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Getting Back On

*Even accomplished riders sometimes have to deal with fear.
From the book "Heads Up," by Janet Sasson Edgette, Psy.D.*

Fear, in contrast to performance anxiety or nervousness, is a different ballgame. Being afraid of getting maimed on horseback is different from being afraid that your peers will laugh at you for making a mistake.

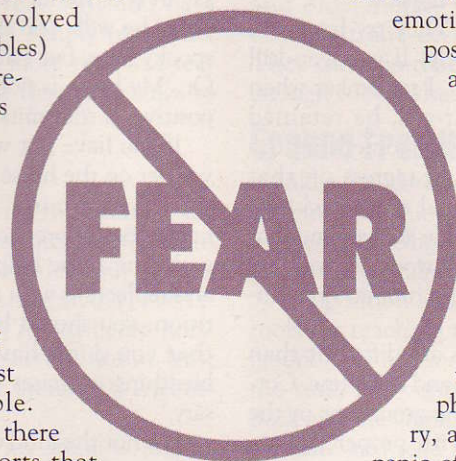
There are probably few other popular sports where the risk of serious injury is so high. This is due, of course, to the nature of the activities involved (like jumping over picnic tables) and the variable of "the unpredictable" (like 1,200 pounds of spook and silliness). Even when you consider skydiving, motorboat racing, or downhill skiing, the risks involved are often more mechanical or physical in nature (speed, velocity, slope, density of snow or ice), and thus at least a little bit more predictable. And, when you think of it, there are a few of these high-risk sports that draw women to them anywhere to the degree that riding does. So for women, the equestrian sports are usually the most dangerous activities in which they become involved.

Therefore, that people become fearful upon occasion during their riding career should come as no surprise. It's only a surprise to me that rid-

ers are usually so unforgiving of themselves for feeling apprehensive or frightened. "I've been doing this (cantered or gone out on the trails or led a horse from the paddock or jumped an in-and-out) for years. One bad experience and I'm acting like a baby. I can't believe it!" they declare in my office and in seminars.

Sometimes I can help them; many times I can't — or won't. Fear is not a random emotional experience. It has purpose: it signals that something is amiss. It has value: it tells you when you are outside your zone of comfort or safety. No wonder we can't wish it away. It even has evolutionary value: Eons ago, those cavemen who respected their fears survived the best.

There are other reasons for fear. Human beings have a phenomenal facility for memory, and we vividly remember the panic of being run away with, or the pain of injuries. Moreover, being creatures with forebrains, we humans attach meaning to incidents past and future, putting them into a larger context. A fall isn't just a fall but a month out of work, a month without income, a month with no one to muck the stalls or feed the horses or tend to the rest of the family.



Don'ts for Dealing with Fear

Here are some things to avoid doing to yourself if you are struggling with feelings of apprehension or fear about what's happening in your riding. The "dos" come afterward.

- **Don't** try to ignore what you are feeling. Pretending that something didn't happen, didn't affect you, or isn't different usually serves only to make the problem worse.
- **Don't** fall into the trap of believing that if you refrain from thinking or talking about what you feel, the feeling will go away. It won't.
- **Don't** start calling yourself names or anything like that. You are not a baby, a chicken, crazy or a "Sunday" rider. You are normal.
- **Don't** make the relationship between you and your fear an adversarial one.
- **Don't** blame your horse. He is doing the best he can with what are, admittedly, rather artificial conditions of living.

What to Do Instead

- Determine the limits of safety for yourself and ride within these as you work to master the problem. Never ride beyond your comfort zone, even if it is smaller than what someone (or even you) would define as objectively safe. If you know that you and your horse could safely jump a two-and-a-half-foot fence but you are nervous at that height for whatever reason, then wait to jump that height until you feel more comfortable.
- Allow yourself to say out loud or privately exactly what it is you feel, if you feel like saying so. Saying "This scares the heck outta me!" can be really good medicine for the ailment. Learn to find ways to be comfortable with how you feel as a first step to alleviating fear.
- Ask yourself where and how you have mastered other fearful or overwhelming situations and revive the same personal resources you used then. Were you once frightened of driving at high speeds? Moving up from ponies? Walking the dog alone at night? How did you overcome the problem? Did you do it alone or with the support of a spouse, trainer, friend, grandfather? Did you approach it from a perspective that would work well for you now? What actions did you take that helped; that didn't? What made the problem worse? Can you avoid that this time around?
- Commit to a first step somewhere in your attempts to deal with the problem. Decide to talk to your trainer about it, or drop down a division or level until you feel better, or add a lesson a week to work through the problem, or go back to foundation work (longe-line work to develop a greater sense of balance and control, riding without stirrups to deepen your seat, etc.)
- Give some thought to why you are uncomfortable with your riding or some aspect of your riding. For those who were spooked by a fall or definable event, this is not a difficult question. But sometimes the change in how you feel might have come upon you more gradually, insidiously, and without a reason that is easily pinpointed. All you know is that your confidence has been gradually eroded over time and you don't know why. Thinking it through may help you find and cope with the problem.
- Consider creating a ritual that will enable you to put the problem behind you. Such rituals as burying or burning something symbolic from a bad riding experience (a piece of broken tack from a runaway, the prize list from the show where the fall took place, the day from an appointment book of that disastrous lesson) are extremely powerful. ♠