switch, equine

welfare-led education for real world horse owners



10 signs your horse may be in pain

+ whole horse checklist

A simple, evidence-led guide to help you recognise early indicators of discomfort — long before lameness becomes obvious

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why subtle signs matter

Horses rarely show dramatic signs of pain at first.

They whisper long before they shout.

Discomfort often appears as:

- small changes in posture
- small changes in movement
- small changes in expression
- small changes in behaviour

These early signs are easy to miss — especially when the horse is still "working."

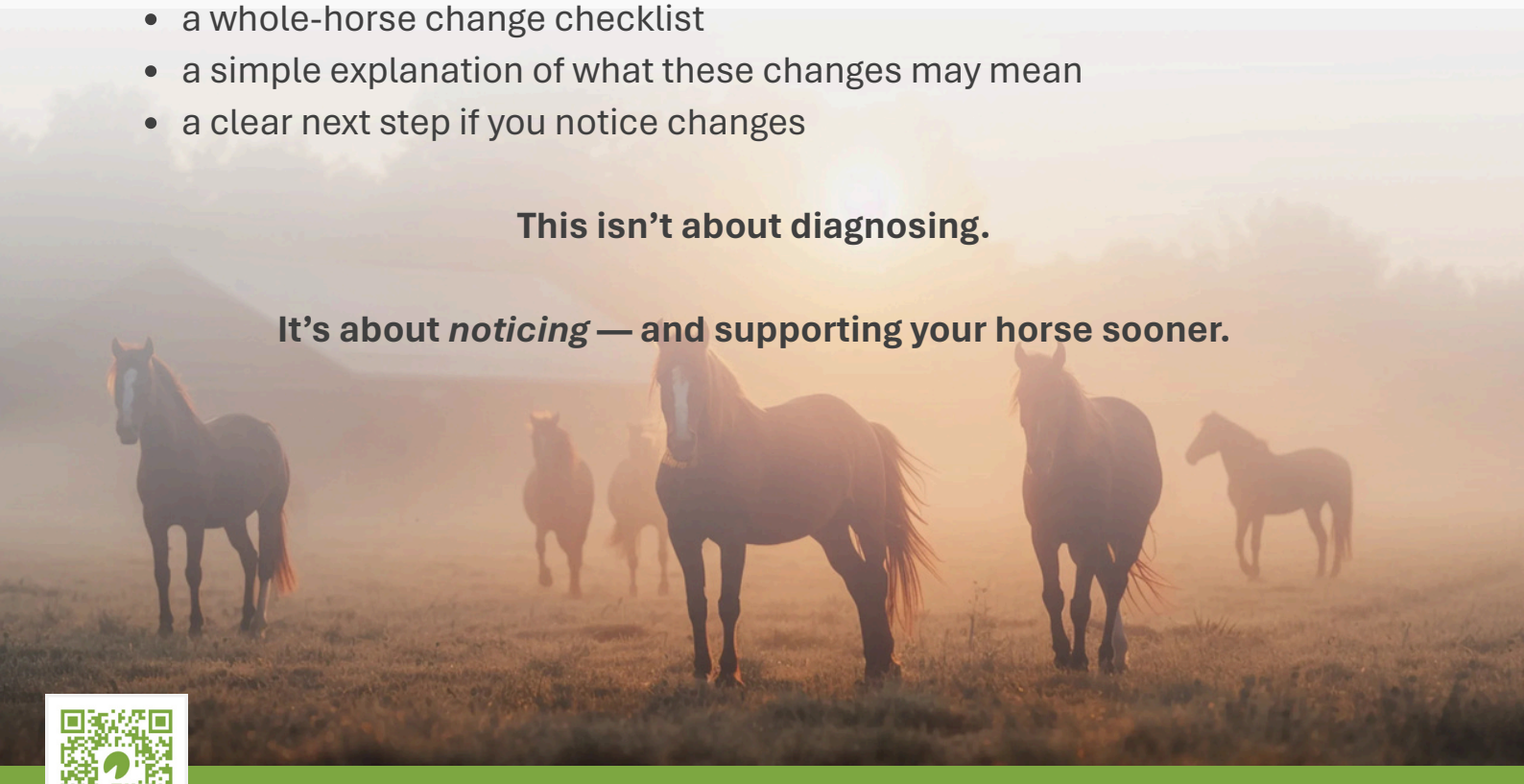
Many horses labelled "lazy," "naughty," "stubborn," or "spooky" are actually showing early indicators of discomfort or adaptive strain.

This guide gives you:

- 10 subtle signs you can spot today
- a whole-horse change checklist
- a simple explanation of what these changes may mean
- a clear next step if you notice changes

This isn't about diagnosing.

It's about *noticing* — and supporting your horse sooner.



subtle indicators of change

Most horses show early signs of discomfort, stress, or unmet needs long before anything looks “obvious.” These changes are often small, quiet, and easy to miss — especially when they develop gradually or the horse has learned to cope.



Expression:
glazed or intense stare, triangular eye, tension around the muzzle or nostrils.



Breathing:
breath-holding, shallow breaths, flared nostrils at rest, uneven breathing.



Posture:
leaning, bracing, weight-shifting, tail held to one side, narrow or wide stance, on the forehand.



Movement:
toe-first landings, shortened stride, reluctance to turn, stumbling, loss of rhythm.



Laterality:
consistently preferring one rein, one lead, one direction, or spooky on one rein.



Resting patterns:
less or more lying down, more vigilance, resting the same limb repeatedly.



Social behaviour:
avoiding companions, clinginess, irritability, withdrawal, increased resource guarding.

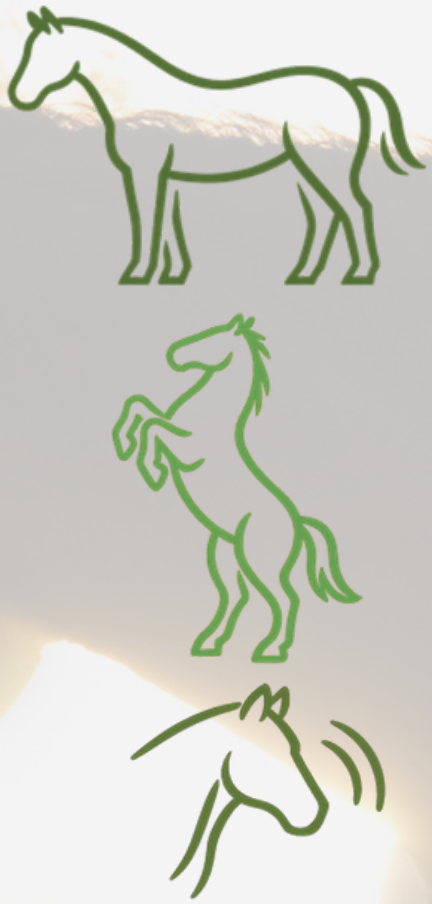


Eating behaviour:
slower chewing, fussiness, dropping food, changes in appetite.

These signs do not diagnose a problem — they simply tell you that something has changed in your horse’s internal state.

recognising them is not criticism. It is care

10 signs your horse may be in pain



Posture & Movement

1. Head tilt
2. Uneven stride length
3. Dragging hind toes
4. Leaning on the circle / counter-bend
5. On the forehand

Behaviour

6. Reluctance to go forward
7. Increased reactivity
8. Avoidance behaviours

Expression

9. Triangular or tense eye
10. Flared or strained nostrils / tight lips

These signs don't diagnose pain — but they tell you something has changed in your horse's internal state.

Subtle changes often reflect:

- early discomfort
- low-grade pain
- emotional strain
- environmental mismatch
- reduced confidence
- increased allostatic load (the cost of coping)
- early musculoskeletal imbalance
- digestive discomfort
- social stress

Patterns matter more than single moments.

If you notice several of these signs — or the same sign appearing repeatedly — it's worth looking more closely.

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If you've noticed subtle changes in your horse, don't panic — but don't ignore them.

These subtle shifts are part of your horse's adaptive capacity — how they cope, compensate, and communicate their internal state.

Start with:

- observing your horse over a few days
- noting any patterns
- checking saddle/bridle fit
- reviewing workload and environment
- paying attention to posture, expression, and movement

If you want to understand what these subtle changes really mean — and how to respond with clarity and confidence; your next step is:

Pain or Behaviour?

Understanding What Your Horse Is Really Telling You

A 19-minute, evidence-led mini-course.

You'll learn:

- how to tell pain from behaviour
- what subtle signs really mean
- how to avoid common misinterpretations
- how to support your horse with clarity and confidence

Includes:

✓ 4 short lessons
✓ Printable Observation Toolkit
✓ Whole-horse indicators
✓ Clear next steps

Scan the QR Code to find out more