

The Old Cliché?

If you have ever had a coach yell “relax”? or said it to yourself, you have experienced the old cliché. It is “easier said than done.” So if you experience yourself getting tense while riding, it can be empowering to break things down a little.

When I work with different kinds of athletes and performers, we typically break the mental game down into these four components: 1) Thoughts (including words, images, and placement of focus), 2) Emotions, 3) Physiology (bodily activity and sensations), and 4) Behaviors (ultimately performance). These four aspects of the mental game interact and are in constant operation, whether we are aware of them or not. Building awareness allows us to make choices, and optimal training towards our best performances.

So, if tension is having an impact on your riding, it can help to start with the simple question of “what is causing me to be tense?? It could be because of nervousness, often because of focus on some possible outcomes: a bad performance, or worse? injury. A thought like “I might get injured here,” and a mental image of the injury occurring, can lead to a narrow focus on the things that cause injury, bringing you dangerously to the edge of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As we think, “I might get injured,” or picture it, we experience the emotion of fear. Physiologically, the body goes into a “fight or flight” preservation mode (whether or not the fear is regarding true physical harm). Adrenalin kicks in, blood moves from the extremities to the core, the “butterfly” alarm system goes on, sweat cools the body, breathing speeds up, heart rate goes up, and focus often gets very narrow. For instance, we might get narrowly focused on the thought, “Don’t look down!” But as this thought distracts us from where we truly want our focus (ahead of the horse), posture changes and thigh muscles tense.

As a herd animal, horses tune into their leader, picking up on muscle tension just as accurately as my biofeedback equipment tunes in. You may feel the horse getting hot, and so your behavior changes to get better control of him. Now, neither of you are loose, having fun, present moment, or engaging in a trusting mindset. These negative patterns can be nipped in the bud.

Just as you can train the technical processes of riding well, you can also train the mental processes. Whether you are physically with your horse or not, you can be working on improving your communication, shifting from an intellectual understanding of riding to an innate one. This happens by using your awareness of old mental processes to engage new mental processes, and by practicing them. This is a very individualized process, but it could look like this?

When we don't take our thoughts so seriously, they don't take as tight a grip. When thoughts are on a run-away train, saying something like "Simmer down now," can allow you to chuckle about it and engage thoughts that are more helpful. "We know this course," could help steer your emotions, physiology, and behaviors in directions that help. It is natural to have negative thoughts. Being aware of thoughts, without clinging to them, opens the door to forming new habits of thinking. As we experiment with thoughts like, "We know this course," we experience a feeling of calmness and preparedness, breathing and heart rate slow down and operate in coherence, our muscles are loosen, we engage the present moment, it becomes easier to work with the horse, our better performances unfold, and the process is likely to continue as long as we continue to engage the present moment.

Mental practice helps solidify these mind-body changes. Whether they call it mental practice, imagery, or something else, many riders instinctively engage these forms of practice as they memorize a test, or just prior to hopping on the horse. They boost their comfort level by picturing, in their mind's eye, what each turn looks like, and the height of each jump. Good imagery goes a step further by incorporating all of the senses. When you imagine not only what you see, but also what you do, how it feels in your body, how it feels emotionally, the surrounding sounds, smells, and even the taste in your mouth, it makes an image "real." In fact, psychophysiological changes that mimic real practice occur in the brain and in the body, through repeated mental practice. Further, all the cues that could act as distractions during an event, can become triggers for you to remember your training, and to bring your focus to where it serves you best- in the present moment.

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