

The Fear Factor

We've all heard from the experts that fear is what keeps us safe. But what about when fear becomes overwhelming and starts to interfere with one's learning and enjoyment? As the trainer at Cadence Farm in Harvard, MA, I have students whose fear is just that, overwhelming their learning and riding pleasure. I've also experienced it myself after a few very bad riding accidents that landed me in the hospital. So when Training4Teaching offered a Zoom seminar, Over Coming Fear and Training Blocks, with Jen Verharen, I was totally absorbed in what Jen was discussing about dealing with fear and I wanted to learn more. I applied and received a scholarship from Teaching4Training to take a six week course, "Mental Skills Mastery for Trainers," with Jen. Here are a few of the takeaways that have helped me guide my students through those fearsome moments.

- Set Goals- Start each season by asking your student to write down attainable goals, including a few stretch goals and share them with you. As a trainer, it can be revealing to hear possible roadblocks your students may be having. It might be the first time they've expressed them to you! File the goal sheet away and review it every few weeks to make sure you're keeping your student on track to meet them.
- Have a Mantra- A simple mantra really helps a rider focus their thoughts on themselves and their horse rather than their surroundings and distractions. A mantra can be as simple as repeating to oneself while riding through a difficult spot, "I got this!"
- Scale Your Fear- This scale can be used throughout a training session to check in with the rider as to how they are feeling as they ride. A trainer must learn to observe emotions and not judge them! Ask your student while they are riding if they have:
 - 0- No fear or anxiety
 - 1- Some butterflies
 - 2- Slight increase in the heart rate, shallow breathing or some muscle tightness
 - 3- More muscle tightening, heart rate is increasing, thinking about "what if's", tightening the reins and legs
 - 4- Heart is pounding in their chest, sweating, pitched forward in the saddle and a narrow focus
 - 5- Get out of Dodge! The whole body is tense, feeling dizzy or paralyzed!

The above three suggestions to help guide a person through difficult situations are easy to make part of everyday teaching. I've found the scale of fear most helpful when teaching by asking a student, "Where are you on a scale of 0 to 5?"

Lastly, as trainers a few learning tips to keep in mind:

- The Four Agreements- I think this is something we can all agree on to do throughout our lives, not just while interacting with students:
 - Always do your best
 - Be impeccable with your word
 - Don't make assumptions
 - Don't take anything personally
- The role of a trainer versus a consultant is: a consultant offers advice and a coach/trainer does not, but instead offers suggestions.

As professionals, we need to learn to recognize when a student is in a situation that is beyond our own training skills and refer them to a professional who can aid them in overcoming that obstacle, be it in the saddle or out!

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