

Overcoming Fear of Riding

By Katharine Lark

At some point in their lives, *everyone* who rides faces a frightening situation. It can be going over that first real jump, a first horse show, getting back on a horse that bucked you off or even just trotting a colt for the first time. It doesn't matter what causes the fear — there are not specified levels that are justified and others that are considered moot — any fear is valid because the feelings are there . . . period.

The important factor there is finding a way to deal with the fear and get beyond it. The first step is to recognize it, admit to it, stare it in the face and realize that it need not control you.

I have had many students who came to me terrified of riding. No matter what the reasons for their fears, the first thing I told them as they sat on one of my school horses was that *they* were the truly brave ones. *They* were summoning up more courage than other riders who felt no apprehension in the first place. The rider who continues to ride when filled with fear is a dedicated one. The person who overcomes *any* fear in life is one who becomes stronger and more capable in all aspects.

But it must be overcome. The fear will retard progress. It must be systematically broken down into small steps that the rider can face, one at a time, and conquer.

If you are afraid to canter, then don't canter for a while. Work very hard on the trot; sitting, rising, collecting, lengthening, with and without stirrups — riding in an enclosed arena. Work every day if possible at walk and trot until you are finally eager to try the canter. It will come. If you decide that it is just not essential and forget about it, eventually the desire will return.

One important factor in overcoming fear is to get yourself mounted on a well-schooled, dependable horse. A kind, old school horse can work wonders. Many of my students spent hours on a "babysitter" they had to push all the time until they finally decided there was no reason to fear a horse's natural desire to move forward. They welcomed it.

Find a good instructor. Tell her you are afraid and why, if you know the reason. If you can work on getting your "automatic pilot" well tuned, that instinctive ability to ride without having to think through every move, you will be able to surrender yourself to that conditioning. If you can ride "automatically," like walking or running without thinking about moving each foot, you will have a chance to work on relaxation. Try humming or singing while you ride to keep your attention *off* of all those negative thoughts about what awful thing *might* happen.

It's not really advisable to ask yourself, "what's the worst that could happen?" Even though it's a well-meant phrase — as if thinking about the worst

makes it less formidable since everyone falls off now and then — a truly frightened rider can picture the ambulance, hear the siren, feel the bones breaking. Ask yourself what is the *best* that can happen! You can mount your horse, walk around the arena, hear the birds, feel the breeze, smell the grass and stroke your horse's neck. You can groom him, hug him, clean your tack and feel its supple leather. If a particular horse is scaring you, stay away from him. If he is yours, think about finding a replacement — there are plenty of good, quiet horses in this world. Don't allow one individual to destroy the joy you could feel from being relaxed, confident.

There are many riders "out there" seeking the challenge of "hotter," more animated horses. Find a good owner for your mount and a suitable mount for you.

Or, if your horse is just green and you are too, put him in training and start lessons yourself. There are always solutions if you think about it.

I have faced a lot of fears of my own through the years. Falling off, my horses falling, being run away with, being kicked, the list goes on and on. But I've not had a single bone broken as of this writing and I don't believe I ever will. A whole lot of what happens to a person is connected to what he believes. I was taught *how* to fall off with emergency dismounts at all gaits as a child. I was given that "automatic pilot" type of balance and seat from years of being longed on a horse without stirrups or reins. It's a good kind of background to have and those are things you can do even without an instructor — you just need a kind horse.

Perception is another factor. My husband and I had spent a day visiting a friend who had just acquired two Belgian geldings to drive. Their

combined weight was something over 5,000 pounds. This friend put bridles on them and helped us up onto their enormous backs. In the middle of a large field, my husband went trotting off, enjoying the whole experience. I took a deep breath and wondered *why* I felt so uneasy. My friend summed it up. He said that I had had colts come unglued under me before and, knowing that I would have no influence at all on the giant I sat on at the time, it was my perception, my own experience that kept me from being as carefree as my husband. He was right. I wished that I could have just "let go" and galloped across the pasture. I couldn't. I just jogged around with that dear, gentle giant wondering why I was worried. It was enlightening for me. Fear can come from unexpected places in the mind.

Evaluate your fears. Acknowledge them, define them and give them only as much energy as they deserve — if your fear is of doing something dangerous, it is your own good sense protecting you and your horse. To overcome a needless fear, do not deny it. Realize that everyone has them. Formulate well planned steps that lead up to facing the fear with a prepared foundation of good horsemanship. Find your own way to distract yourself when you become nervous — sing, hum, play music, recite poetry, pray, breathe slow and deep, do mounted exercises, count the rhythm of your horse's strides, count strides to each fence, etc.

For jumping, I envision the *space* my body will travel around a course and suspend the horse within my aids all around the "line" of the course (I made myself afraid of heights in my youth and I struggle with it sometimes). By concentrating on it in this fashion, I can forget the individual jumps and I ride better, the horse goes better and I don't get as worried.

Be patient with yourself. Have compassion for yourself. Set your goals in small increments of progress toward overcoming each fear and, in time, they will melt away to be replaced by the incomparable joy of conquering your own emotions.