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HOTTEST HOW-TO BARREL RACING MAGAZINE

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Jan Spencer photo/courtesy WPRR.

MENTAL PREPARATION

SPEEDY FALL, SLOW RECOVERY

Dr. Janet Edgette

Editor's Note: This article was first published in *Practical Horseman* and will be included in Edgette's forthcoming book: *The Rider's Edge: Overcoming Performance Nerves, Negative Thoughts, Perfectionism and Other Psychological Challenges of Riding, Showing and Loving Horses*. She also has authored *Head's Up! Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families and Their Trainers*. Visit her at www.headsupsupport.com.

Dr. Edgette—I had an awful fall off of my horse several months ago—broken collarbone, bad bruises, the whole shebang. It was a freak thing—three hot air balloons flying low overhead while a bunch of us were hacking in the field. My friend's horse was sure it was martians and took off for his life. Mine followed suit. My friend went bouncing into some weeds, but I had the misfortune of meeting up with some old fence posts. I rested up and recovered, did everything my doctors said, and basically behaved myself (i.e., no jumping the gun on riding). Then, when it was time to go back, I went back without a problem—or so I thought. About a week into returning to riding, I suddenly started to feel really uncomfortable. My horse was fine. My trainer had kept him in work so he was his usual quiet self. But I just started to get more and more nervous about something else freaky happening. I keep telling myself that nothing will happen. Nothing like that ever happened before, and my horse wasn't even the one that started it. I just want my riding life back again! I was cantering small courses, riding out cross-country, doing some hunter trails, and loving it all. Now I'm barely trotting. It just seems that this one stupid accident took so much away from me. I don't understand—do you?—Margie

I think I understand, Margie. You'd been having a ball riding your reasonably reliable mate, suffered a fluky accident, chilled on the sidelines, listened to your docs, remained sensible, arranged for horse care and, in sum, played by all the rules. So of course you expected to be able, more or else, to pick up where you left off. But sometimes playing by the rules isn't enough.

You got fooled by that first week back in the saddle and took your seemingly easy return as a sign that everything was going to be okay. Sometimes the first few rides are the easiest for people, not the hardest, as most expect. They are easy because:

- 1) The person is so pumped up about getting back to riding that her enthusiasm overrides her nerves, or (under the influence of some denial) she might even be misreading her nervousness as excitement.
- 2) The person has "pepped talked" herself into feeling courageous despite her true feelings. When the pep talk wears off, the poor soul is left with nothing but her bare feelings of panic.
- 3) The first few rides are typically very simple rides—a walk, maybe a little trotting in an enclosed arena—and so the person achieves a false sense of security about her

confidence level. This changes as soon as she starts returning to her regular routine.

Yes, that one accident *did* take so much away from you. But they do that. I really believe that many riders (more than will ever admit) are but one bad wreck or fall away from having their confidence shaken to its bones—especially those who come up the ladder too quickly. But why should we be surprised? A person whose car gets broadsided looks nervously to the right or the left at every flicker of movement in her peripheral vision for quite a while after her broken bones or scrapes have healed. That's *after* she's convinced herself to get behind the wheel again. And that's with 30 years or so of safe driving history behind her. Minds sometimes heal more slowly than bodies.

The good news though, Margie, is that having a confidence problem isn't a problem unless the rider thinks she shouldn't be having one. Most get resolved with patience, time and good riding management. It's just that having a confidence problem is undesirable and can't be driven away by mental force. Too bad on us! But we chose riding, not badminton. Scrap the notion, Margie, that something freaky won't happen again. *It always could*—especially with horses! Please don't pretend otherwise, or you'll get

all tangled up in a web of illusory self-talk that you don't take seriously anyway. Affirmations and all that "nerve-control" bunk are no protection from occasionally getting ambushed by factors outside of our control.

Getting blown away by this accident tells me that it made too big a withdrawal on your confidence account for what you had in the bank. Don't fret, it's okay. You just have to make lots of deposits over the next few weeks and months—small, measurable, confidence-building riding experiences that begin to add up to the feeling of, "Oh my gosh, I am enjoying this once again. I even think I'd like to try a little canter soon..."

And then you do.

Bad things happen. People get fixed.

Dr. Janet Edgette is an accomplished speaker, author, equestrian sport psychologist, family and adolescent psychologist, and an individual consultant near Philadelphia, Pa. Edgette is an avid lifelong competitor in equitation and hunter and jumper divisions, placing at the American Gold Cup and more prestigious events. She owns Edgette Equestrian, LLC, which finds, develops, and competes show jumpers.

