

Getting Back in the Saddle: Managing Fear
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Nettie Barr and Ribbon

If the truth were known, I think at some point most people with horses have experienced some fear issues. Fear is normal, it is healthy, and it is Mother Nature hard at work within us saying, "I want to live". I call fear "self preservation" and consider it a great gift.

Rather than being ashamed, recognize that your senses are working well, appreciate this gift and work with it rather than against it. Fear can cause us to re-evaluate our situation or make quick life saving decisions. However, fear becomes unhealthy when we allow it to control, holding us back from doing the things we enjoy.

Following are some suggestions in helping you overcome some of your fears.

Set yourself up for success rather than failure: Don't take on too much at once. If all you can handle today is to brush your horse, be proud of that.

Listen to the little voice inside of you: A lot of times well meaning on-lookers at arenas or horse events give all kinds of suggestions that we feel uncertain about or not ready for. Listen to your little voice. You will know when you feel ready to try something or move on to the next step.

Take your time and don't feel pressured: We are often in a big hurry to reach our goals and this creates a lot of unnecessary pressure. Take time with you and your horse. Avoid deadlines. Challenge yourself slowly within the level of expertise, knowledge and understanding of both you and your horse. Speed is irrelevant. For example: if you and your horse are having issues at the walk, do not feel pressured to trot, and certainly do not try to lope. Speed adds negatively to the problem already at hand. If your horse is pushy and will not stop well at the walk, speed is not going to sharpen up that stop. Rather, the horse will become more reactive and more difficult to stop. I have seen many people gallop on their horses and I would like to see many more, but with control, mentally, emotionally and physically.

Begin on the ground: If you and your horse do not have understanding and respect on the ground, being mounted is certainly not going to improve the situation. Ground work enables you and your horse to develop an understanding while your feet are still on solid ground. It allows the horse the opportunity to learn and grow in confidence about us and what we are asking, and for us to work without invading his space, or causing him to go off balance should we lose our balance when riding.

Using lateral flexion: Bending the horse's head to the right or the left in a submissive position is often referred to as the emergency rein position or lateral flexion. It is important that you teach this first on the ground, and then build to this understanding under saddle. Lateral flexion not only bends the horse's head in a submissive head position, it also causes the horse to release endorphins (the happy hormone) and disengage the hindquarters. The hindquarters are the motor of the horse. When we pull on two reins we engage the hindquarters, empowering him. When we use one rein to bend the horse's head to the left or right in lateral flexion we disengage the hindquarters, taking the power away from the horse.



Nettie demonstrating lateral flexion with Baker



Themis Laffitte sending her horse through a water obstacle

Obstacle course: Set up little obstacle courses for you and your horse on the ground. Begin with small, easy obstacles and work up to more challenging ones as you become more confident. Don't make this complicated or expensive. Mother Nature provides you with all kinds of "free" toys to play with. Send your horse jumping over a small tree that has blown over, back him up a small hill, send him through a large puddle of water, back him between two trees fairly close together, and the list goes on. Progress to where you can jump the horse over a higher jump, or back him over the small tree that blew over, etc. Try to keep yourself in the mindset of playing with your horse rather than drilling him to learn tasks. Create a learning atmosphere based on trust that builds confidence, never asking for more than both you and the horse can handle. This will not only make the horse more confident, but you as well.

Getting back in the saddle: Begin in a safe environment, review ground work to ensure you and your horse have an understanding before getting on. Again, the same principles apply as with all of the other steps -- take your time. Avoid speed. When mounting a horse, look the horse in the eye. The eye will tell you before his body that something is not right. If things look tense, play with your horse on the ground until he is relaxed, accepting, and responding to you in a positive way.

Mount your horse, and before swinging your leg over, rub him on the opposite side of his neck, introducing yourself to the other side, then swing your leg over. Sit down and relax. The first thing I encourage people to do when they mount their horse is lateral flexion. Remember in the previous point, this maneuver relaxes the horse, releasing endorphins, and will probably relax you too. Rub your horse while sitting in the saddle.

If this is all you can handle for the day, be proud of yourself, maybe tomorrow you will want to take a step or two. When the time is right, and you want to ask your horse for forward movement, begin at the walk and ask for just a few steps, stop, ask for lateral flexion, relax and rub your horse. Slowly build to where you can ask for more steps as you and your horse become more comfortable with one another.

Trail Riding: Whether you are going on your first trail ride, or the first trail ride since a bad experience, coming out of the arena and into the open country can be a big step. We sometimes feel we should undertake the whole task in one step, but, again, we need to begin slowly. You can have your horse saddled and ready to ride, but begin by walking on foot with your horse on the trail. Even if you are 20 feet from home and feel you want to mount your horse and ride back just those 20 feet, be proud of yourself! It is a great start. Maybe tomorrow you can ride further. In time you will build the confidence to leave and return under saddle.



Vanessa Klimp taking time to stop and rub her horse



**Reiner Haack desensitizing
with a plastic bag**

What if I feel I need to dismount? Often we have been taught that if you dismount a horse, he wins, so ride it out. This puts us in a very unsafe and fear-based situation. Consider this...people pay money to go and watch cowboys, who have learned how to ride bucking horses, to see if they can stay on. I'm guessing if they stand the chance of getting bucked off, so do we.

When it comes to staying on or getting off, we find ourselves worrying about what is the right thing or the wrong thing to do. Again, I encourage you to listen to that little voice. If you feel you need to dismount, dismount. To relax the horse, do some ground work that relates to the task you were having difficulty with. When you are more confident and in a more relaxed mindset, remount and ask your horse for this task under saddle.

Set up building blocks for you and your horse in stages that both of you are ready for. Some people feel the need to dismount because they are afraid, even if their horse is relaxed. I encourage you to dismount, be proud of yourself and say, ride #1 is over, I am now ready for ride #2. Mount again and you will find that in time you will

have the confidence to stay on longer. Think about how great your horse will be in terms of mounting and dismounting!

Remember that horsemanship is an ongoing journey. It is a journey that presents opportunities for growth through highs and lows. Enjoy this time by eliminating pressure with deadlines that we inflict upon ourselves. Tie in with someone knowledgeable and trustworthy for advice. Ride with people who allow you the time and space to grow and develop your horsemanship skills. Good horsemanship skills are based on principles of fairness and safety with solid building blocks that prepare both you and the horse. Choose a horse that is suited to your level of experience and skill. Take your time and be safe.

I wish you many great rides.

