



THE PERFORMANCE PROJECT

Expanding Your Comfort Zone

Module Six, Session Three

One of the most overlooked aspects of overcoming fear for riders is the physiological one. When you experience the physiological effects of fear, it's easy to think there's something wrong. You look around and it seems no one else is dealing with fear or self-doubt the way you are. Please hear me: Nothing is wrong. Your body's response to stress is its effort to help you survive. Your emotions are simply getting stuck in your body and you can learn to process fear physically so that it doesn't get in your way.

In this session, I'm going to share some strategies you can use to address fear physically. This will make it easier for you to access being in the zone- not only when you're in the saddle, but in the rest of your life as well. If you can flush fear from your body, ultimately, this will allow you to expand your comfort zone.

Unfortunately, our society is maxing out our sympathetic nervous systems. This system was originally intended to briefly divert resources to the parts of our body needed to fight danger. It's now activated by daily stressors like driving, constant noise, financial worry, overworking and other triggers. It can, over time, become more sensitive than it needs to be. If you arrive at a lesson having experienced sustained levels of stress all day, you will probably not ride your best. When you add a horse into the mix, this can be a recipe for disaster or at least for a frustrating lesson. Once your nervous system is in hyper activation mode, no amount of talking through it or saying a mantra can shift that. It must be addressed physically.

What are some signs that you might be experiencing disruptive levels of stress or fear?

You may be unable to relax your muscles. You might be tight in certain areas and no amount of reminding or position corrections help you let go. You may be holding your breath without realizing it and get fatigued quickly. You might feel like you need more

breaks than are warranted by the amount of riding you're doing. You may find it hard to listen or follow instructions. You may have a hard time releasing the reins or feeling what your horse is doing. You may be overly emotional or crying for hard-to-define reasons. You might find that you get hyper focused on particular "what ifs" like a spook or a bolt or a buck. Most often, you'll be frustrated by your own tension while feeling unable to get rid of it.

Here are some ways to stimulate the parasympathetic response and help you "rev down" when you're experiencing this kind of sustained sympathetic activation.

Breathing

Taking a deep, full breath is one of the fastest, most effective ways to trigger the relaxation response and calm the nervous system. Here's why: the lower lobes of the lungs contain parasympathetic nerve receptors. Most of the sympathetic nerve receptors are in the upper lobes. Rapid, shallow breaths stimulate the sympathetic nervous system. Deep abdominal breathing brings air into the lower lobes of the lungs, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system and initiating a state of relaxation.

Inhalation triggers sympathetic activity and exhalation stimulates parasympathetic activity. If you've ever caught yourself holding your breath when you're stressed, you'll notice it's always on an inhale. Exhale, and you immediately feel more relaxed. With every cycle of breath, heart rate increases on the inhalation and decreases on the exhalation. When you deepen your breath, you allow for a much fuller exhalation, lowering your heart rate, signaling to the brain that you're safe, and triggering the parasympathetic nervous system. I'll go more in depth into specific types of breathing you can do in the next session. The main thing to understand is that you want to capitalize on deep breaths and on a long exhale to activate the parasympathetic response.

Movement Tools

Whether you're actually stressed out or not, the brain reads tension in the body — particularly the shoulders, neck and jaw — as cause for alarm. The tension itself can trigger the sympathetic nervous system and perpetuate the habitual stress response. If you begin a ride with a lot of tension in your shoulders and neck, this can have a layering effect- causing any fear associated with riding to be amplified. Releasing deeply held tension from your upper body allows the brain to know that it's safe, signaling the parasympathetic nervous system to kick in. There are many different techniques for releasing the shoulders, neck and jaw. You can stay in the saddle or dismount. Make sure the situation is safe, of course, and then experiment with **shoulder shrugs, neck rolls, upper arm stretches, and deep breathing**. It will

generally take at least two minutes for you and your horse to reach a new level of relaxation. Once you're feeling more relaxed physically, resume riding and focus on movement- roll your shoulders and your neck if you start to feel the tension creep in again. Horses are so amazingly resonant with us. Over and over I watch horses express physical signs of relaxation during this exercise.

Emotion is processed in the body through movement. Fear stops movement and therefore tends to get stuck. Riders get locked up in ways that we may not be able to see with the naked eye but that horses can feel. There's a particular exercise that I use to help riders release fear and protect their horses from the effects of fear so they can have successful rides. It works really well. I call it "**wiggling your femurs**". You can try it yourself. When a rider is afraid, the pelvic floor and hips tend to tense up. Imagine wiggling the tops of your femurs while you relax the pelvic floor. This can be such a small movement that an observer cannot see it. An immediate difference can be seen in the horse, however. Both horse and rider will move more freely and fear will decrease. This can also be fun and silly and make you laugh which also activates the parasympathetic nervous system and creates relaxation. You can also make up little exercises yourself to keep your body and emotions moving. Play with it!

Music

Both singing and listening to music can trigger parasympathetic activation. I know some instructors who have their students sing songs or count strides out loud in order to get them breathing and laughing. Certain kinds of music are therapeutically designed to slow the mind and promote a slower heart rate. We all know this instinctively but sometimes we need permission to utilize music as a tool. You do not want to create disruption during your lessons but you can introduce music in your daily rides or while you're handling your horse as a way of feeling more empowered around your emotions and moods.

These are just a few ideas for how to intercept the fear cycle at the body level. The possibilities are endless. Breathing, intentional movement and music can all be integrated into riding in order to allow fear to move as it should rather than remain stuck. Have fun with these!