CALMING THE ANXIOUS STALL REST HORSE
Ah, winter. The time of cold weather, and dragons hiding everywhere a cooped-up horse looks. This means even more calls about behavior issues. What’s a vet to do? Look to behavior research, and pharmaceutical interventions, to help your clients tame their dragons. Offering these options will also solidify you as the go-to source for information ahead of Dr. Google, friends, and the feed store.

Horses are readily trainable by their very nature. It’s quite literally what we do with them. For the anxious stall rest horse, there are many training options which provide these horses outlets for their nervous energy that don’t involve bucking, rearing, and kicking. Target training using things like Jolly Balls and milk jugs train the horse to touch these objects to obtain a reward. When used during high-stress times, like feeding, they can significantly reduce unwanted behaviors. Clicker training “tricks” like stretches can facilitate rehabilitation of injuries and keep the stall rested horse mentally engaged. Both target and clicker training are easy procedures for owners to learn, and can be applied to future veterinary procedures. Briefly, owners “click,” then offer a very small treat. This action is repeated a few times; then a “click” reward is used instead of a food reward. Owners can practice poking horses with ballpoint pens at sites of blood draws or vaccines to help desensitize between veterinary visits. Once you start clicker training, there’s no end to the things you can teach a horse. BEVA has a series of videos (https://youtu.be/JnwrDMsQGx0) that veterinarians can share with owners on many of these techniques. These videos are part of BEVA’s Don’t Break Your Vet campaign to increase safe horse handling awareness.

Increasing time spent foraging is another excellent way to keep anxious or stalled horses from developing stereotypical behaviors. Slow-feed hay nets filled with low calorie hay options are great. Hang a few around a stall to give a horse more places to forage. Double the hay nets, one inside another, to make foraging take even longer. For concentrates, adding puzzle balls into the mix makes horses have to work for every pellet. Speaking of concentrates, evaluate the diet to be sure it’s not contributing to anxiety or behavior issues. High fat, high fiber diets have been shown to reduce anxious behaviors. High levels of magnesium may also produce a calming effect. Head off anxious behaviors by making sure owners reduce concentrates when those bad winter storms set in, and everyone stays inside for a few days. Again, this is a great opportunity for client engagement.

Finally, let’s talk pharmaceuticals. Pharmaceuticals can help manage stall rest and anxious horses, but can also help reduce owner fear when trying to ride exuberant horses in the wintertime. Allowing these horses to be ridden will give them a much better quality of life, and as the riders become more confident they can reduce

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the amount of drug given. It's a win-win for horse and rider! I am by no means condoning drugging show horses. This is giving owners a little help so they can continue to have a positive relationship with their horse. Ethical prescribing of these drugs in small quantities will ensure the owners are checking in with you on a regular basis, and not using the medications in a manner you didn't intend.

Sedatives are probably the most common anti-anxiety medications out there. However, it is important to be aware these drugs likely mask, rather than improve, anxiety behaviors. Their use is best reserved for the horse coming back into work, those starting turnout who need to remain calm, or specific procedures owners may be performing such as bandage changes. Sedatives come with their fair share of side effects. Tripping and priapism are two of the best documented of these at doses commonly used by clients. Hypotension and bradycardia can occur at higher doses used for more intense procedures such as clipping, and should be considered in the senior horse in particular. Side effects are likely to be short-term in nature, but should be discussed with owners and riders so they can be fully prepared. I always err on the side of talking with owners about what can happen. If owners are ready, they handle it better than being surprised by the snoring, stumbling horse.

Not all horses respond the same to this class. Be open to trying different drugs if you aren’t getting the response you’re looking for.

There are a wide variety of supplements and herbs used by owners to potentially provide sedation. Many of these products have no peer-reviewed studies to prove their efficacy, and as such are difficult to recommend to clients. They are few and far between, but look for products that do have studies. For example, the ingredient alpha-casozepine has equine-specific studies showing positive results. Be aware that herbal products carry the additional potential for positive drug testing. Educating your clients about the potential pitfalls of these products will lead to more appropriate expectations of effects.

Anxious horses directly lead to anxious clients. Taking the time to discuss the many tools we have to reduce these behaviors leads to better interactions between horses, clients, and veterinarians. ■

INCREASING TIME SPENT FORAGING IS ANOTHER EXCELLENT WAY TO KEEP ANXIOUS OR STALLED HORSES FROM DEVELOPING STEREOTYPICAL BEHAVIORS.

True anti-anxiety medications have been used with increasing frequency in horses. Many are oral, which offers ease of dosing, and can be easily titrated to lowest effective dose. These medications are ideal for the long-term stall rest horse. While mild colics can be seen at high doses, horses generally tolerate this class of drugs well. Learning can also happen while on anti-anxiety drugs. This makes them perfect for trailer loading, early experiences off the farm, or farrier work.

About the Author
Dr. Erica Lacher is a 2001 graduate of the University of Florida’s College of Veterinary Medicine, and the owner of Springhill Equine Veterinary Clinic in Newberry, Florida. In addition to practicing medicine, she is also an author, blogger and podcaster. Her podcast, Straight from the Horse Doctor’s Mouth, is popular among horse owners worldwide. She enjoys competing in show jumping with her OTTB, and spending time outdoors with her husband.

References