

Food for Thought **By Lynn Acton**

Horses can tell time. Skeptics need only visit a well-scheduled barn at feeding time. It goes something like this. About 15 minutes before feeding time, horses start looking around for their server. If that person is in the barn, her activities are followed with increasing interest. By 5 of Feeding Time, all eyes are locked on her, and the horses are using their own reinforcement system: Encouraging nickers if the feeder approaches the feed room; impatient stall banging if she walks the other way. By Feeding Time sharp, she had better be serving up the goods.

Heaven forbid the server should be detained by more pressing matters or (horrors!) absent from the barn. Now the visitor may see frantic calling, stall pacing, door banging, and other stress related behaviors. If the horses are turned out, feeding time can involve impatient crowding at the gate with increased risk of injury to horses and handlers.

Tradition says that horses must be fed on a predictable schedule to minimize this sort of feeding time stress, because we all know that stress wreaks havoc with those delicate digestive systems. Nice in theory for barns with the staff to feed on a regular schedule, but what about those of us who are a staff of one, not counting our four-legged guest greeters and rodent patrol?

Well, let's peek in a barn with a variable feeding schedule and see how bad it really is. Hmm. Everyone's snoozing. Or lazily looking out a window. The action doesn't start until the server actually bangs around in the feed room. If the horses are turned out, they might go about their own business until called for their meal. Maybe it's not so terrible when daily life trumps the "regularly scheduled feeding". In fact, some stables deliberately vary mealtimes to avoid the anticipatory stress.

There are a few basic guidelines for making virtue of necessity. There should be a minimum of eight hours between meals; ten hours if a horse gets twice a day medication. (If you have a hard keeper who needs large quantities of grain, those meals should be as close to 12 hours apart as possible or, better yet, divide the food into 3 meals.) Meals should be served within a somewhat consistent time frame. For example, breakfast between 7:00 and 9:00; dinner between 5:00 and 7:00.

Here are a few other tried and true methods for reducing mealtime stress and its accompanying health hazards.

1. Serve hay first. There is an excellent tradition of serving hay 10 minutes before grain, even if it's just a token amount. Munching hay is a

natural tranquilizer. We also serve it when someone is frightened by a bad storm or experiencing some other stress.

2. Reduce grain to a minimum. If your horse is a hard keeper, give free choice good quality hay and keep up with his dental work. If you are giving grain for the vitamins, check the bag for the maximum serving recommended. This is the amount you'd have to give for the vitamin levels listed, but it's usually far too much grain. Your horse might be better off with less grain and a good multi-vitamin/mineral supplement.

3. Maximize turnout. Most horses are happier and healthier outdoors. Studies show that increasing turnout decreases the incidence of colic. A shed significantly increases the hours a horse is comfortable outside. Blankets, fly masks and sheets also increase happy turnout time. Our horses come into the barn only to escape bugs, cold rain, or unusually cold, windy weather.

4. Optimize or simulate grazing. Ideally, horses have access to pasture 24/7, and graze intermittently. Realistically, none of us have adequate pasture year round, and many horses develop weight and health problems with free access. Even free choice hay is too much for some horses. If you have the option, "naturalize" by dividing hay into 3 or 4 feedings a day instead of 2. When horses are turned out, spread hay around multiple clean areas to encourage a more natural mosey-and-munch routine.

5. Protect lower ranking horses while they eat. Our 3 horses come into their stalls for meals, munching their 10 minutes of hay while I prepare their "bucket meal". This is also a good time to notice lameness, boo-boos, or lost shoes. Weather and bugs permitting, they go right back outside to the hay I have already spread out. If you feed grain outside, you can tie a dominant horse while others eat. A lower ranking horse is vulnerable to being kicked, and should never be tied.

6. Create a calm atmosphere. If your horses have trained you to dash around madly to serve up the goods before they beat down the doors, try changing your demeanor. Slow down, breathe deep, and chat cheerfully with the crew, modeling for them a calm, happy feeding time atmosphere.

Whenever and however you feed your horses, take time to relax and enjoy the soothing sounds of horses happily munching away.