Animal Behaviour Apathy





Comparison between apathetic and resting posture.



SEBWAT parameter (Standardised Equine-Based Welfare Assessment Tool)

Observer approach Chin contact Tail tuck (donkeys only) General attitude

Welfare issue

- The animal appears lethargic and unresponsive to external stimuli such as approach by or contact with the handler or other animals.
- An apparently apathetic animal should be observed closely to establish genuine apathy as opposed to resting, sleeping or simply being relaxed/unconcerned, since equids are able to sleep standing up. However, if the animal is unresponsive to its surroundings, interactions with the handler, and to any physical contact, this suggests apathy. A non-apathetic, alert animal should display some reaction or interest in the handling process and its surroundings.
- An apathetic animal should be considered of as much concern as those showing more overt behavioural problems, as the causes can be equally significant to welfare.¹

Welfare significance

- An apathetic state is an important indication that the animal's welfare is compromised in some way, and should never be ignored.
- Apathy can be a sign of a range of problems² which could include:
 - Illness
 - Exhaustion
 - Chronic pain
 - Lethargy or depression
 - Dehydration or severe electrolyte imbalance
- When apathy is a response to poor handling, there is a danger that it can be misconstrued by the owner as acquiescence. As the animal becomes more and more unresponsive to stimuli, even when this has been increased, the owner may believe that the animal has "learned its lesson" because the desired outcome (i.e. a submissive animal) has been achieved.
- Dullness and depression is commonly reported as the only observable behaviour change caused by abdominal pain in donkeys³. The more subtle pain indicators shown by donkeys can often be missed meaning that opportunities to treat problems can be delayed or overlooked altogether. Donkeys with unrecognised chronic pain can become increasingly withdrawn until an unresponsive, depressive-like state is reached.

¹ Hall, et al (2008)

³ Brooke Veterinary Manual (2013 edition)

² Burn et al (2010)

Possible causation

Illness/exhaustion

- The body's attempt to fight disease or infection will reduce overall energy levels, producing a lethargic or withdrawn appearance. The body's resources are diverted towards the most important systems (e.g. the immune system) at the cost of reduced vigilance and maintenance behaviours such as eating and grooming.
- The acute phase of a bacterial or viral infection is a primary cause of lethargy⁴. Possible causes in the Brooke context could include equine influenza, trypanosomiasis (Surra), strangles, glanders.
- Diarrhoea is a symptom of some types of infection and can lead to dehydration and severe electrolyte imbalance, which further contribute to lethargy.
- A reduced appetite, associated with some illnesses, will lead to further loss of condition as energy used during work or to fight illness is not adequately replaced.
- Depleted energy reserves due to over-work and exhaustion lead to the animal becoming correspondingly less responsive.
- Apathy and unresponsiveness have been found to be associated with a lower body condition score, older age and other health problems⁵.
 Animals with a body condition score of 2 were twice as likely to be apathetic as those with a score of 3.



Horse showing poor body condition and apathetic behaviour.

Dehydration

- A severely dehydrated animal is likely to present an apathetic appearance.
- Chronic dehydration can lead to problems including constipation, colic, lack of energy/ poor recovery rates, tissue damage and delayed wound healing.

Rough and inconsistent handling

- If the outcome of every attempt to obey a handling command is met with a punishment response from the handler (even if this is accidental e.g. due to poor driving technique) then the animal will become increasingly unresponsive to these commands.
- The animal may not understand what is being asked and consequently cannot predict whether or not any 'punishment' is to be expected.
- When the animal has learned that it has no control over unpleasant or harmful conditions it will give up trying, i.e. it will enter a state of "learned helplessness" characterised by increasing lethargy and apathy.

Pain/discomfort

- If every attempt to relieve pain or discomfort is unsuccessful, for example, being punished for attempting to avoid the pain of ill-fitting harness, then again the animal can eventually become increasingly apathetic.
- Protective behaviour aimed at reducing pain, such as reduced mobility and a decrease in normal activity, can be observed as lethargy and unwillingness to interact with handlers or other animals.



Donkey showing apathy and head-pressing, suggesting pain.

⁴ The Brooke (2013)

⁵ Burn et al (2010)

Means of resolution

- The means of resolution will depend upon the specific cause of apathy as described above; for example, if due to illness then it is likely that responsiveness will return as the animal recovers.
- Opportunities to drink should be provided throughout the day, particularly in hot/ dusty environments to avoid dehydration. Rehydration salts could be provided by the vet.
- If linked to exhaustion and low body condition score, adequate rest and improved feeding could help the animal to recoup lost energy reserves. A suitable (warm, comfortable) resting area should be provided for the purpose.
- It may be necessary to remove other animals from the rest area (perhaps by the use of partitions) to allow the affected animal to rest without being disturbed.
- With learned helplessness, there is some evidence that this leads to changes within the animal's brain chemistry⁶ which could be permanent. However, in less severe cases this may be reduced by an improvement in the animal's environmental conditions.

Longer term solutions

- Consistent handling and welfare-friendly training are vital. Humane training and 'starting' practices and welfare-friendly methods of restraint should always be promoted. Reward-based training methods will prevent animals becoming habituated to violent treatment.
- Working equids will require adequate quantities of good quality feed to provide them with the energy they need to work, which will also provide the essential nutrients needed to maintain general health and fight disease. Feeding should be adapted to the animal's individual needs.
- Equids should be fed a mainly forage diet (grass or hay) but working equines are likely to have additional energy requirements which would need to be provided in the form of "hard" feeds such as grains (e.g. oats, barley or maize) or commercially available concentrate feeds. Whatever is fed it should always be good quality and free from dust, mould and foreign objects.

Refer to the Working Equid Veterinary Manual, Community Engagement work plans or strategies and the Handling Guidelines before conducting an intervention.



Means of resolution - improved feeding

⁶ Hall, et al (2008)