



What Doesn't Work

Module Five, Session One

In module five of The Performance Project, we're going to focus on how to intercept the fear cycle at the level of emotions. The ability to efficiently process emotion is as important as the ability to retrain your brain. This is a topic that is often left out of mental skills discussions in our sport but one that is an extremely impactful aspect of horse-human partnerships.

Ten years ago, I got bucked off my big, young mare at a symposium. I hadn't had the mare for very long. She was seventeen hands, barely four, a super dynamic mover and she'd just come into her first heat cycle in the six months I'd owned her. She came out of the trailer breathing fire. During my lesson, there were people stomping around up in the viewing area. There were shots going off a nearby sportsman's club and I felt like I was sitting on ten kegs of dynamite. The clinician thought the best way to work through her tension was to canter right away. I knew that she would explode if I asked her for canter. So I trotted around like a little kid on a pony as he yelled louder and louder, for me to canter. At some point I decided to just do it.

I don't remember hitting the ground but I do remember flying through the air. I didn't end up in the hospital that day but both my body and my psyche took a hit. In the months that followed, I experienced debilitating fear for the first time in my life. My mare would flick an ear and I would get an adrenaline rush. An acute fear response to a trigger had been put in place. For the first time, I could not control the tension in my body. I got so frustrated with myself because it seemed like I was having these over-the-top reactions to every little thing. I could not control my thoughts or my body very well once fear took over. Now I understood what some of my students had been experiencing throughout all my years of teaching!

I was a professional. And this horse meant the world to me. I would lay awake at night thinking over and over about the very real prospect that I might fail with her and that my career could be over if I couldn't get a handle on the fear.

So began my journey to figure this thing out. I read books, consulted sports psychologists and dove deep into the topic of overcoming fear. I knew that the special dynamic that exists between horse and rider required more than just basic sports psychology. As I started to work through it, I realized that getting out of the cycle of fear meant tackling it from three different perspectives. It had to be intercepted on the levels of the mind, emotions and body. If it wasn't, there would always be some residual fear left. It would keep sneaking in, unwarranted and unwanted. It became my mission to understand it on all three of these levels.

So, I got past it. I retrained my brain but, more importantly, I developed what I've come to call emotional suppleness. I was able to ride my mare and be a fair partner to her again. I began to share what I'd learned with my students and clients.

This program I've developed for getting to the other side of fear was born of my own, desperate need to get my mojo back ten years ago. And it has grown through my work with so many riders since, who want to achieve the joy that lives on the other side of fear.

Along the way, I've learned what doesn't work when you're trying to help someone overcome fear. In the horse world- we're taught to buck up, get back on the horse, and push through fear. We think we should be able to get rid of it through repetition and grit. We think we're supposed to be fearless. Unfortunately, this philosophy tends to increase fear and build up resistance in most riders.

Emotions are real- they are chemical, neural responses in the body. Any fear we're trying to suppress, get rid of, or avoid gets stuck in our bodies. Fear can get harder and harder to manage because it gets stronger the more we try to deny it or judge ourselves for having it.

Fear is a powerful alarm system that occurs instinctively. It is not logical. When my mare flicked her ear, I wasn't thinking, "OMG, she's going to buck!" I've been riding for most of my life. I knew that a flicking ear did not mean danger. But a trigger had been installed. My body was not distinguishing between the moment I felt out of control during my fall and the moment I saw her ear flick. Not only does combating fear with logic not work, it can make things worse.

Most riders who experience fear, judge themselves for it. They think things like, "Why can't I just get over it?" and "Why can't I just be care free like everyone else?" "There must be something wrong with me." Often, an instructor's first instinct is to reassure. They say things like, "You're fine. Your horse is not going to do anything bad. There's nothing to worry about. Just trust him."

As well intentioned as these are, they assume that the rider has the ability to think their way out of something that is occurring physiologically. All of these supportive statements are effective if they happen before the trigger has occurred. But once fear has been triggered and a rider is having an acute response, they only serve to heighten the judgement and resistance that is already keeping the fear in place. This will make more sense after our discussion in the next session about how emotions are supposed to work.

Another common response that doesn't work is to tell a rider to "relax." Again, this might be useful pre-trigger but unless specific instructions are given for how to relax, the rider will likely still feel powerless to do so. It is very difficult to follow instructions when you're experiencing acute fear. The implication that they should be able to relax can increase internal resistance and exacerbate fear.

One other well intentioned mistake trainers often make is to ask students to "push through" fear. They encourage them to ride their nervous horse in the scary end of the arena despite their fear so that they can find out there are no ghosts. They encourage them to jump the scary jump or just do the scary canter transition so they can discover their fear is unwarranted. They focus on the task instead of the emotions thinking that this will support the student in getting over the fear.

All of these are totally natural and well intentioned responses! And they can all be like putting a lid on a pot of boiling water when it comes to fear. The next few sessions will help you understand what you need in order to overcome this kind of fear so that you can ask for it. You'll also, more effectively, be able to support others.