



Emotional Suppleness

Module Five, Session Two

As riders, we should strive to be as supple emotionally as we ask our horses to be physically.

I'll never promise you that you will be fearless. That would be crazy and also boring. Emotions are a part of the human experience.

The goal is not to be fearless. The goal is to get really good at processing emotions so that you can behave according to your values and your goals instead of according to your emotions. Through the exercises we're going to discuss in the next couple of sessions, you'll get good at processing your emotions. You'll still feel fear but you'll learn to trust that it'll pass in a wave. If you allow them to, emotions come and go fairly quickly. You might still feel nervous but you'll be able to turn your nerves into a powerful engine for inspiration.

Please take a look at The Energy Chart PDF. I find this to be an extremely useful way to understand how emotions work. It's a staircase shaped chart. The lower energy states on the bottom steps are represented by emotions that we commonly think of as negative. Starting from the bottom: shame, guilt, apathy, grief, fear, desire, anger, and pride are all lower level energy states. Courage is next. It's the gateway to higher energy states. The emotions we commonly think of as positive emotions are on the higher steps: courage, neutrality, willingness, acceptance, reason, love, joy, peace and enlightenment. As human beings, we're supposed to constantly be moving up and down this chart- one emotion to the next. When emotions are doing what they are supposed to do, we're able to feel afraid or angry but then move up the chart once the source of that fear or anger has subsided.

The word “emotion” means “to move”. Babies, puppies and horses are all great examples of emotion operating as it is meant to. Babies cry when they’re sad, laugh when they’re happy and wail when they’re angry- sometimes all within a period of minutes. They don’t tell stories about why they should or shouldn’t feel a particular way. They don’t beat themselves up for shedding a tear or feel ashamed when they giggle out loud at something fun. Horses spook and can be in a free walk a few seconds later. This is how emotions are supposed to work.

So, what causes things to go awry?

In our society, we’re trained to suppress emotions from a very young age. We’re told to control our anger, hold back our tears, and act happy no matter how we really feel. As riders, we’re told to suck it up and not let the horse know we’re afraid. Stuffing our emotions becomes a habit and results in it being stuck in our bodies.

When we experience a trauma or even just a bad thing in whatever form, it triggers an emotional response. Our brains are programmed to seek pleasure and avoid pain. So the first thing we do is try to suppress the uncomfortable emotion. We try to pretend we don’t feel it. We hold it in. We distract ourselves with other things, and we instinctively bury it.

In the case of me and my big mare, I had the conditioned response that, as humans, we generally have to trauma. I stuffed my emotions thinking they were bad and undesirable. I wanted to protect myself from feeling them. My fear was exacerbated by other emotions that occurred at the time. Shame, guilt, grief and anger were all getting stuck in my nervous system. This made the fear seem even worse when it got triggered. This is why our fear responses can seem illogical or out of proportion to the circumstances.

Think about what you do when you feel tears coming on, when you feel afraid in front of people or when you feel ashamed. If you’re like most people, you try to hold it in and play it off as if you are not feeling those things.

This is where emotions start misbehaving. If you don’t properly process the feeling when it happens- it quite literally gets stuck. It lives, latent, in your body. Every time you come up against something that reminds your psyche of it, you’ll likely have a bigger emotional response than seems warranted. This is what we most commonly hear referred to as “being triggered”. This can go on for years. And it is cumulative. It often gets worse over time rather than better. This can be crazy making because we have this idea that fear should go away with time. But it can actually become more intense the

more we judge it for being illogical. Being fearful can become a part of your identity because it's so persistent. But there's good news! You can change all this pretty quickly.

So how do you interrupt this pattern and get unstuck? Here's the deal. The only way past it is through it. You've got to learn to efficiently and gracefully process difficult emotions so they pass in a wave rather than set up camp in your nervous system. **THE KEY TO THIS IS TO BECOME THE OBSERVER OF YOUR EMOTIONS.** To stop judging them.

Emotions are supposed to occur in relation to a thought about a particular circumstance. They are then supposed to subside when that circumstance goes away. Because we tend to repress our emotions and tell stories in our minds to keep them place, many emotions (especially the lower level energy states) do not subside. We might distract ourselves from them or act tough and pretend they're gone but the emotions stay dormant in our bodies, just waiting to overreact! In the next session, I'm going to share with you what I call the Fear Scale exercise. It's an effective exercise for developing emotional suppleness and beginning to get past fear that messes with your mojo. So keep going!