



Train Your Nervous System Like You Train Your Horse

Module Six, Session Two

In positive reinforcement training we have two terms we use to describe two types of training behavior- that is the behavior of the trainer, not the horse. These two terms are splitting and lumping.

In splitting, you have a plan in mind to teach your horse something. You set your goal. You identify your starting point and divide the goal into baby steps. Then you train every step separately and consecutively to mastery before you move on the next. In this way, you train or shape your desired skill in a very systematic way. Each baby step is a building block toward the final goal.

In lumping, your expectations for the horse are too big. You have a goal but you ask for everything all at once. You've skipped some steps. The horse does not fully understand what is being asked. As the trainer, if you've lumped, you've asked the horse to meet too many criteria, too soon. The horse may show signs of frustration. He might become disinterested, resistant or shut down because he doesn't understand what is expected of him.

Hopefully, we don't just grab a frightened horse out of the stall, slap a saddle on it and start cracking the whip to get it to do what we want. Instead, we slowly acclimate it to each new stimulus in order to build confidence and calm.

Good splitting is not easy. It takes practice and patience. At first glance, it can seem that splitting is a much longer route to your goal. But over time, you'll find that splitting actually takes less time because the horse learns to learn and gets good at tackling each little step along the way. With splitting, learning is thorough and reliable.

Think of your comfort zone like a balloon- if you blow it up quickly, with force, it will pop. If you blow it up slowly and gradually, it will get larger and larger.

What does this have to do with performance skills? You want to treat your own nervous system as if it's a horse. That means no lumping. No "pushing" through fear or going to a show and riding through a show jumping round if you're still nervous jumping at home. No more doing things because you think you should, despite joy-stealing fear. Starting now, you treat yourself with the same compassion you would a horse. This doesn't mean you don't have high standards and big goals. It just means you become a splitter. You split your goal up into as many small pieces as possible. You go step by step through those pieces and tackle them one at a time- giving your nervous system time to adjust to each new level of stimulus. This is not about convincing yourself that there's nothing to be afraid of. It's also not about letting yourself off the hook.

I have a client whose goal was to ride in a cavalletti class with her friends. Her horse had bolted with her once in the past and she came to me wanting to overcome the fear that had been mushrooming ever since. Her instructor and she both agreed that her horse was safe and appropriate. She was afraid to ride with other horses in the ring and fear had pretty much become her constant companion. Some days, she was so paralyzed by it that she could not get her horse to go forward at all. Other days, he would start out a little spooky and she would get off and put him away. She was missing out on so much. Her nervous system was hyper activated and she was stuck in the fear cycle.

So here is what she did to retrain her nervous system. First, she had to accept that she was having a physiological response to riding that she could not change by talking herself out of it. She realized would need to retrain her nervous system to not be so reactive to certain things. Then, she decided on her baby steps and made a plan. Her first step would be to walk and trot in the arena with one other horse while using the fear scale exercise. Remember, the fear scale is a reference tool for observing the level of emotion you are experiencing. One is mild butterflies and five is, "get me the hell out of here."

Once she had mastered riding in the ring with one other horse, she would move on to her second step, which was to ride through a variety of cavalletti exercises with one other horse in the ring. Then she would ride through cavalletti with two other horses in the ring and then ultimately, attend her cavalletti class.

Here's the thing though. Her nervous system was so sensitive by now that she had to break things down even more. I asked her to identify the first trigger. She said she could feel her nerves as soon as she started leading her horse from the barn aisle into the arena. She would feel her fear go from a one to a four as she got nearer to the arena door. That would be step one: Leading her horse from grooming stall to arena. The next trigger was mounting. That would be step two. Then walking off. Then making walk- halt transitions. Then riding a 20-meter circle at the walk. Then the whole arena in the walk; Then walk-trot transitions; Then a 20-meter circle in the trot; Then the whole arena in the trot. Then leading her horse in the arena while a trusted friend was riding a trusted horse; Then riding while her friend

leads the other horse; Then riding together in the arena at walk; Then riding together at walk and trot. You get the idea.

Every day, she was to approach her training session with no idea how far along in those steps she would get. The first day, I had her lead her horse into the arena with the intention of getting on. But when her fear went up to a four or five, she was to pause and breathe and observe her emotions. Once the fear had gone down to a one, she went back to the grooming stall, turned around and headed back to the arena again with every intention of getting on. She repeated that until she was walking from the wash stall to the mounting block staying between a one and a two. Then she moved on to the mounting block. At whatever point her fear would go up to a three or a four, she would pause, breathe and observe. Then she would repeat that step until she was staying at a one or a two. Mastery at each step along the way was reached when she would either have no fear response at all or feel the nerves as a short wave of anxiety rather than as sustained fear. As with horses, every day is different. Some days she would get to step five. Some days, she'd have to get on and off at the mounting block until she ran out of time.

Over a period of a few months, she went from having fear as a constant companion to riding in weekly cavalletti classes with her friends. Riding came to represent freedom and fun for her again. If she'd spent that same amount of time "pushing" through her fear and forcing herself to do all the things while she was at a four, she would still be back where she started.

You'll be surprised by how fast things go, once you slow them down.

You can apply this system to almost any situation or goal that is being blocked by what you might think of as "irrational" fear or anxiety.

One important outcome of this exercise is that it requires you to stop judging your emotions and start observing them. Each of us has differing degrees of fear stemming from an infinite possibility of reasons. By splitting and retraining the nervous system methodically, you'll increase the capacity of your nervous system to handle all kinds of stimuli. Once again, the goal is not to be fearless but to have the capacity to handle all the things!