

# What Equines Need to Be Happy

By Jen Reid

Horses, donkeys and mules are amazing friends and teachers. That happy nicker or bray that greets you at the gate can bring a smile to even the grumpiest person. Sometimes, though, simply loving them isn't enough. This story will illustrate:

## Donkey-Hotey's Story

Years ago, Donkey-Hotey roamed free with a herd of feral burros in Death Valley. Like a lot of wild horses and burros, Donkey-Hotey was removed from the wild herd and began his life as a domestic burro. He went through several homes before meeting some very nice, kind people who thought that having a burro around would be fun and a good experience for the kids. So they bought Donkey-Hotey and he moved into a small pen with a goat for a roommate.



Everything seemed fine at first. Donkey-Hotey was very friendly and seemed to be doing well. As time went on, however, he became more and more agitated and depressed. He no longer wanted to be handled, he constantly tried to break out of his pen to get to the horses in the field next door, and he started to kick at the dog. The final straw came when he attacked the goat he was living with. After that, his people felt that he was no longer safe to be around, especially since they had young children. They contacted Best Friends and asked us for help.

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So, what happened to make Donkey-Hotey act this way? His people never intentionally mistreated him. He was loved and cared for the best way they knew how. What they didn't realize, though, is that burros (like horses and mules) are roaming animals. To be happy, they first need to have space to move around. In the wild, they will easily walk an average of 20 miles per day in search of food and water. This activity provides more than just physical exercise; the mental stimulation is very important, too. Confined to a small space with nothing to do, roaming animals can get bored and frustrated.

Secondly, they are herd animals who need the companionship of others like themselves to feel safe, secure and content. In the wild, a lone horse or burro is an easy target for predators. In a domestic situation, the predator threat doesn't necessarily apply, but the innate survival instinct is still there, so a solitary animal will often feel vulnerable. Donkey-Hotey did have a goat for a companion and, for some horses or burros, a goat is a great buddy, but for Donkey-Hotey, the goat was not enough.

Donkey-Hotey's story does end happily. Since his arrival at Best Friends, Donkey-Hotey has been a model citizen. He moved into a pasture with a timid Shetland pony named

DJ who is just the same size as he is. DJ and Donkey-Hotey hit it off immediately and have been inseparable ever since. They nap together in the warm afternoon sun, they eat together, and they play all day. Donkey-Hotey is even helping DJ overcome some of his fears about people.

All Donkey-Hotey needed was some space to run and play, a good buddy, and some understanding of what makes equines (whether horses, mules or burros) the way they are. As much as we humans love them, we aren't enough of a herd to keep them happy. Since we live in the house and they live outside, the time we can spend with them is limited. When it comes to our equine companions, love is not enough – we need to understand how they think and why they act the way they do, so we can give them what they really need.

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