



## Mental Rehearsal

### Module Four, Session Three

The third mindset mastery tool I'm going to talk about is mental rehearsal. Riders at all levels use it to train both their minds and their bodies for the sport. Mental rehearsal is one of the most practical and effective tools that I have my riders use. I like to call it mental rehearsal instead of visualization because it has little to do with actually seeing and everything to do with feeling and experiencing. The brain doesn't distinguish between reality and fantasy. This can work for you or against you. It gives your imagined experiences the potential to become as impactful as physical experiences. If you go over and over in your mind all the things that could go wrong or things that have gone wrong in the past, it can work against you. If you utilize the positive power of mental rehearsal, you can give yourself the experience of being in the zone and riding to your potential over and over before it actually occurs.

Try this. Get yourself into a relaxed and comfortable position. Close your eyes. Imagine that you are performing whatever it is- a dressage test, a barrel run, a show jumping round or mounting and training quietly at home. Notice how you feel when you're calm and focused. Notice the sounds. Notice how your horse feels, how your partnership works. What do the reins feel like in your hands?

Go through your entire routine in real time. Imagine yourself performing with complete relaxation and confidence. Ride every turn, every half halt, and every transition just as you plan to. A five-minute dressage test should take you five full minutes to get through. Avoid doing this while you're in bed or during times of the day when you're likely to be drowsy. You won't make it past your first lengthening or your second fence!

You can do a short mental rehearsal before a training session or lesson. And oddly, there is some new research that shows that mental rehearsal done after a ride or performance can actually have a bigger impact on skill acquisition than if it is done before. Again, this is something that you want to gain mastery with daily, not wait until

you are at a horse show! Personally, when I'm getting ready for a competition, I do a mental rehearsal of my dressage test just before I go to bed every night for several weeks. I find that when I don't do this, I feel less confident and prepared.

This is about much more than just memorizing a dressage test. It is about practicing your performance exactly as you'd like to perform it- creating the neural pathways in your brain that will allow you to perform just as you plan to during the real thing!

I think mental rehearsal is too often associated with simple positive self-talk or memorization. These miss the true value in effective mental rehearsal. There is a lot of research that shows that mental rehearsal stimulates the exact same electrical impulses in your brain that physical practice does. Only when you practice mentally, you get to practice perfectly.

That said, you can also use mental rehearsal to mitigate your "what ifs" and practice handling the unexpected. If you're afraid your horse is going to spook or buck, mentally rehearse the spook or the buck. In order to change your emotional reactions to situations, you want to evoke the very emotions you want to change. Envision the stressful situation and mentally rehearse managing that situation with equanimity and focus. Basically, practice shifting yourself from the fear cycle into the power cycle while you are imagining a stressful situation. By doing this, you can radically shift the way you respond to the stressful scenario if it actually occurs. I have clients who deal with a lot of mental "what ifs", include spooks or stops or errant golf carts in their mental rehearsal. You can practice performing a not so perfect scenario, perfectly.

There is an aspect of desensitization in mental rehearsal. In order to become desensitized to a stressor, let's say a huge snake, a person will not simply imagine themselves getting close to the snake over and over. They will imagine themselves getting close to the snake and handling the experience differently. They will mentally practice coping strategies that they will eventually use when they come face to face with the real deal. This preparation enables them to create new neural and mental pathways. They are able to connect an actual life experience with a new emotional response. An example of this for our purposes would be imagining yourself at a show, if that is a stressor for you, and repeatedly using your mantra and other mindset mastery tools to recondition your emotional and physiological response to being at a show.

Mental rehearsal is applicable in a variety of scenarios- not limited to riding. You can use it to reprogram procrastination, frustration, negative self-talk and almost any situation you want to change your response to. You can learn to vividly evoke the desired experience, reframe the situation, shift your emotional response and rehearse your desired behavior. When you do this again and again, you create new, positive habit

patterns. Without mental rehearsal, you'll be more likely to remain stuck in old patterns. Without intentional and thoughtful intervention, we almost always gravitate to our default ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Think about it- all great types of performance require rehearsal. If you want to shift from the fear cycle to the power cycle it will require rehearsal too.

Give it a try and set yourself up for success in all areas of your life!