

Every week, we receive e-mails from HW readers all around Australia, who have become frightened or nervous about riding or handling their horses. Often, this fear comes from being involved in a horse riding accident yourself, seeing someone else being hurt or perhaps witnessing a horse taking fright at close range. While fear and self-preservation helps us to stay safe and be sensible with our riding, it can also be really hard to overcome those 'bucking butterflies' we all feel at some point during our riding lives. In this issue, HW's resident 'pony princess' Michelle O'Neill answers some 'HW Helpline Mail' and offers us some great tips on becoming braver and staying safer in the saddle.

getbackonthathorse

Dear HW,

My name is Natalie and I love horses but I've become a bit scared about riding since I had an accident. I was trying to put an acorn on a barrel but the horse I was riding wouldn't move. I got so frustrated that I kicked him really hard and he went cantering down the side of the arena. I was screaming because I lost control of the reins but I still had my feet in the stirrups. Copper turned the corner and was either going to jump the fence or keep on running around the arena. He took a really sharp turn and I fell off. I did a perfect roll and landed right in front of a pole. I got up and cried.

Ever since then I haven't been game enough to get back on a horse. Even if a horse makes a sound I jump. Could you give me some advice on how to get my confidence back?

Hi Natalie and all our HW readers out there!

We all get frightened sometimes. When we do, we just go back to basics and remember the fun stuff that makes us love our horses so much.

To overcome fear we go back to doing things we are comfortable with. Then, just like learning to ride a bike or swim across the pool, we push ourselves to where we are no longer SO comfortable (but never so we are completely scared), and then when we get comfortable and then push a little further.

To make this lesson easier, have a person you really trust with you at all times when you are practicing. An experienced horse person, parent or instructor, can give you lots of positive encouragement, hold your horse's head while you are practicing your exercises and really help you enjoy your horses again!

Positive thinking

What is the first thing we all think about when we get scared? We think about the very thing we don't want to happen! If you are scared that your horse is going to bolt, what do start thinking about? Your horse bolting of course!

So from now on, your number one job is to always think positive thoughts when you are riding. The instant you think of something bad, just concentrate on your surroundings and focus on something positive instead. Be really aware of things around you that you can see, smell,

hear and feel, enjoy the sensation of your horse's feet moving underneath you and remember to smile!

Hang around with horses

When you are around horses it is important to be relaxed. To start with, just spend time around horses and enjoy being with them. You don't have to ride if you don't want to; just pat and brush them and remember why you love horses.

When you feel really confident, prepare yourself and the horse as though you were going for a ride. You don't actually have to ride if you get too nervous, but just prepare as if you were going to head out on a lovely trail ride. When you can saddle your horse calmly and without fear, you might just feel like sitting on him! You don't even have to take a step! Ask an adult to hold your pony's head and just sit there and remember the fun you have when you ride. And remember to see, smell, hear and feel... and SMILE!

Each step will take you a little further towards your goal of riding again. You can progress to being led at the walk or the trot, then to being lunged by an experienced horse person or riding supervised in a small yard. But...only take each new step when you are feeling fully confident. If at any time you get too scared, just go back to the last step where you felt most comfortable.

Remember to breathe!

The next thing to remember when you are actually riding is to breathe! Sounds silly doesn't it? But as soon as we get tense, we forget to breathe! It is very hard to ride a horse when our body is all tensed, because you are holding your breath. There is a very simple way to remember to breathe when we ride; it's called singing! If we are concentrating on singing our favourite song, then we have to breathe! I have a friend who sings to herself every time she canters; otherwise she forgets to breathe and bounces straight out of the saddle!

Confidence exercises

Once you are confident about being back on your horse, take some time to practice a few exercises that will help you be more balanced and in control on your horse, to help you out the next time something starts to go wrong.

The first thing everyone should learn is a ONE-REIN STOP. It is the emergency brake that will help you be more confident in a difficult or frightening situation. Essentially you reach down one rein and bring the rein back to your hip, pulling your horse's head around to your knee. This not only stops your horse from

bolting or bucking, but if taught correctly, the one-rein stop becomes a really good 'time-out' reminder for your horse if he is becoming fretful or anxious. Both horse and rider need to be taught the correct method for a one-rein stop, so ask your local pony club or riding instructor or even a family friend who you know is a good rider to show you how it is done.

You could also spend some time being lunged without your reins by an experienced horsey adult and doing exercises like touching your toes, your horse's ears and your horse's rump, while someone holds your horse's head. That way, if you ever lose your reins again, your seat will be strong and you can reach forward and grab hold of your reins again with confidence.

Slow and Steady

If there is one more thing I would like you to remember, it is to take your time! You have all the time in the world to get

your confidence back. Just keep taking small steps until you are feeling confident again. Before long, you will be back to loving every minute of being on a horse and wishing you could ride all day long! After all, that is why we ride, isn't it?



michelle's confidencetips

All photos by Jenny Solomon - www.jensol.net



one-rein stop



hands out!



touch your toes

toosmallortoobig?

Help HW!

At home we have a 15 hand, 4 year old gelding. Since mum doesn't ride anymore, he is just sitting out in the paddock, apart from the small daily rides he gets. Mum just wants to sell him, but dad wants me to train him to jump and to become an eventing horse, which is my sort of interest. But, at this stage I am riding a 12.2 hand high pony who is the perfect size for me. So if I do train the other horse to jump, he has to sit around in the paddock until I can handle him. He is just too big! HELP ME!!! From 'Too Small'

Hi Too Small!

You are facing a problem that many of us have had to deal with at some stage; it is terrible to be caught between keeping those you love happy, and feeling confident and safe in your riding.

If you are willing to take this big horse's training on, you will have a lot of work ahead of you. At four years old, he is

very young and (I am guessing), very inexperienced. In my experience, the combination of a young horse and a young rider is seldom a good one.

You really need to sit down and ask yourself if you really want to train this horse. Do you feel confident around/on him? Do you look forward to the task of training him with excitement and enthusiasm? Do you believe you can achieve what you want to achieve with this horse? If the answer is "No" to any of these questions, then you really need to tell your Mum and Dad how you feel.

I see a lot of horses that have been 'given up on' by their owners because they did not feel confident with them. Sometimes the riders go on to ride other horses; sometimes they lose interest in horses all together. You and your Mum and Dad also need to consider how long you will have to keep this horse before you will feel confident enough to train him. It may be a couple of years and in that time you will have to care for and feed him and (hopefully) get lots of regular lessons with a competent instructor who you feel comfortable with. You have to make sure you make the right choice for everyone – including your horse! Good luck!

PS: Thanks also to Cate and Evie who emailed HW to say how much our 'can't catch me' column helped them handle their ponies. Good work girls!



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