

BURNOUT RESCUE

Feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of your at-home horselife? Hang on—help's at hand.

WRITTEN BY
ANNE LANG
ILLUSTRATED BY
NOBEE KANAYAMA

IT WAS YOUR LIFELONG DREAM. For years, you imagined yourself living in the country, with your own horses grazing right outside your window. You finally saved enough money to buy a piece of rural property, and full of hope and happiness, plunged into your brand-new lifestyle.

By now, that very lifestyle also may have plunged you into a life-balance nightmare that you're beginning to fear will never end. We're not surprised—at-home horsekeeping is almost as big a job (and as big an adjustment) as parenting, but without the "escape clauses" of day care, and visits to Grandma's house! Add this responsibility to an already-full schedule, and it'd be no wonder if you were feeling a bit overwhelmed at this point—not to mention guilty about that "is this worth it?" question that keeps bubbling to the surface of your private thoughts.

Please take heart—you're not the only horse lover facing this dilemma, and you don't necessarily have to "chuck it all" to get your life back on track. Most likely, you happen to be in the *burnout* stage of horse ownership—one that almost everyone goes through, sooner or later. In this article, we'll provide you with solutions for coping with, and improving your situation—*right now*, when you may feel you need it most.



COULD THIS BE YOU?

First, let's take a look at your state of mind, to determine whether you are indeed in the throes of burnout. If you can identify with three or more of the following warning signs, you could be suffering from "barn burnout," and be in need of our immediate-rescue tips. Check those burnout symptoms that apply to you:

- You've begun to regard your horses as just one more daily task to be crossed off the list, instead of as a pleasurable hobby.
- You aren't riding much, because your "leisure time" is taken up by horsekeeping maintenance and construction projects.
- You feel that you're performing under par in all facets of your life—that there just aren't enough hours in the day to adequately perform any routine, whether it relates to horses, career, family, or household.
- You're totally thrown for a loop when a minor but unexpected crisis comes along and disrupts your daily routine.
- You feel perpetually guilty that you're not spending enough time with your horses, or that you're neglecting other parts of your life because you do spend so much time with your horses.
- You feel a vague sense of shame because you're unable to live up to the perfect image that you'd always imagined.
- You've gone from being the master of your horses to being their slave—they've gotten spoiled from being waited on hand and foot, without a healthy counterbalance of daily training.
- You feel alone in your stressed-out state—believing that other at-home horsekeepers have everything under control.
- You've stopped talking to your friends on the phone (and long ago stopped seeing them in person), because you believe there's just no time for socializing.
- You can't enjoy a function away from home, even for just a few hours, because you're imagining all kinds of things that could be going wrong during your absence from home.
- You feel exhausted at the end of the day, even though you didn't come close to accomplishing everything on your list.
- You feel paralyzed when confronted with the need to make decisions—large or small.

These are symptoms of someone who *feels* overwhelmed, because he/she is overwhelmed, by the perception of what "must" be done. And here are some self-help steps you can take, to begin to change that perception.

GET A GRIP

To the burned-out, at-home horse owner, we offer the following tips for general

Advice for Potential "At-Homers"

If you're still at the dreaming stage of at-home horse ownership, here are a few "reality bites" you need to consider now, to help minimize the drudgery and financial strain that can lead to eventual burnout:

- **Borrow an expert.** When you're shopping for horse property, take along someone who's experienced at keeping horses at home. He/she can spot trouble areas (poor drainage, inadequate footing, etc.) that you might not recognize. Having to tackle large-scale renovations while trying to get settled in can cause quick burnout.

- **Consider the waste issue.** Minimizing labor minimizes stress. If you have limited acreage, the labor intensity of manure removal will increase with the number of horses you accumulate. Try to acquire enough land to allow you to rotate between two enclosed grazing areas; that way, you can take your time cleaning and clearing the area that's not in use.

- **Look beyond the dazzle.** State-of-the-art facilities, if you can afford them, can save you grief, time and labor. But the more structures you have, the more upkeep you'll have, too—which can leave little time for experiencing horses as fun.

- **Anticipate weather woes.** When choosing horse property, consider your region's harshest seasons/weather trials (rainy winters, arid summers, blizzards, floods, or whatever), and make sure you don't select a property with built-in potential for trouble. If you end up spending most of your time making concessions to the elements after you've brought your horses home, you'll reach the burnout stage in a hurry.

- **Tend to the basics first.** It's much easier to get your property "horse-ready" before you bring home the animals; otherwise, you'll be dealing with horsekeeping on top of major facility improvements, which can trigger burnout. Make sure you at least have the following in place ahead of time: good drainage; good footing (including a flat place for training/exercise); and a sturdy shelter on high ground. And in case you were thinking of "roughing it" for a while, take it from those who've "been there" ahead of you—"basics" also include electricity, and a convenient running-water source. A tip: Automatic waterers are inexpensive, and will save you lots of time.

- **Set a realistic budget.** Know that unless you have unlimited year-round pasture, and no bedding costs, you'll spend a monthly average of \$100 to \$200 per at-home horse—and that's just for basic care, such as feed/bedding, farrier, and routine veterinary treatments. You can count on spending more, however, in a hundred hidden ways. Plan ahead so you'll have a little extra each month for tools, repairs/maintenance supplies, and vet calls. Being financially strapped is a surefire contributor to burnout.

- **Plump up your piggy bank.** To elaborate on the previous point, the more you've saved in advance for at-home horsekeeping, the better—especially for start-up expenses. If you scrimp on labor-saving equipment, you'll pay for it later in terms of stress. And when you finally bring the horses home, you'll appreciate having extra money to pay help for housecleaning, errand-running and/or barn-cleaning. Another use for spare capital: boarding costs, for those occasions when you need to send your horses elsewhere for any reason.

- **Less is better.** When you're ready to buy the actual horse(s), keep in mind that due to increased scale, having two is *more* than twice the work of one; having three is more than a third more work than two; and so on. For avoiding burnout, a good ratio to live by is one horse per horse-involved family member. (A small number of horses also keeps your auxiliary funds in check—for example, if you board out your horses while you're away, you want to be sure that *their* vacation isn't costing more than *yours!*)

- **Round up a support team.** Before you bring your horses home, make sure you have the following people lined up to help you out when needed: at least two competent horse sitters (preferably persons who can exercise horses safely, as well as feed and clean); some reliable horse-owning neighbors (with whom you can trade horse-care duties when one of you is out of town); a local barn with covered facilities where you can board on a short-term, short-notice basis (in the event of weather emergencies, health emergencies, etc.); a veterinarian who makes "house" calls; and a local farrier. It helps if the latter two have flexible hours.

- **Launch your plan at the office.** If you're about to bring home a horse or two, *first* have a heart-to-heart chat with your boss. Discuss how this imminent, significant lifestyle change might affect your work. If you're absent due to horse-related emergencies, will it count against you in terms of sick time, vacation time and/or hourly wages? Can you make up missed time after hours? If so, what possible havoc will those extra office hours wreak on your barn routine? Remember that at-home horse ownership is like taking on a part-time job.

- **Keep a clear perspective.** Be realistic about your horsekeeping: Your actual circumstances may not measure up to your original dream. Here's heartfelt advice from one formerly burned-out horse owner: "Don't create a bigger situation than your work life, family life, finances, or facility can accommodate."

copied. And since the last thing you need right now is another item for your "To Do" list, try regarding these items not as more work, but as stepping stones

to a way out of your misery:

- **Give yourself a literal break.** First and foremost, reduce the demands you've
continued on page 76

HORSE-COPING

continued from page 34

placed on yourself! Drop from your schedule anything that isn't absolutely essential to routine care and maintenance. It's not worth beating yourself up mentally because your horse's white stockings aren't spotless all the time, or because you can't keep a house *and* a barn clean. It's okay to let things slide for a few more days; right now, you probably could use the rest.

- *Give yourself an emotional break.* If you're feeling guilty, step back and realize that it's not the *situation* that's making you feel guilty, it's how you *perceive* yourself in the situation. If your self-talk is full of "the shoulds" ("I *should* be doing this, I *shouldn't* be doing that"), you're probably perpetuating your guilt, without being aware of it. For an immediate respite, declare the rest of your day to be "should-free" time.

- *Find a shoulder to lean on.* Early on, if you start to feel burned out, openly share your feelings with those who live with you, or with horsey friends. The former are likely to provide much-needed empathy, and the latter may be able to offer useful advice for coping—as well as a comforting "I've been there, too" confession, perhaps.

- *Recognize when to take drastic action.* If you feel encroaching symptoms of chronic burnout, either ask a horse friend to take your horses in for awhile, or board them out for a few days while you leave town for a break. If it helps save your sanity, it's money well spent.

- *Utilize your reinforcements.* To elaborate on the above suggestion, if you have a regular horse sitter, don't just use him/her for your out-of-town trips. Call on this helper when you simply need a few days to escape the barn routine, while you remain at home. If you're short on cash, perhaps a friend could give you an at-home break. There's nothing wrong with wanting to get such a break—and besides, your horses probably could use the stimulation of a new face.

- *Don't add more projects to your life right now.* If you've got a time-consuming project that just can't be ignored (fixing a broken fence, patching a leaky roof, etc.), by all means take care of it—but stop there. A common stress trap for over-achievers is to follow up necessary repairs with cosmetic improvements that demand excessive labor. ("Gee, that nice new roof makes the barn look shabby. I'd better re-paint the whole thing.") To re-

continued on page 78

HORSE-COPING

continued from page 76

cover from burnout, you need to do *less* for awhile, not more.

- *Reintroduce yourself to pleasure.* Pleasure is an emotional tonic, so free yourself to act on your whims—you're having them for a reason! If you're in the middle of barn tasks, and are struck by the urge to enjoy a non-horse-related activity (e.g., soaking in the tub, reading, napping, exercising), drop the pitchfork, and *just do it!* You'll emerge with renewed energy and a much fresher view toward horsekeeping. If all you want to do with your horse today is brush him and feed him carrots, do just that—or whatever else you feel yourself *wanting* to do.

- *Take time to smell the...whatever.* Use your five senses to enhance the pleasure you derive from your horse. Linger for a moment to close your eyes, and breathe in the scent of his neck. Or brush him just for the sake of the sensation it creates for

Trust us—you

won't always feel as overwhelmed as you do now.

both of you, *not* in an effort to achieve a show sheen. Enjoy the sight of your horse out the window, without automatically glancing at the clock to see what's next on the barn-task schedule. Treat *him* to an apple, after taking a bite for yourself.

- *Know that barn burnout passes.* Trust us—you won't always feel as overwhelmed as you do now. In time, you'll see a way clear to make whatever life changes are necessary to *complete* your adaptation to a horsekeeping lifestyle. Fret about the plans and details later, after you've had your "chill out." Your horselife will look better soon—we promise. □

The editors thank psychologist Ed Fuller, PhD; Barb Crabbe, DVM; and California reader Carmela Bozulich, for their helpful and candid advice.

"My philosophy on having children is applicable to accumulating horses," says Texas-based freelancer Anne Lang. "One is an adjustment, two is a commitment, three is a career! Potential burnout candidates might want to keep that in mind."



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