life and cope as effectively as possible," said Sarah Tomaszewski Farias, Ph.D., ABPP-CN, a professor in the department of neurology at the University of California, Davis, and principal investigator in the Connected Horse Research project at UC Davis School of Medicine, Alzheimer's Disease Center.

That's exactly what Anzelmo and Hertel are striving to accomplish. Both women have nearly 30 years' experience working with seniors, specifically those with memory and cognitive impair-

the ground, and participants don't need prior horse experience.

"We're not teaching horsemanship," Hertel said. "We're teaching folks the importance of non-verbal negotiation and working through a struggle."

Instead of horsemanship lessons, the sessions start with a sensory walk. This encourages participants to become more aware of what's around them and orients them with what it's like to be around and inside a barn. Participants spend time outside, taking deep breaths and focusing on being present in the moment.

"Feeling a sense of connection with the earth is just one tool that I took away from the program. It has helped me stay calm and centered in the middle of a crisis. I'm able to regroup easier with more clarity of mind," said Gloria.

The therapeutic sessions last a few hours, and the activities progress to an "over the fence" interaction where participants get up close and personal while the horse is still in a stall or paddock. Eventually they move on to grooming and leading. By the end, participants are doing liberty work with a horse in a round pen.

For centuries horses have relied on their abilities to adapt to change, sense their environment, and use the interdependence of the herd to thrive. Connected Horse facilitators bring awareness to these instinctual characteristics while encouraging participants to build their own awareness regarding their somatic and emotional responses, Hertel explained.

"The connections between people and horses have proven to be therapeutic in many populations due to the nonjudgmental, unconditional interactions horses offer to each other and humans," Anzelmo said. "The human-horse connection is especially powerful as the nonverbal responses and behaviors of horses provide immediate feedback and often act as mirrors to participants to provide clarity, strength, and healing."

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

Alzheimer's has a considerable impact caregivers. As individuals with dementia become more impaired and require more care and supervision it takes a big toll on the caregiver. Stress, tension, and sometimes resentment at having lost an identity, other than being a caregiver, creep in.

"The disease can really alter the relationship between the person with dementia and their caregiver—most often a spouse or adult child," said Dr. Tomaszewski Farias.



It's not just those with dementia who benefit from time with horses. Caretakers like Gloria find a sense of freedom.

Typically, research studies and therapy sessions separate the care partner from the person with dementia. Hertel and Anzelmo believe it's important to keep both individuals together because the disease progression and changing relationship dynamic is a shared journey.

Because both the caregiver and the person with dementia are participants in the Connected Horse program, their ages range from 25 to 94. The caregiver roles vary from a spouse to an adult child to a partner to a sibling to a close friend. Working with the horses erases the hierarchy and puts both the caregiver and the person with dementia on the same playing field.

"All of the titles associated with age and who is who go away with the horse," Anzelmo said.

For Gloria, the Connected Horse sessions provided a sense of freedom. For the 2½ hours she and Rich interacted with the horses, she didn't have to worry about his well-being or his safety. As Rich's disease has progressed, he's increasingly looked to Gloria to affirm the safety of a situation. As his caregiver, she is increasingly on watch.

"It was a real indulgence and relaxation," she said. "There was always a facilitator present with each of us, so I didn't have to always be looking out for situations."

The sessions also remind the caregiver that it's okay to find time for themselves, even while providing care for a loved one.

"One gentleman had been a woodworker but put it away because he had become the caretaker for his wife," Anzelmo said. "Through working with the horses, he realized the importance of having his own life and identity and started looking for a way to fit it back in."

While the caregiver is learning that he or she doesn't always have to be protective, the person with dementia is discovering that he or she is still a whole person who's not labeled by disease. As the disease progresses, an individual is forced to give up independence. Many eventually lose confidence in themselves. The simple act of cleaning out a horse's hoof activates and restores a person's feeling of self worth.

One male participant with advanced Alzheimer's had been a painter before the disease crept in. He spent almost 20 minutes painstakingly cleaning every inch of the hoof.

"Our hypothesis is that it made this individual feel useful again to be able to finish the job," Anzelmo said. "He touched every part of the horse's hoof to get the rocks out. It was like he was painting the hoof."

HEALING THE HORSES

Horses are often considered the healers in these types of therapeutic programs. The emphasis is usually on how much joy the horse brings to a person. But the Connected Horse is different. It's also giving horses the opportunity to "be healed," too. Many of the Connected Horse sessions take place at UC Davis using the school-owned horses, most of which are seniors. Claudia Sonder, DVM, Emeritus Director at UC Davis Center for Equine Health helped spearhead the research and has been an advocate for this program and others that support new roles for all horses in the community.

Hertel recalls one horse in particular, a retired roping horse, that didn't want to be haltered or handled when he first came to the center. After he'd passed his prime in the sport, he'd been ignored. When the center adopted him he was a "grumpy old man." By the end of the program, he was totally engaged, affectionate, and wanted to interact with the participants.

"These older horses, like senior citizens, are often 'put out to pasture,' even though they want to work. It's such a powerful message that just because they are aging doesn't mean they don't have a purpose," Anzelmo said.

The two horsewomen love that they're serving two senior populations at once. Both own geriatric horses of their own. Anzelmo owns two geriatric horses, including one over 30. Hertel's herd of four are all 20-plus. The older horses tend to be quieter and have the perfect temperament for interacting with non-horse people and it gives retired horses a purpose once their competitive careers are over.

"Giving these older horses a job and working with the participants, both care partners and people who have dementia, is part of our goal of erasing

the stigma around aging," Hertel said. "We have a responsibility to look at productivity and place in a different way. Just because a horse or a person can't do what they once did, they still have a societal place and a value."

Anzelmo and Hertel are often asked why they're using horses rather than cats or dogs. Small animals are much easier to manage than horses. The horse-loving duo know that horses' natural instinct as a prey animals makes them much more in tune with their

environment and the people in it.

"Horses are non-judgmental. They just want to connect with the people around them. That sets the tone for the whole workshop," Hertel said.

As any horse person knows, there's

nothing that can replace the experience of quiet time in the barn.

"It's all about being one with the horse," Anzelmo said. "I've worked in memory care units for 30 years, and I go to the barn to make sense of the world after work. Practicing presence with my horses helps me to be more present with those with dementia."

THE FUTURE

Until a cure is found, families need access to programs focused on care and support for people living with dementia and their family members. Specifically, non-clinical programs for early-stage and young-onset dementia are few and far between. Anzelmo and Hertel are hoping to change that with the Connected Horse. But they realize the importance of scientific research to back up what horse people already know and love about horses.

"Horse people know the benefits of just being around horses. The medical field is more skeptical until scientific research shows a connection," Anzel-

mo said. "We're collecting important data to support what horse people already know."

The Connected Horse is more than an experience-based program. The outcomes are being tested through research and scientific study. From 2015 to early 2016, the colleagues and friends concluded phase one of a pilot study at Stanford University in conjunction with its Red Barn Leadership program. The results were promising, although the sample size was small. Quantitative and qualitative indicators showed an overall positive trend in measures of support, burden, stress, and sleep, with a decrease in undesired behaviors and positive increases in communication between the patient and caregiver.

In the fall of 2016, a comparative study was launched at UC Davis School of Medicine, Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, and School of Veterinary Medicine, Center for Equine. Data collection is expected to wrap up in 2019.

"The veterinary and medical school worlds rarely work together," Hertel said. "This research has built a bridge between both schools."

The study is in progress so specific data cannot be released at this time, but early findings suggest the results will provide the medical field with information to validate the important role horses can play to help individuals diagnosed with dementia and their family members. This research data helps secure funding for future workshop experiences and may even one day lead to greater recognition in the medical field, perhaps even becoming an approved therapy recognized by insurance companies. Even without the statistics, there's no doubt the Connected Horse is a life-altering program.

"It was such a gift for Rich and me to share an experience that made us feel connected to one another and to connect with a horse," Gloria said. "It was an empowering experience. The horses showed us a sense of oneness." ★

As any horse person knows, there's nothing that can replace the experience of quiet time in the barn.