

March 2016 - Fitness Tip: Umbrella Breathing

Written by Carla Bauchmueller
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Breath technique creates the right balance of relaxation and muscle tone.

by Carla Bauchmueller

You have probably heard your trainer say: "Breathe!" and then realized that you had actually really stopped breathing. Do you remember how that felt? You had probably lost the feel for your horse and for your seat. You probably felt unstable and tense. Your horse probably started tensing up or literally held its breath, too.



So why is it important to breathe when we are riding? It seems obvious, doesn't it? But when we have a closer look it's also about how we breathe. There are different ways of breathing with different effects on your seat and your horse.

You can try this exercise sitting on a chair first. Sit on a firm chair with your back straight as if you were sitting on a horse.

Closing your eyes might help you feel.

Place one hand on your sternum and let your breath go in and out mostly into the area underneath your hand, your upper chest. Check in with yourself: How comfortable do you feel breathing like this? How relaxed or tense do you feel? How do you perceive the contact of your seat bones to the chair?

Then place your hand on your abdomen, below your belly button. Breathe into your abdomen. How comfortable do you feel breathing like this? How relaxed or tense do you feel? How do you

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perceive the contact of your seat bones to the chair?

Breathing into your upper chest causes a sense of tension in most people. It's easy to lose your grounding when breathing high like this and the breathing tends to become shallow. There is the sense of the center of gravity moving up towards your chest, too. In the saddle you feel unstable and insecure. Your horse senses your tension.

When we are afraid, we breathe shallow and high in the chest.

Breathing into your abdomen on the other hand can feel very relaxing. Especially, long exhalations can help you let go of unnecessary tension.

Relaxation is good but there can also be too much relaxation in riding. When we are too loose, the horse's movements will go through us in an exaggerated way and we lose our upright and centered position and stability.

In riding, we need relaxation but we also need stability and "positive tension" (tone) to be able to follow the horse's movement without moving too much. A big challenge in riding is that we tense up all the wrong muscles and we don't have enough tone in the muscles we actually need.

Breathing is a big part of finding the right amount of positive tension or tone.

The "umbrella breathing" (adapted from Eric Franklin) is perfect for creating just the right amount of tone without tensing.

Visualize one of these old-fashioned umbrellas with a curved handle. It is closed. Its shaft is aligned with the vertical central axis of your torso. The tip of the umbrella is the top of your spine.

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The curved handle of your umbrella rests in your pelvis, helping to lengthen your lower back. The body of the umbrella is your ribcage and below.

In inhaling, the umbrella opens to all sides. You can feel your ribcage widen and open. You can feel the breathing even in your back. It expands your diaphragm and you will feel the expansion in your lower torso, too.

In exhaling, the umbrella closes around the shaft, helping you to exhale completely.

Let the umbrella open and close in the natural rhythm of your breathing, no pushing or holding your breath.

This exercise helps you to breathe deeply and create just the right balance between relaxation and tone that we need in riding.

When you feel comfortable with this way of breathing, try it while riding at a walk first. See how it changes your position in the saddle and helps you find stability and relaxation at the same time.

This way of breathing works everywhere. On a horse it creates a relaxed but focused and aware state. Start each ride with a couple of “umbrella breaths,” so that you can find your alignment and a relaxed focus for your ride.

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