

FEAR OF RIDING?

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Where riding-related fear comes from, how trust beats it, and how you can develop that trust.

Groundwork is an important part of building trust in your horse.

Does fear keep you from enjoying your horse as much as you'd like ... and often perplexed and frustrated? If so, you're in good company.

"I'm a good rider on a good horse, and I'm still a nervous wreck," confided one rider. "My horse tosses his head or speeds up a little, and I have a panic attack."

From another: *"It's as if I got into my late 30s and just lost my nerve. Now, I'm the one who spooks at the slightest hint a horse may shy. What happened to me?!"*

Fearfulness. Among middle-aged women especially (more on that in a moment), it's widespread and often chronic. Left unchecked, it can drain away the pleasure our horses otherwise bring us.

We're going to explore what causes that fear, then explain how trust, plus the skills and knowledge you develop as you gain trust, can drive it away—for good. There's science behind the mechanism that enables us to become more confident; we'll explain how you can take advantage of it.

Ultimately, if you invest the necessary time and effort into developing a trusting relationship with your horse, you almost certainly can attain (or regain from your youth) the confidence that makes riding a joy.

What Did Happen to Us?

Many factors can cause even once-bold riders to become fearful around horses. These include:

- **Wrecks.** Especially if you're injured, the trauma of a horse-related accident can have a lingering impact on your confidence. You're prompted to think, "How many more of these do I want to have?". And the answer—zero—causes you to begin to hang back.
- **Empathy.** Even if you've never had a wreck of your own, you're aware of others' mishaps, more so now than ever in this age of cyber-sharing. By the time you're 50, you've seen people get hurt and heard of all sorts of things going wrong. You've been accumulating knowledge of the negative. And if you're empathetic at all, these mishaps can bother you almost as much as if they were your own.
- **Aging.** We naturally feel more vulnerable as we age. There are psychological and mental changes that begin to occur. Reflexes are not what they once were, and we're aware that bodies break and don't mend as well as before. Add to the equation your family responsibilities, plus that "having to go to work on Monday" reality," and you naturally become more guarded—and thus more prone to fear.
- **Gender issues.** Women, in particular, are more prone to fearfulness as they age. Many who never had phobias before may develop them when they get beyond 40. The cause may be partly hormonal, but it may also reflect a social pattern prevalent among women. They may retire early or not have worked outside of the home, and this lessened exposure to new environments may make them more vulnerable to fear. Women are also especially prone to osteoporosis (brittle bones), which may add to their other age-related fears of increasing vulnerability.
- **New data.** Many of us grew up blissfully ignorant about head injuries. By contrast, today we know a lot more about traumatic brain injuries in all different sports. And, not surprisingly, as we become more aware, we tend to become more cautious.

How Fear is Overcome

The causes of fear may be daunting, but they can be overcome, given enough effort over a sustained period of time. Your first step, say experts, is to reframe your fear. Rather than thinking of it 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, plus helps 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 (a lot of them, in fact, every single day). You simply do everything in your power to drive safely and reduce your risk of a crash.

Your fear, then, can actually help you stay safe as you begin to learn how to overcome it. **And your secret weapon in overcoming fear? The development of trust. Feelings of trust actually help drive feelings of fear out of your brain.** We don't know exactly how this occurs, but a 2005 brain-imaging study at the National Institute of Mental Health discovered that the fear-processing circuitry in the human brain appears to be short-circuited by the brain chemical oxytocin—often referred to as the “trust” hormone. The brain scans revealed that this trust hormone quells the brain's fear hub, the amygdala, in response to fear-inducing stimuli.

So, by extension, **the more trusting you feel of your horse, the less likely you are to feel afraid of him.** Trust doesn't just happen, of course, the way, say, love might. **You can love your horse to pieces, but still be afraid to ride him.**

After you've done what's necessary to develop a genuinely trusting relationship with him, however, you'll have accomplished several things: instilled respectfulness in him, improved your human-equine communication skills, and learned how to predict—and deal with—his most likely behavior.

Reduced to an equation, it would be this: **Trust overrides fear; systematic training + enough time invested = trust.**

'Predict and Control'

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.**

When we can predict and/or control the environment we're in, we have 'self-efficacy,' which is our belief in our ability to predict and control. Self-efficacy has a profound effect on the transmitter substances in the brain—another way of saying there is great power in our perceptions. So self-efficacy keeps us from becoming overwhelmed with fear and anxiety.

But to be truly safe with your horse your level of self-efficacy must match the level of skill you actually have with your horse. 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 even be dangerous.

What this means in practical terms is that **you must put in the time necessary, via systematic training, and with expert guidance if need be, to learn how to effectively predict and control your horse.**

Groundwork is Key

Groundwork is especially useful for this process, as it enables you to begin to learn all the essentials (communicate effectively, command respect, predict your horse's responses, effectively deal with those responses) 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, then use those language skills to move your horse the same way a mother moves her foal. Come close, move away. When you can do that along with the many other skills groundwork teaches, your self-efficacy, or confidence, increases."

He goes on to explain that fear has a natural life cycle, and that having a well-thought-out advance plan, through your training program, will help you to stand up to fear.

Fear works off avoidance. There's a physiological response involved that's conditioned by the action of avoidance. Turning away from and avoiding fear 'feeds' it. It then persists and actually grows stronger.

Let's say you walk into a round pen with your horse, for example, and he pins his ears at you. If this makes you fearful and want to move away, if you do move away—that is, leave the pen—your fear is 'rewarded,' and therefore grows. (Your horse also learns a bad lesson about how to 'back you off.')

But 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 learn to experience less fear in the presence of your horse.

A Mounted Plan, Too

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.

Clearly, what you don't want to do instead is "turn away" by getting off and putting your horse up. Standing your ground requires you to have the skills and knowledge necessary to do so, however, and that's why an ongoing, systematic training program is essential to your success.

You have to have done the groundwork in advance so you always have something rock solid to fall back on.

With this formula, you advance as far as you can within your comfort zone, then go one step further, knowing you can fall back temporarily, if need be, to reestablish your confidence.

Move to where you experience a little anxiety then try to 'stay' until you begin to establish a sense of predictability and control. We can never completely predict a horse's behavior, but we can get to where we can reasonably control what's likely to happen in a given situation.

And that is what gives you confidence.

References:

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