



Nervous System Nuts & Bolts

Module Six, Session One

Welcome to module six of The Performance Project. We've talked about ways to intercept the fear cycle at the level of the mind through Mindset Mastery and at the level of the emotions through developing Emotional Suppleness. Now it's time to talk about how to intercept the fear cycle at the level of the body.

Before you can change or implement something, you first need to understand it. In this session, I'm going to describe (in basic terms) some concepts concerning the function of the nervous system that relate to us as riders. But first, I'm going to provide you with some definitions that will give us a shared language and ultimately, help you be able to take your performance skills and your ability to ride with confidence, presence and connection to the next level.

The autonomic nervous system is in charge of the functioning of the internal organs. It is autonomous- meaning that it acts independently from the brain's conscious control. It has two main divisions: sympathetic and parasympathetic.

The **sympathetic** branch increases alertness, energy, blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing rate. It prepares your body for intense physical activity and triggers what is often referred to as the "fight-or-flight response".

The **parasympathetic** division, has almost the exact opposite effect. It triggers relaxation in your body and decreases alertness, blood pressure, and heart rate. It creates calm and supports digestion. It is associated with the "rest & digest" response.

When these two branches are working well together, the sympathetic nervous system is activated when there is a perceived threat and your body will prepare to fight or flee.

When the threat subsides, the parasympathetic nervous system kicks in and your physiological functions calm down and return to normal.

As riders, it's important for us to understand how this works so we can, more efficiently, recover from spooks, bolts or competition nerves.

When your body gets "stuck" in either sympathetic activation or parasympathetic activation, things stop working as smoothly as they should.

Hyper Activation of the nervous system is caused by ongoing stress. Cortisol is released into the bloodstream and the fight or flight response in the body is sustained for longer than it should be. Anxiety, difficulty focusing, high emotionality and shallow breathing are all signs of hyper activation. This is what can happen when you are in "the fear cycle" too often or for too long. Basically, your nervous system gets stuck in high gear.

Hypo Activation of the nervous system is when your primary body functions slow down too much. It's associated with depression, delayed response time, emotional withdrawal or "shutting down." Hypo activation can happen when the sympathetic nervous system is in high alert for an unsustainable period of time and then crashes. You might feel tired, sluggish or unmotivated. Symptoms can also include feeling lethargic, disorganized or "spacy." Basically, your nervous system is stuck in low gear.

So, it follows that Optimal Nervous System Activation is when these two branches of the nervous system operate in harmony. Our nervous system is designed to deal with short moments of stress that threaten survival. The sympathetic fight or flight response is not supposed to last very long because the body can't sustain itself in that stressed state. When things are working well, the parasympathetic nervous system kicks in quickly to calm things down following a perceived threat. The optimal functioning of the nervous system means that you have a functioning alarm system so you can stay safe, but also a system that kicks in to return things to normal when the threat is over. In optimal activation, these two work together throughout the day. We get stressed, then we calm down. When these waves are happening regularly, we're able to get "into the zone". We're able to engage socially and be connected to our environment. We're able to access our athletic abilities and be emotionally supple. We're open to new experiences, able to listen to our intuition, and learn. We're responsive to our environment and able to think clearly. And obviously, this is when our horses are the most confident and comfortable with us.

The most common imbalance is hyper activation of the sympathetic nervous system. When the body remains in a state of fight or flight, this can prevent you from being able to think clearly, focus, control your body and engage authentically with other people. It can make it difficult to truly connect with your horse and ride with confidence. You might feel overly reactive to sound or movement when you're riding and more vulnerable to your Inner Critic voice. Horses are so sensitive that you can imagine how hyper activation can impact them as well.

People who come to me complaining of a lack of motivation and an inability to get energized and inspired by things that ordinarily fire them up, are usually in hypo activation mode. This means they were probably stressed or "on" for an extended period of time and their nervous system has shut down out of self-preservation. This is common in riders who are high powered and extremely ambitious and in riders who deal with a high degree of fear, anxiety or self-doubt. What I continue to learn, is that it's not enough to just focus on mental skills. We also need to focus on our physiology. We need to learn to "rev up" when we are stuck in parasympathetic low gear and "rev down" when we are stuck in sympathetic high gear.

I recently had a client who'd come to me wanting to get her anxiety under control so that she could ride with more confidence and have more fun competing. She'd read some sports psych books and set her goals. She was trying all the things but nothing was working. She continued to feel stressed and plagued by anxiety.

As she was telling me all this, I realized that she was DOING all the things but not BEING. She was not slowing down. Taking the time to let the exercises she was using, sink into her body. All the tools she was using are only effective if you allow yourself to experience them deeply enough that they impact your physiology. She was going through the motions but not thoroughly enough to activate her parasympathetic nervous system and actually experience the "revving down" that she needed. Her nervous system was in hyper activation and she was going to need to address that in her body before the mindset work was going to make a difference.

I had her do some of the strategies that I'm going to share with you in this module. I asked her to slow down and consider that it was not enough just to do the exercises. She needed to actually feel them. This is not easy if your nervous system has been stuck

in high gear. We needed to find ways to rev her nervous system down before she could fully leverage the mindset tools she already had. She had to make her body a safe place to be before she could fully access her intellect and benefit from the other work.

We tend to look for safety outside ourselves rather than learning to create it within. If you're constantly feeling like your emotions and experiences are bigger than what your body can hold, you want to increase your capacity by helping your nervous system to become more balanced. Your ability to intentionally regulate your nervous system increases its ability to handle more stress and stimuli. When your nervous system has an increased capacity to respond to and recover from stress, you'll feel more socially engaged, able to adapt to new things, and able to expand your comfort zone. You'll also be able to help your horse feel safe and build capacity for embracing instead of fleeing from new experiences. This is what it's all about!