



Breathing Techniques for Riders

Module Six, Session Four

I already described why breath is important for parasympathetic activation. It's also vital for remaining present and athletically accessible in the saddle. As an instructor, I've experimented with different ways of working with riders on breath- using breathing strategies to improve stamina, mitigate anxiety, improve transitions and enhance the quality of the connection and gaits. There are many breathing techniques used to calm anxiety and improve focus. Square breathing and the 4-7-8 method are a couple. I find that these are challenging for riders to use in the saddle because they involve holding the breath. This is not practical while exercising.

Measured breathing is the simplest breathing technique I've found to help riders improve performance without getting frustrated and feeling like they're going to hyperventilate.

Measured breathing involves inhaling and exhaling on the same count. This means you inhale for a slow count of five and then exhale for a slow count of five- Or three or four or six. The number you choose depends on what is comfortable for you. It depends on the rhythm of your horse's gaits and the tempo you choose to ride at. You can match your breath to your horse's stride and improve your rhythm while you're at it.

If you're not breathing optimally, your horse might hold his or her breath as well. This can cause anxiety and trigger different reactions in the horse: a fight or flight instinct, tension in transitions, spooking at ghosts, sucking back or getting behind the leg.

As you start to practice measured breathing, you might notice some things start to change in your riding. Your shoulders will relax. Posting or sitting will become smoother and have more ease. You might notice some of your position issues begin to fix themselves.

Much of the time, we are so focused on our horses or on trying to ride well or on our anxiety that we aren't even aware we're breathing inefficiently until we're gasping for air. This usually happens long before we would actually become fatigued. I work with riders who say they struggle with fitness. They can't get through a lesson without asking for breaks or do more than a few 20 meter circles before they become out of breath. Nine times out of ten, this is more related to breathing technique than it is to fitness! Most of these riders don't believe it until they learn measured breathing. Then they realize that they're not that out of shape.

It's not just anxiety or fear that triggers poor breathing technique. Perfectionism can cause the same tension to creep into your body and cause you to forget to breathe. Measured breathing used in combination with a mantra, a power persona or mental rehearsal can help you train your brain to let go of pressure and embrace being in the moment.

Measured breathing is really powerful when used during mental rehearsal. As you go through your performance mentally, in real time, breathe just as you plan to during the real thing.

Many people also like to use their breath in transitions. Usually, this means executing the transition on your exhale. This can help your horse become more in tune to your aids and improve harmony. It can also help keep your muscles oxygenated and get your body to do what you want it to.

Another technique I find works well for riders is **lengthening the exhale**. This means you inhale for four counts and exhale for six. Or inhale for five and exhale for seven. This method is used by endurance athletes and ironman competitors. My son is a free diver and he practices breathing in for four counts and exhaling for ten. Lengthening the exhale slows down your heart rate, makes you calmer and helps you concentrate.

A variation on this is described by Dr. Andrew Huberman in his podcast, Huberman lab. He describes a breathing technique that I find extremely effective. It takes some practice out of the saddle so you can most beneficially utilize it while you're riding. Take two quick breaths in through your nose and one long exhale out through your mouth.

These intentional breathing techniques can help you interrupt the fear cycle at a physiological level. They can help you change your thought patterns as well as become more receptive to learning and in tune with your horse. Give them a try!

