

FEAR AND TRAUMA

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Question: I had a bad fall several months ago. Though I have healed physically, I still feel a lot of anxiety when I ride. I have a new horse that is very safe and quiet. How can I start to regain my confidence?

Answer: Feeling anxious after an injury or trauma is one of the most upsetting experiences a rider can have. Of course it is quite normal, but unfortunately this kind of anxiety can be quite persistent, and can really interfere with the enjoyment of riding.

Your body, especially your nervous system's "fight or flight" reaction, has a very good memory for trauma. The body may remember a trauma long after the mind has rationalized it away. This is part of your survival mechanism, and it is quite powerful. When this kind of anxiety becomes triggered, it can leave the rider feeling numb, weak, dizzy and terrified. Sometimes it seems to build for no apparent reason. If fear is interfering with your enjoyment, here are a couple of ideas that may help.

- Evaluate whether you are taking unnecessary risks. On numerous occasions I have had riders consult with me concerning their fear, only to find out that they were in fact in danger! Whether it was an inappropriate horse, lack of training, or a bad riding situation, these riders needed to listen to their fear. For instance, one rider kept her horse at a facility that was next to some rail road tracks. Her horse was terrified of trains. She was a beginning rider but felt she should be able to deal with the problem. Eventually she moved to a less convenient but quieter facility. After a year of training she was able to move back and handle the problem.

- Talk to your fear. Acknowledge it, and ask if it has something intelligent to say to you. It might say "Wear your helmet!", or "Be careful of the loose dogs at the end of the arena". If your fear says something smart, then listen. But if your fear is being unreasonable then argue with it! Working around horses always has some inherent danger, but make sure you are not taking unnecessary risks.

- Once you've listened to your fear and attended responsibly to any obvious safety issues, then respectfully tell your fear to be quiet! Distract your mind by focusing on specific, methodical exercises to build your confidence. A patient, sympathetic instructor can be very helpful, but here are some general ideas:

1. Get very good at stopping. Make sure you can ride a very controlled, balanced downward transition. When I have a student who is afraid, I have them do a lot of halts (assuming the horse doesn't get nervous with this). The more confident you feel in your ability to stop, the more confidence you will have in letting go. This ability to stop includes learning how all of your body parts can provide security and stability in the saddle. Upper back, lower back, stomach, thigh and weight all play important roles in balance, leverage and control.

2. Confidence usually returns slowly and incrementally. For awhile it may feel very delicate. During this stage it can be helpful to learn some relaxation techniques. Breath work and progressive muscle

relaxation can both be very helpful. Don't try to ride when you feel hurried or stressed out about something else in your life.

3. If you get nervous in trot or canter then give yourself permission to get on your horse and do nothing but walk. Keep building one positive experience on top of another, and eventually your anxiety will decrease.

4. Rate your fear from 1 (completely calm) to 10 (terrified). Don't let your number go past 5 or 6. If it does, then simplify whatever you are doing until your anxiety returns to a 3 or 4. If you are cantering, then come back to trot. If you are trotting then walk. If you are walking then dismount and hand walk your horse. Use long slow breaths combined with intentional relaxation to calm yourself. Have a simple positive affirmation you can say to yourself. Something like "I can do this", or "relaxed body, amused mind".

5. Spend time with your horse on the ground. Reaffirm your relationship, and your enjoyment. Recognize that you cannot control every variable. Life is dangerous from the moment you walk out your front door. There are no guarantees, especially with a horse. Be patient, methodical, and careful. Hopefully your confidence will return soon.

If your anxiety persists then seek professional help. A good therapist will have many tools to help you break the cycle of anxiety and fear. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at <mailto:seanaadams@aol.com>.