

Animal Behavior: Helping Horses say Goodbye

Lori A. Torrini, Director

Spirit Keeper Equine Sanctuary 501c3

We all have a story. Our horses have stories. There is a beginning of the story when they are born and experience safety and security with their mothers, the joy of play with other foals, and learning how to interact with conspecifics. There is the middle of the story when they leave their mother or original herd mates to live a life at the whim of humans. This may be to do a job, be a companion, a pet, a family member, an athlete; or, as a tool, commodity, or money maker for people who view them as property. There is always an end to their story and that is what I want to talk about here.



Many people share their lives with horses in some way and for various amounts of time. When asked “whatever happened to that horse you had?” people may respond by saying things like “oh, he went to a retirement home”, “he’s living his life out at a sanctuary”, or “she went to a really nice family to be a kid’s horse” and for you, that’s the end of the story. In your mind, a happy ending; your horse living out their life in a nice place. That may be the end of the story for you but its not for your horse. They end up someplace and ultimately they die, and that is the end of their story. Hopefully, they live out their final days in a safe place where they are loved and cared for and where the end of their life is comfortable and easy.

For the horses’ final caretakers, the end of the story is not until after emotionally letting go, dealing with the psychological loss, the burial or cremation and settling up any outstanding veterinary or end of life finances for the horse. For the conspecifics, herd mates, and companions of the horse now gone, the story is not over until they reach their own end. There will always be an emptiness there for horses left behind because while social interactions may be taken up with others, it can never be quite the same since each horse is an individual.

Horses form strong social bonds. It is an innate trait of their species to live in groups called herds, even if that is a herd of two. The relationships they form are strong and contribute to their psychological and physical well-being. They stand watch over each other as they sleep, stand together for security and warmth, groom each other (called allogrooming), and engage in play behavior with one another. So, what happens to the one left behind when one half of that bond is gone? How does the horse cope with the loss of their companion and all of the important social interactions they shared?

It can be traumatic, especially if the herd was only two. If the horses lived in a group of three or more some of the social dynamics may change and shift; however, the availability to socially interact is at least still there and, it is with horses they already know. If the group is only two horses or there are two in a larger group with a particularly strong bond, the loss of one can be devastating. The remaining horse may become lethargic, be uninterested in normal activities, experience a reduced appetite or start to exhibit stereotypies (aberrant, maladaptive behaviors).

The following is a case example of how we at Spirit Keeper Equine Sanctuary did our best to make the end of life transition as smooth as possible for a strongly bonded pair of mares. They had lived together

for many years prior to arriving here, came here together with a group of 11 horses, and remained together for four years here until the death of the older mare.

Summer and Flower (2020)

Summer, age 17, was extremely attached to Flower, age 28. If Summer could not see Flower, even for a second, she would pace, run, whinny, and display general anxiety. They were pastured together and when it became necessary to place Summer on a special diet they were separated but in adjacent spaces so that they could still see each other and interact with one another through the fence. When they were not eating they were turned out together. When Flower began to slow down and take longer to eat her special senior diet, they were pretty much separated all the time; however, still adjacent so that they could interact.

Their pens were in the middle of other corrals with many other horses all around them that they could have physical, auditory, and visual contact with. Summer had horses next to her that she and Flower had lived with prior to coming to the sanctuary, including her 6-year-old foal. We made sure to arrange the horses this way as we observed Flower's declining health and strategized as to how to best prepare and transition Summer to be without her.

Flower was experiencing kidney failure and remained in the stall and run adjacent to Summer during her treatment, palliative care, and eventual euthanasia. The panels were then opened so that Summer could access Flower's body and be in her pen with her for about 24 hours prior to her burial on site at the sanctuary. Summer was then moved into Flower's stall and paddock for several weeks before being moved out to a larger paddock next to the other horses she came to Spirit Keeper with.

Surprisingly, Summer handled the loss of Flower very well. Despite the drama of loud and over-the-top behaviors she would exhibit anytime Flower was out of sight during their four years in our care together, we did not see this behavior from Summer during Flower's end of life transition. Summer stood by her companion when the veterinarian was here caring for her and during the euthanasia. She watched over her body until it was moved to the burial site and barely offered a whinny when that happened.

In Flower's final days we interacted with her normally. We groomed her, scratching her in all her favorite spots, allowed her access to the places she normally liked to stand in or lie down in, fed her normally even when she wasn't eating, and made everything as normal and routine as possible. The euthanasia was done where she had chosen to be that day, while being scratched in her favorite spots, Summer next to her, and surrounded by other horses.

I feel satisfied that we took every step possible to ease the transition for both mares and to ease Summer into a new social situation for what will likely be many, many more years here since she is so young. It has been our experience that gradual transitions for horses always go smoother and take less of a psychological toll on them than abrupt, sudden changes.

I want to thank Sara Pehrsson who fostered Summer and Flower for three years, and visited them often after they returned to the sanctuary. Sara visited Flower during her illness and assisted us in making the decision to euthanize her at the right time. It was at Sara's suggestion that we publish this case as a resource for others managing horses in similar circumstances.