

Mind Matters

HOW TO REGAIN CONFIDENCE AROUND HORSES...

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Many of us have been there. Sometimes for no apparent reason, we start feeling butterflies in our stomach before every ride. If these nerves are allowed to go unchecked, they can develop into real flashes of fear, and even getting in the saddle becomes a challenge. Eventually, it gets to the point where the owner is only riding because they have to. The enjoyment has gone.

A crisis of confidence can hit any horseperson, from those just starting out to professional competitive riders. It can be especially upsetting for more experienced horse owners. When someone has ridden, owned or worked with horses for many years, loss of confidence can come as a huge shock, especially when it comes to riding and handling their own horse.

So, where does this fear originate from? Why do the four legged creatures that we devote so much time, money and energy to suddenly become the source of such acute anxiety?

Many factors can cause even courageous riders to become fearful around horses. Unsurprisingly, accidents are one of the primary causes. Especially if you're injured, the trauma of a horse-related accident can have a lingering impact on your confidence. Even if you've never done any damage yourself, you will be aware of injuries other people have had. We see people get hurt and hear of all sorts of things going wrong, particularly in this era of Facebook, Twitter and instant sharing. Over the years, we accumulate knowledge of the negative. If you're empathetic at all, these mishaps can bother you almost as much as if they were your own.

A dip in confidence can also occur when people compare themselves unfavourably to other riders. They look at their instructor or other competitors and think they are not 'good enough' for their horse. This is a psychological trap that leads to the rider having less and less faith in their own ability. They develop a mental block that affects their own and the horse's progress.

Fortunately, a lack of confidence does not mean hanging up

your riding boots forever. It is something that can be worked on and regained. The first step on the path towards increased confidence is to break down the general fear into specifics. For example, are you anticipating a bad time as soon as your seat lands in the saddle? Or are you building up nervous anticipation for the jumping work you feel you ought to be doing later? Once you have an idea of why the stress is there, you can begin to tackle the root causes head on using the following techniques.

Prepare and Relax

So much of successful riding is in the preparation. Fear at any level brings on specific symptoms, one of which is tightening and hunching of the shoulders. Focus on loosening and softening those shoulders. This will enable you to sit and breathe deeply and slowly, making both you and the horse feel much more relaxed.

Outside Influences

Very often, it is events which occur away from the horse which have the greatest impact on how well we ride. A riding diary can be a useful tool. Try to keep a record of what happened at work/home, and how your schooling session or hack went later that day. If you start to see a correlation between stressful days at work and bad riding experiences, it might be a good idea to take a break from schooling on those days. Or perhaps try some calming exercises before jumping on board. Anything to take your mind off the worries of the day before jumping in the saddle will be beneficial.

A Different Perception of Fear

Rather than thinking of fear as something that's holding you back and embarrassing you, regard it as a tool that enables you to identify the limits of your comfort zone, as well as helping you stay safe as you work to expand that zone. Think of it this way: You don't

avoid driving a car even though you know that automobile accidents do indeed happen. You simply do everything in your power to drive safely and reduce your risk of a crash.

Your fear can actually help you stay safe as you begin to learn how to overcome it. A rider's secret weapon in beating fear is the development of trust. The more trusting you feel of your horse, the less likely you are to feel afraid of him. Of course, trust doesn't just happen in the same way love might. You can love your horse to pieces, but still be afraid to ride him.

Building Trust

Trust is another way of saying prediction. That's how we don't go crazy with fear driving a car. We have a pretty good idea that the other drivers are going to stay on their side of the road. Similarly, doing groundwork and other systematic training exercises with your horse enables you to know what to expect from him, to be able to predict how he'll respond in various situations. At the same time, you're developing faith in your own ability to handle his behavior.

It's important to mention at this point that to be truly safe with your horse, your level of self-belief must match the level of skill you actually have. An artificially inflated sense of confidence may help you feel more comfortable and less fearful in the moment, but unless you also acquire the skill to merit the confidence, it won't serve you well in the long run and can be dangerous.

Groundwork is King

Groundwork is vital as it enables you to begin to learn all the essentials in a setting where you naturally feel safer (from the ground). Through groundwork, you learn a horse doesn't communicate through verbal language, that instead, it's an entire bodily process for him. You learn to speak that language, and then use those language skills to ask your horse to perform certain actions. When you can do that along with the many other skills groundwork teaches, your self-confidence, will increase.

Remember, fear works off avoidance. Turning away from and avoiding fear 'feeds' it., allowing it to persist and actually grow stronger. Imagine you walk into a round pen with your horse, for example, and he pins his ears at you. If this makes you fearful and you choose to leave the pen, your fear is 'rewarded,' and therefore grows. Your horse also learns a bad lesson about how to 'back you off.'

On the contrary, if you stay and do the things you need to do to get those ears up and pointed at you, under the guidance of a trainer if need be, then that fear will retreat, and you will learn to experience less fear in the presence of your horse.

In the Saddle

The same principle applies when you're riding. If your horse's head suddenly goes up and you feel that knot of fear, you need to have a pre-planned strategy to deal with it. Maybe ride him in a figure-eight or a serpentine, or even a small circle to distract him and regain his attention. If you're too anxious to accomplish even that, then dismount and immediately do some groundwork to regain control and remind him to listen and be respectful. You may or may not get back on at that point, but the key thing is to stay with your horse and work him until your fear subsides. This is why it is important to have done the groundwork first. So you always have something rock solid to fall back on.

Fear and loss of confidence is not something to be ashamed of. It is something that can blight anyone at anytime and is often a perfectly reasonable response, considering the size and nature of the animals we have chosen to deal with! The mark of a true horseperson is acknowledging that fear, figuring out how to cope with it and coming out the other side, often more confident and capable than they were before. Take it one step at a time and above all be patient. The rewards and renewed enjoyment you get out of your riding will make every effort you have put in more than worthwhile.

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