



Elevate your ride and enjoy it more.

by Darby Bonomi, PhD

Fear can be debilitating. It can also be highly motivating. How do you transform nerves that negatively impact your performance into an internal fire that focuses your mind, elevates your ride, and opens the door to more joy in the saddle?

First, let's talk a bit about fear and nerves: I place fear into three general categories: Realistic, Physical, and Mental.

Realistic fears are our friends. They are necessary for survival—they keep us from touching a hot flame, from driving on the wrong side of the road, and from getting on a horse who will throw us to the ground. Realistic fears guide our behavior, and are imperative for our safety and well-being.

Physical fears are those based in trauma. Let's say a rider took a nasty fall and is recovering not only from the physical blow, but also the emotional impact. He may have some post traumatic responses such as continually replaying the incident or being overtaken with anxiety.

Physical fears become more entrenched (that is, more traumatic) if the rider sustained a previous fall or has mental fears that line up with the accident.



Physical fears need kid-glove handling and lots of time and compassion. For more on physical fears and recovering from a fall, check out my article, [Had a Bad Fall? Bounce Back with Gusto](http://www.darbybonomi.com) on www.darbybonomi.com.

Mental fear is the nervous chatter in our brain. It's about the future, the past, or about others. It can sound like this: I'm going to miss the distance; I'll forget my test; XYZ is watching and I'm going to mess up; what if I'm not perfect; this judge doesn't like me. I could go on, but you get the point.

Mental fears are emotional baggage; they keep us from riding effectively and from enjoying our time in the saddle. Mental fears are not in present time—they transport us to the future, the past, and elsewhere so that we're not fully in the saddle and with our horse. Mental fears are debilitating, and they tend to snowball over time.

In my experience, mental fears are on the rise—both in and out of the barn. In general, people are more anxious, distracted, and stressed. While part of our reason for riding is to decompress and focus on something that we truly love, what happens instead is that we bring stress, busy-ness and emotional noise to the barn—and then expect to ride well.

I also see riders who have lost touch with why they are riding. In the desire to be the best, they are no longer riding for themselves. They end up riding for the blue, for their trainer, for the judge, for the spectators or for their parents—and feeling anxious about it all. These riders have gotten out of contact with their love for their horse, and the joy of pursuing the sport for themselves.

How do we shed the nerves, get back to enjoying our time in the saddle and truly ride our best?

Reclaim Your Ride

- Be in present time (not worrying about what comes next or what happened yesterday.)
- Decide that the ride is between you and you (you're the only judge of yourself).
- Affirm that the ride is for you and your horse only (your goal is to give your horse the best ride you can on that particular day).

This may sound simple, but in practice, it takes work. Truly being in the present requires that you stay mindful and continually bring yourself back to the here and now. If you find yourself worrying, try doing a mini meditation—feel your seat in the saddle, your feet in the stirrups. Really focus on the rhythm of your horse's walk. Feel his neck. Listen to the sound of his steps. This kind of practice can take just a minute or two, but can powerfully bring your thoughts to the present and connect you with your horse.

Set an intention to make it your ride, not your trainer's or anyone else's. In order to really own it, you have to claim every moment as yours. Take ownership of the transition from halt to walk, the lead change, the corner you're about to go through, or the course you are about to navigate.

Once every moment is yours, everyone else gets shut out and performance anxiety drops.

Sure, your trainer gives you suggestions, but it's not her ride. The judge will give you a score, but the ride was yours—you know what score you gave yourself, and whether you met your own goals, both riding and otherwise.

Fear is a powerful tool—hence I like to say, “fear no fear! Remember, your fear is a signal. If all of a sudden you feel mental fear, you know that it is a sign that you have gotten caught up in something that is not in the moment. You're worried about what is going to happen, or what happened yesterday, or something outside yourself. Use that signal to bring yourself back into the present moment with your horse. Your fear will diminish, and you'll elevate your ride.

Want to transform your nerves into focus—and have more fun in the process? Be in touch! I

July 2019 - Fear No Fear

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Monday, 01 July 2019 03:25

have lots of tools to help and would be honored to guide you in this journey.

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At shows I give myself three goals before every round—along with an instruction to have fun. My goals might sound something like this: “it’s Sunday afternoon, and I am super exhausted and mentally fatigued. I know this is not my ideal time to perform. My plan for this round is to trust my horse, to go forward out of the turns and to stay with my performance in every moment.” At one recent show, I was quite nervous on the last day because I knew I wasn’t at my best. I even considered scratching. I made a conscious decision to embrace my nerves, trust myself and my horse, and work through it. I dug deep and came through with very credible rounds. It was a personal triumph. Did the judge pin me at the top? Nope, but it didn’t matter because I genuinely know that it was a personal best for me on that particular afternoon.