



EMOTION

THE CHOICES WE MAKE IN LIFE HELP DEFINE US BUT THEY ALSO IMPACT ON OUR OVERALL WELLBEING DAY TO DAY AS **ANDREA OAKES** FINDS OUT IN PART SEVEN OF OUR SERIES.

Carl Hester famously lets his horses 'be horses', with a healthy ration of turnout time to offset their training sessions. Yet how many riders find the space in their hectic schedule for some rest and relaxation – or allow themselves any escape from the demands of competing, work and everyday life?

"It's important to ask yourself 'what's my downtime?', says chartered sport psychologist Jo Davies of www.jdpsychology.co.uk, who emphasises the worth of regularly recharging your batteries. "Many riders consider riding as their downtime and switch off by hacking out or

just chilling with their horse, spending time in his company. Others are so competition-oriented that every minute at the yard has to have a purpose.

"Relaxation is a very individual thing," adds Jo, who explains that downtime can be constructive, indulgent, sociable or solitary. "Ideally, it's a moment to find calm and enjoyment."

Emotional wellbeing might be up there with physical health when it comes to happiness and fulfilment, yet it's an aspect of life that is typically overlooked. Calm moments can

become elusive in the relentless rush to get everything done. What's the solution if you constantly feel as if

you're spinning too many plates?

"Try to identify your values, in riding and other areas of your life," says Jo. "Think about what is important to you, and where you get meaning. What would you miss if you stopped doing it?"

"Now check that your actions connect with your values, by rating yourself out of 10 for each," she explains. "You may place a high value on spending time with your family, for example, but find that you're only scoring three in that area because you're always at the yard or competing."

"Reassessing your priorities can help you manage the time you do have," adds Jo, who points out that life is about balance and acceptance. "If horses are your key value, that's fine, as long as you're happy to devote your time to them at the expense of other things."

Another aspect of emotional wellbeing is establishing your identity.

Jo explains: "If you only see yourself as a rider or competitor, what happens when your riding doesn't go to plan? Think about what else you are. Maybe you're a supportive partner, a fun friend or a great parent, or passionate about music or travel. If the riding isn't working out, you can check-in with these other areas of your life."

"Support is massively important, especially during difficult times," adds Jo, who explains that it's natural to want to normalise feelings with other people, share ideas or talk things through with family members, some of whom might be affected. "Recognise who is in your support team and the roles they play. Perhaps you know a great person to talk to, someone who is calm and rational or a key advice-giver, or maybe your non-horsey other half is brilliant at being positive, doing the

admin or buying you a hotdog at a show."

Dealing with the wide variety of personalities at the average livery yard can be challenging. Rather than soldiering on with difficult relationships or through tricky social situations, it can be useful to stand back and assess what's happening. Jo suggests classifying people as radiators or Hoovers.

"Radiators radiate positive energy, so you finish a conversation with them feeling uplifted, while Hoovers suck energy and leave you feeling deflated or negative," she says.

"When you consider the people in your life, identify those that it may not be useful to have around."

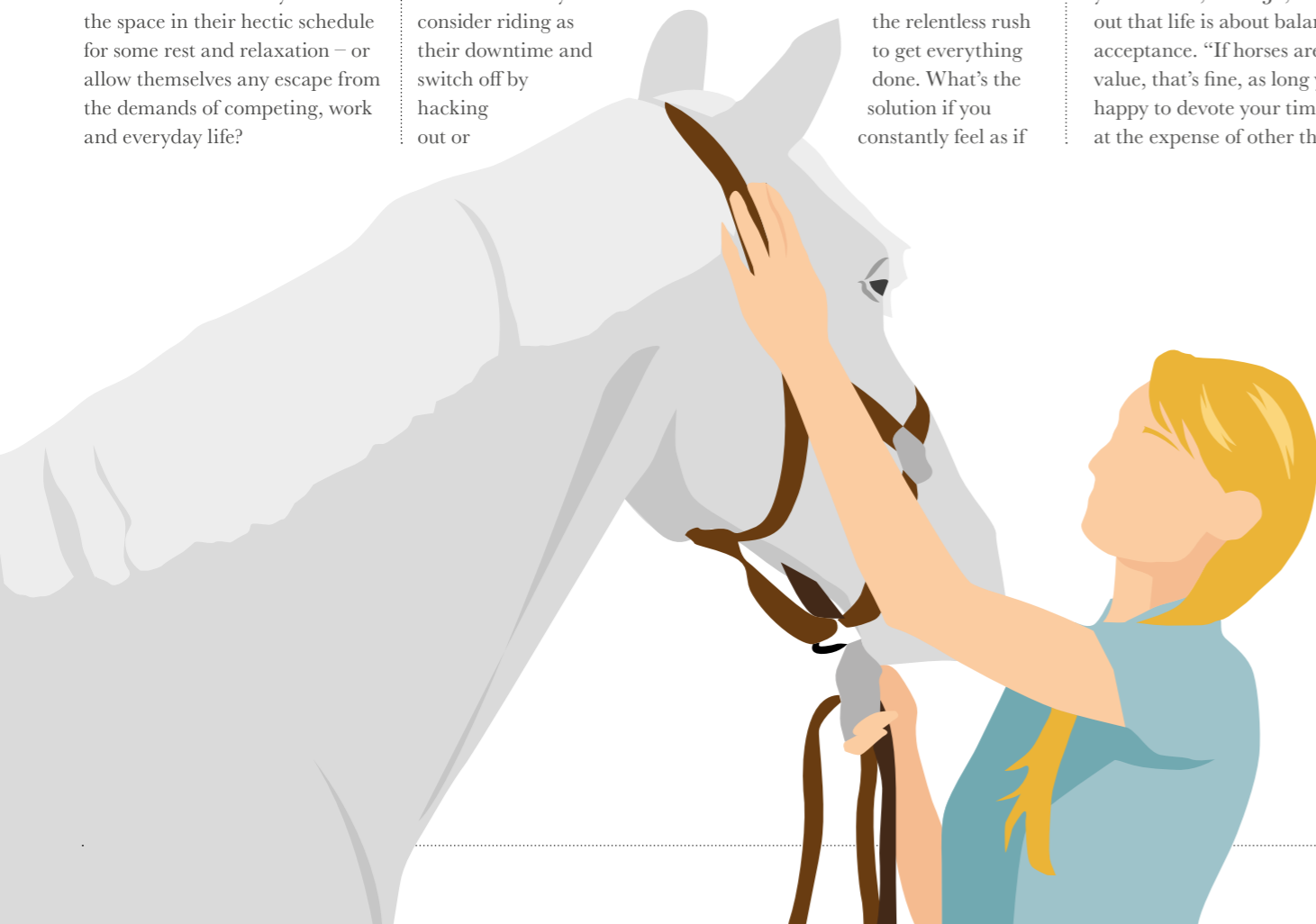
"The same is true of social media," adds Jo. "While this can be a great way to connect and make like-minded friends, social media can inflate negative comparison with other people's lives. It depends how it leaves you feeling when you come away from it. Are you supported, uplifted

and understood, having learned a new perspective, or feeling down and isolated? Ask yourself what you're getting from social media on a personal level, and whether this is helpful to you."

Positive social interaction is considered one of the most effective mood-boosters, alongside engagement in a worthwhile cause and having a purpose in life. One way to tick

all of these boxes is to make time to volunteer, either within the equestrian community or the wider world.

"Volunteering can satisfy the altruistic part of us, which links back to wellbeing," says Jo. "Helping others, aside from doing things for yourself, will give you the perfect opportunity to build relationships and find meaning." ■



CASE STUDY

Katie Palmer believed that her competition career was over when she volunteered to score for the day at a Summerhouse EC affiliated show.

"My Advanced Medium mare had been put down and I thought I'd give up," she explains. "But that day I decided to continue. I bought a three-year-old called Headmore Braithwaite, known as Boris, and we're now competing at Novice and aiming for the Winter Regionals."

Katie became involved as a volunteer through BD South West Regional Development Officer Amanda Heath.

"I'm now a volunteer marketing rep on the committee," says Katie, who works in the catering industry. "I write for the newsletter and post on social media, as well as scoring at several events throughout the year. I've learned a lot about what the judges are looking for, through sitting in on judge training and exams, and I've gained huge satisfaction from encouraging less confident members into the sport. It's important to give something back. Volunteering has added a new dimension to my riding."

With a busy job, two horses and a dog called

Harry, Katie admits that she couldn't manage without hands-on help from her mum, Carrie.

"I love going out shopping sometimes or for dinner with friends," adds Katie. "I put my heart and soul into the horses, but it can be a hard slog. It's healthy to take a break sometimes and surround yourself with non-horsey people to help keep things in perspective."

