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Contemplating the Five Domains model of animal welfare assessment: UK horse owner perceptions of equine well-being

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Abstract

Traditionally, assessment of animal welfare generally focused on physiological signs of health with less consideration of psychological well-being. More recently, the Five Domains model highlighted the concept of all aspects of an animal's life influencing their affective state. In equestrianism, however, there is a lack of awareness of the Five Domains model and, specifically, how different factors may affect the mental well-being of horses (Equus caballus). This divide between scientific research and lay horse owners could compromise equine welfare by failing to recognise horses as sentient beings with species-specific needs. The present study therefore aimed to explore how evidence-based information can be effectively communicated to equestrians (n = 259) through an online survey and whether increased knowledge of equine welfare needs has any impact on horse caregivers' assessment of their own horses' quality of life. Results showed that a simple educational infographic based on the Five Domains model had a significant impact on equestrians' assessment of equine welfare, although longitudinal, empirical studies are needed. Scores on a Likert scale for health, behaviour/human interactions and overall welfare were significantly lower following the intervention but scores for emotional well-being were significantly higher. This may suggest that, whilst the infographic increased participant awareness of the importance of emotional state and the factors affecting welfare, there were difficulties or inconsistencies in objectively assessing these emotions. This highlights the need for equine welfare science to be communicated more proactively to horse owners in an accessible, engaging format.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviour change, Five Domains, mental state, owner perception, positive emotions