

Make your advice count

Top tips for equine professionals working with struggling horse owners

Do you ever feel uncomfortable with your client's handling or management? Ever wish your client understood their horse's needs better or was doing more to give them a good quality of life? These situations are all too common and can leave equine professionals feeling despondent and alone. It's a situation that can lead to burnout, or even the deliberate 'sacking' of a client which leaves them without professional support or in a position where they need to find someone else, something that we believe undermines positive change for horses.

This guidance is designed to help you foster more rewarding and sustainable client relationships where they feel under strain on welfare grounds. It's written with the awareness that as professionals you are already naturally engaging in a range of conversations from straightforward to difficult and aims to offer some tips to boost resilience and help deliver positive change for horses.



Photo courtesy of The Society of Master Saddlers

Remember that we are all subject to 'cognitive biases' in the way we think and behave. Few people deliberately refuse rational and helpful information and there are many reasons why humans don't act on advice given. Embracing the limitations we all face in adhering to 'best practice' will help you build an understanding and supportive relational style with your client.

Below are techniques to help you communicate skillfully with your clients:

The quality of your relationship with your client will enable change. Learning how to build a rapport with a diverse range of people is an important and often under-recognised skill worth reflecting on and investing in. Consider what techniques you already use to successfully build rapport.

Ask open questions that elicit more conversation. Avoid 'why' questions as they can feel judgmental but questions beginning with 'what' and 'how' can be really useful, especially if paired with an observation. Try "I notice you swapped feeds, may I ask what made you switch?" or "I see you are riding again, how was his recovery?"

Be warm and accepting - respect your client's viewpoint when it is different from your own. Be curious and genuinely try to understand their point of view.

Feel comfortable and secure in your role and know the extent of your professional area of expertise. Knowing when and who to refer to in different fields can be a great help when assisting a client - including welfare organisations who have a wealth of trusted advice!

Listen actively - this means tuning into the intonation, emotional cues and non-verbal behaviour of the person you are speaking to. While we say one thing verbally, we express another non-verbally. Be sensitive to where you are being invited to give a response or just listen, and whether it is a request for knowledge, emotional or practical support.

Reinforce achievements - celebrate successes, however small. Positive reinforcement works for people too. Just like in horse and dog training, we want to ignore the behaviour we don't want to see and encourage the good. For example: "I can see you've been trying to work on his handling for me - I appreciate that." People find it easier to open up about challenges if they feel their efforts are recognised too.

Ignore excuses - as best you can try not to agree with any excuses, however cheerfully or sheepishly they are communicated. This is called 'colluding' with the client. It doesn't help them in the long run if we reassure them. Although silences can be uncomfortable and unnatural, they are not intrusive or rude. If a statement falls flat, this may prompt them to ask a question - "I've let their body condition scoring slip to be honest" - Pause/silence - "Do you think that's bad?". This leaves you able to ask an open question to help them think, such as "What do you think got in the way?" or "How would it have been easier to keep it up?"

Contact Redwings if you are worried that a client may be in breach of their legal duty to meet their horse's needs, for advice. We are members of the National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) and can assess, investigate or escalate a welfare concern for you in areas we cover and refer you to other NEWC members where necessary.

This advice is based on a summary of well-established principles aimed at helping people through problems. For further advice on interpersonal skills that can enhance your influence and customer care you might want to investigate interpersonal communication skills such as Motivational Interviewing (Rollnick & Miller, 1995) - used widely by doctors and other experts in public health settings.

Continued Professional Development which explores more of the principles of human behaviour change in the context of client/customer services in animal welfare professions is offered by Human Behaviour Change for Animals CIC: <https://hbca-online-learning.thinkific.com/courses/making-change-happen>

Please note: If you are concerned about a horse you can contact us confidentially to discuss the equine(s) you are worried about. We respect client confidentiality and your professional judgement and aim to provide you with the support you need to decide what action, if any, should be taken.

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Avoid direct advice unless asked, it's rarely received positively. Research suggests that advice influences people in just 10% of situations. Sticking to direct advice can also be demoralising for you, as you feel you've 'told them over

Find ways to cope with the emotional impact of helping.

Frustration, disappointment or sadness towards the horse, the owner, and even towards yourself are common experiences and can be very hard to cope with. Mindfulness and self-care practices to look after your emotional health are widespread and worth investigating to avoid burnout and maintain passion in your work with owners.

Most importantly, **know your own limitations.** Know your area of expertise and respect your clients' autonomy with regards to their horse. Ultimately it is their right to think and decide what is best for the equine in their care.