



## HELPFUL CONTACTS

**Aware** 1800 804 848  
**Samaritans** Freephone 116 123  
**Sosadireland** 041 984 8754  
**Pieta House** 1800 247 247  
**Samaritans Belfast** 028 90664422  
**Samaritans Newry** 028 030266366  
**Lifeline (NI)** 0808808800  
**PIPS Suicide Support** 028 30266195  
**Public Health Agency (NI)**  
 publichealth@hscni.net

**The Industry Assistance Programme (IAP)** provides information, resources and counselling on all of the challenges that life may bring. This includes depression, suicidal thoughts, debt and money worries, health and wellness, emotional wellbeing, bereavement or loss, work/life balance, managing stress and relationships. The service is free, 24-hour and confidential and can be accessed on Freephone 0800 028 0199 or visit [www.equip.ie](http://www.equip.ie)

**DEVENISH**  
 Beyond Nutrition

# Important lessons horses can teach us



## Leo Powell caught up with Emma Hutchison of HorseBack UK to learn some lessons you can use at home – even without a horse

**W**e all know horses are wonderful creatures, but they can also teach us so much, according to Emma Hutchison of HorseBack UK. She shared six lessons which are an integral part of their programmes with both veterans and disadvantaged youth.

### 1. Practice new mental habits

Working well with a horse is not a matter of going through a check-list and then patting yourself on the back. It's a daily dedication. Horses love steadiness and consistency, so they really value the stuff you do every single day.

It's exactly the same with your mental health. If you get stuck in negative stories, as the gremlins in your head tell you that you are not good enough, that everything is going to end in disaster, that you will never come out of the darkness into the light, then a beautiful daily practice is to learn to turn those stories around.

Find your one good thing and write that down. Seek for the silver lining in the clouds. Simply tell yourself that you are good enough. Do it again and again. Slow and steady every day, until your

brain believes it. Small shifts in perspective, done over and over, can have huge results.

### 2. Move

When horses get stuck in the sympathetic nervous system (fight, flight and freeze), sometimes the best thing you can do for them is invite them to move.

Liberty work is great for this – you can offer your horse a chance to dance all those jangled emotions out on the ground, until they come back to a place of stillness and peace.

It's not so different with humans. We can think our way out of some emotions, but some get stuck in the body, and the rational part of the brain can only do so much. So, if you feel trapped in negative thought loops, particularly those of resentment, shame or rage, try dancing them out. Shake them out of your arms; stomp them out of your feet.

You are literally resetting your body when you do this. The nervous system can then move from its threat state to its rest and relax state.

### 3. Be honest

Horses adore honesty, and so does your brain. Denying feelings of anxiety, shame, grief and despair only makes

them worse. They paralyse you.

A lovely thing to do with yourself is to step into difficult emotions. Honestly say yes, I do feel vulnerable, overwhelmed or hopeless. Sit with those feelings instead of fighting them. Then see what you can do with them. You can write them down, share them with a trusted friend or take them to a mental health professional.

The more these feelings are felt and released, the less power they have over you.

### 4. Be present

There is a lot of research and data which shows the extraordinary power that meditation can have on mental health. Meditation is hard and doing it well may be a life's work. You can start simply by practicing being present in the moment. Horses do this naturally, and they also adore it in their humans.

You don't need a special room, time or equipment. At moments throughout the day, catch your racing mind, and bring it gently back to the present. Feel all your senses: the air on your face, the smell of the green grass, the sound of your own breathing. All that matters in the world is in this moment.

At HorseBack UK we often start courses with a meditation for horses and veterans. It is based on the profound but simple idea of being present. If you can make that a habit, you will start to see changes more quickly than you might imagine.

### 5. Managing expectations

False or unrealistic expectations are one of the enemies of good mental health. If you're constantly lashing yourself for failing to meet goals, for not being the person you expect yourself to be, for not being able to change your life through a sheer act of will, you will live with constant disappointment.

We've learned from horses to monitor our expectations. We don't march in expecting the horses to be brilliant just because we want them to be. We understand that everyone has an off-day. So, we ask enough but never too much, and if there's a problem we just take a breath and start again.

You can do the same with yourself. Give yourself small, achievable missions. Understand that mistakes and setbacks will come. Be forgiving. Always be prepared to start again.

### 6. Work with the person you are that day

One of the greatest principles in good horseman-

ship is working with the horse you have that day. Just because your dazzling steed could do perfect transitions last week, it does not mean that it applies this week. Horses have moods, emotions and needs, just as humans do. We ask our horses, 'What do you need from us today?'

You can do the same with your own self. Your anxiety, low mood or difficulty in connecting with others might have improved, and you are getting that lovely sense of the light at the end of the tunnel. Then, wham, - the very next day you feel that all that progress has disappeared. It's easy then to feel like you want to give up, just as one might want to give up when a horse regresses.

However, if you say 'Well, I'm working with the person I am today,' then you can take a gentler, more hopeful approach. Use small steps to move forward again. It is still worth making the effort, building the helpful mental habits, doing your daily practices. You would do that for your horse, so you can do it for yourself.

By using horses as our inspiration, and taking the lessons that they can teach us, we can help shift our mental position and create a better, happier life for ourselves and those around us.

### About Emma and the charity

Emma Hutchison is co-founder of HorseBack UK, a multi award-winning Scottish charity based near Aboyne, in the Scottish Highlands.

HorseBack UK works to improve health and wellbeing by inspiring recovery, positive change and renewed purpose amongst those who need it most, and improving education and employment prospects for those who are disadvantaged or marginalised.

Using horsemanship, equine assisted learning, rural skills and the outdoors, the charity delivers award-winning projects and personal development programmes that encourage participants to acquire new coping strategies, life skills and lasting resilience, while gaining nationally recognised awards and qualifications.

[www.horseback.org.uk](http://www.horseback.org.uk)  
**Twitter:** @HorseBackUK  
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