

# The Fear Factor

Recognize it, manage it, and make it work for you

BY COLLEEN SCOTT



WHEN RIDING IS HELL: *There is help for overcoming fear and anxiety*

**W**hen Janet Anderson asked her Arabian/Holsteiner cross, Eloquence, to rein back, the mare put it in reverse with a vengeance and wouldn't stop. Faster and faster she went, until eventually her hind end buckled beneath her, sending the pair crashing to the ground.

"The mare got up and I didn't. I tried, but I just couldn't do it," Anderson recalls.

The Raytown, MO, woman's right hip was dislocated, the hip socket shattered. Surgeons repaired what was left of the damaged socket with two plates and thirteen pins.

Three months of bed rest later, Anderson knew that if she didn't get back on a horse—any horse—soon, she would never ride again.

"I was still walking with a cane," she says of the first day she went back to the barn, "but I knew I had to get back on." Anderson's instructor put her on a quiet lesson horse for a session on the lunge line.

Anderson ended up abandoning her dressage-competition plans and never rode her mare again. She rode other horses sporadically for a while but wound up taking a full eight years off from riding.

"When I even thought about going back to showing, it just felt like I was starting all over again," she says. "I wasn't necessarily afraid, but the hip I had injured didn't want to do what it was supposed to."

Today, ten years after her accident, Anderson is back in the saddle, but on horses she considers completely trained and safe. And she's changed her riding focus and goals as well.

"I was getting older. The thought of continuing to put my body at risk by pushing performance on the show circuit was too much. But not being around horses at all wasn't an option either." Now she's a trail rider.

Even those lucky riders who haven't had a trauma like Anderson's have probably experienced pre-ride apprehension or pre-show jitters. We asked three equestrian sport psychologists (all riders themselves) for advice on handling riding-related fear, anxiety, and show nerves.

## Kinds of Fear

The riders she coaches report two basic types of fear, says La Jolla, CA,-based equestrian sport psychologist Timmie Pollock, PhD: physical fear (fear of getting hurt) and mental/emotional fear (fear of failure, of letting someone down, or of looking incompetent or foolish). Performance anxiety ("show nerves"), she says, is typically mental or emotional in nature.

These fears are not unfounded. After all, horseback riding is acknowledged to be risky, and we all want to do our

best, make our supporters proud of us, and not embarrass ourselves in public. The problem is that the fear, apprehension, or nerves can actually help create the poor performance we're trying so hard to avoid.

"When a rider perceives a threat, whether it is real or imagined, the physiological response includes an increase in adrenaline; a racing heart and pulse; rapid, shallow breathing; muscle tightness and shaking; increased acid production in the stomach; decreased visual acuity; and mental confusion," says equestrian sport psychologist Ann Reilly, PhD, of McLean, VA. "When riders feel these uncomfortable physical reactions to the perceived threat, it is usually all they can focus on. Their mental plans for their ride go out the window."

Then, to make matters worse, our horses sense our anxiety. Reilly believes that, although some horses are more sensitive than others, all feel fear. "Horses respond to tension in a rider just as they respond to relaxation in a rider," she says.

"Show nerves" may not be as debilitating as full-out "I'm gonna die" terror, but performance anxiety can keep you from riding your best, especially in front of an audience. "Butterflies," sweaty palms, gastrointestinal distress, and other unpleasant symptoms plague many athletes. It's frustrating to ride well at home or even in the show warm-up but then to clutch up and blow the test or the clinic. If the pattern becomes established, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if something isn't done to break the vicious cycle.

## Fear Isn't Such a Bad Thing, Actually

Crazy, right? But that's just what equestrian sport psychologist Janet Edgette, PsyD, of Exton, PA, tells her clients.

"My approach is to 'take the fight out of it,' and by that I mean get people out of the habit of trying to rid themselves of their anxiety or apprehension or fear," Edgette explains. "I help people to accept that they are anxious and to use it as a cue, as information. Maybe it's a cue that they need to change their program, or slow down and take more time, or deepen their seat. For example, if they are afraid of their horse because he bolts or is spooky, then the answer isn't telling yourself he won't spook—because he might—but in doing whatever you need to do (more lessons, lunge lessons, work with no stirrups, riding school horses for a while) until you are confident that, if your horse spooks, you will be able to manage it."

Anxiety can expose our weaknesses, and it can also help guide our decisions when we climb in the saddle, says Edgette. In particular, riders with competitive aspirations need to accept show nerves as "the price of doing business," as she puts it: "You can't overcome them; you can, however,

learn to ride well in spite of them, and part of that is by figuring out how nerves affect your riding specifically, and then compensating for that.”

As Edgette explains, some riders under-ride when they get nervous: Afraid of making a mistake, they “quit riding” and leave the decision-making to the horse. Others compensate for their anxieties by over-riding—becoming aggressive, using unusually strong or abrupt aids, and communicating erratically with their mounts. If you can identify your typical response pattern, then you and your instructor can make a plan for altering your habits appropriately. For instance, if you’re an under-rider, “you can learn to come to terms with making wrong decisions, recognizing that they’re usually safer than no decision, and enter the arena with the motto *Decide and ride!*,” she says. If you’re an over-rider whose legs tighten into a vise grip around your horse, “you can learn to soften your leg as you enter the arena—which is a lot easier to do than making yourself ‘relax.’”

## Overcoming Fear and Anxiety

Some riders can overcome mild anxieties through self-help books or other do-it-yourself techniques, such as sport-psychology workshops or seminars. Reilly, herself the victim of a debilitating riding accident, is the author of *A Sport Psychology Workbook for Riders*, with advice on handling

fear and anxiety. Edgette has written two sport-psych books for riders: *Heads Up! Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families & Their Trainers* and *The Rider's Edge: Overcoming the Psychological Challenges of Riding*, the latter a collection of columns she contributed to *Practical Horseman* magazine some years ago. (For additional resources, see “More Resources” below.)

Other riders, however, may need more than a book to overcome persistent or crippling anxieties. If that’s the case with you, then Reilly suggests contacting a sport and performance psychologist or a counselor who specializes in fear and anxiety management.

When Reilly meets a new client, she begins by helping the person to identify the source of her fears. Next comes guided relaxation to help the person release the fears.

“This is combined with homework assignments that use cognitive behavioral techniques,” Reilly says. “Then, using visualization, I help the rider practice focusing on what they want to happen in the present when they are riding. All of this is done in educational sessions as well as an hour or so prior to them competing, either at the show or by phone. It is a process depending on the rider’s specific fears, how long they have held these fears, and how far the fears have spread.”

That process can be fairly quick, or it may take a while. Edgette says that most of her clients, whose aspirations range from local schooling shows to international competition, come for short periods of time. “My work with riders is designed to be very efficient, very brief. People get results from the first or second visit, and most are done with a handful of sessions. Some choose to continue for ongoing support, or return later on for a booster or maybe because a new issue arose.”

Pollock begins by having her clients talk about their fears and anxieties. “Certain pathways in the brain freeze up with fear, particularly the one for producing speech. Talking gets the process started. The more you talk about fear—with guidance, of course—the faster it diminishes.”

But talking isn’t the only tool in Pollock’s arsenal. She also employs a variety of evidence-based therapies. Another invaluable tool, she says, is the emWave (emwave.com), a small biofeedback instrument the client can ride with that gives feedback about relaxation and tension. Customizable to the individual, the emWave teaches deep breathing and gives feedback about whether the user is practicing the technique correctly.

## Why “Just Relax” Doesn’t Work

Well-meaning instructors, friends, or family members may encourage the anxious rider to “just relax,” especially if they

## More Resources

Several experts have recognized the fact that many equestrians have persistent riding-related fears and anxieties, and have developed books, programs, and courses targeted to such riders.

Besides the books written by the sport psychologists interviewed for this article, one expert who’s made a name for herself as the fearful rider’s friend and head cheerleader is dressage trainer, clinician, author, and speaker Jane Savoie.

Savoie, the 1992 US Olympic dressage-team alternate, entered the world of equestrian sport psychology with her book *That Winning Feeling! Program Your Mind for Peak Performance*, with tips on conquering show nerves. She frequently lectures on the subjects of fear and performance anxiety, including at USDF conventions. She offers a seven-CD, three-DVD, and e-book set called *Freedom from Fear* at her websites, JaneSavoie.com and FreedomFromFearNow.com. And her Facebook page, Solve Horseback Riding Fears by Jane Savoie, has more than 30,000 followers.

feel certain the rider is in no danger—and perhaps also if they’ve never felt the full force of anxiety’s misery themselves. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work and can actually make matters worse.

As Edgette explains, “Telling a person to relax is useless because it is not a voluntary action. It’s involuntary and very difficult to control. It usually makes a person try harder, which then exacerbates the problem. They become too self-conscious of their bodies and movements, and everything becomes mechanical and contrived.”

A better strategy, says Reilly, is to learn to manage the jittery feelings—to “get the butterflies to fly in formation,” as the saying goes. “What many riders do not know is that it is possible to perform well when they are nervous when they learn how to use the adrenaline to their advantage, and also use relaxation strategies, off and on the horse, to learn to benefit from their nerves. A bigger problem for performance is often when a rider is tired and ‘flat.’ Learning to make the butterflies and jitters your friend, and knowing the level of nervousness that enhances a rider’s performance, is a key to successful performance.”

So don’t just wish those anxious feelings away. Be proactive and learn what your jitters are trying to tell you. Enlist the support of a sympathetic instructor, a competent counselor, a trusted horse—whatever you need to help you work through your fears. Give yourself time. Most of all, give yourself a break. ▲

*Freelance writer Colleen Scott lives and writes near Kansas City, MO.*

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## Meet the Experts

**Janet Sasson Edgette, PsyD**, is an equestrian sport psychologist and a general family and adolescent psychologist practicing in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. She is an accomplished hunter/jumper rider who competed successfully as a junior under the tutelage of Wayne Carroll. Her career included callbacks in both the Medal and Maclay finals, and she has won numerous championships in the equitation, junior-hunter, and junior-jumper divisions. She continues to ride and show and currently competes in the jumper divisions. Her websites are HeadsUpSport.com and JanetEdgette.com.

**Timmie A. Pollock, PhD**, is a clinical psychologist, a sports psychologist, and a licensed neuro-feedback provider in La Jolla, CA. She specializes in the use of neurofeedback to enhance everyday function, fine-tune athletic performance, and treat various clinical disorders. A rider since childhood, she has competed for more than 25 years in multiple disciplines, including hunter/jumper, eventing, saddle seat, on the Arabian show circuit, and even

on the racetrack. As an equestrian sport psychologist, she draws on her personal experience after she sustained a head injury and a broken neck twelve years ago in a fall from a young stallion. She still rides and keeps several horses at home but has adopted the motto, “Life is too short to ride bad horses!”

A competitive rider for 47 years, **Ann Reilly, MEd, PhD**, began her equestrian career at age six showing on the lead line. She advanced to a pony, then ultimately to the hunter/jumper discipline. In 2008, her lower right leg was nearly amputated after a horse kicked her repeatedly. Following many surgeries and physical therapy, she is now able to ride again and has been pursuing dressage. Of her experience, she says, “I have used every ounce of psychology, spirituality, and healing knowledge I have learned over the years to recover. I never give up hope that I can beat the constant pain some day and heal my leg completely as well as compete at the Grand Prix level in dressage.”