Fear, what are YOU afraid of?

Written by: Patricia M. Demers

FEAR. What is it? Why do we have it? How do we deal with it?
As a trainer, I’m constantly surrounded by fear and anxiety: Fearful students, fearful equines, and of course my own fears as a trainer. Fear raises its ugly head on a daily basis. As professionals we’re never supposed to admit that we’re human and not superheroes with extraordinary training powers! The possibility of getting hurt, bumped, bruised, kicked, bit, stomped, thrown, dragged or worse, each time I work with the equines brought to me for training, is forefront in my mind every day! It’s my job to get people and animals past their fears so they can perform and enjoy their experiences. So many people have fears, but are afraid to acknowledge it or share it with others for various reasons. It is ours personally, to be hidden away from other’s view - like Golem’s ‘Precious’ gold ring from The Hobbit.

Let’s discuss the origins of fear.

‘Fear can be a constructive emotion. When we worry about a risk, we pay more attention to it and take action when needed. Fear keeps us alive and thriving. Our species owes its existence to fear, but ‘unreasoning’ fear is another matter- which leads us to make increasingly foolish decisions in dealing with risks we face every day. But why are we so afraid? Imagining all the ways things could go horribly wrong - dark imaginations. It’s always possible for things to go wrong. We’re not only living longer now, but better- we have more to lose’. (1)

In our daily lives we have financial, family, work, health, political and global concerns which feed our fears. Our horses are supposed to be our sanctuary from our daily worries. But what happens when our horses also feed our worries and fears?

Here are some of the defining parts of what fear IS:

Catastrophic potential: Our perception of risk rises if we think more injuries will occur
Familiarity: An unfamiliar or novel risk makes us worry more.
Understanding: If the subject is not well understood our sense of risk goes up.
Personal control: If we feel the potential for harm is beyond our control, we worry more than if WE feel in control.
Voluntariness: If we don’t choose to engage the risk, it feels more threatening
Dread: If the effects generate fear, the sense of risk rises. Plain old fear – correlates with several other items on the list: catastrophic, involuntary and inequitable- which are loaded with emotional content. It is a strong predictor of people’s reaction to an activity. There is more going on in people’s brains than rational analysis.
Trust: if those involved are not trusted, risk rises
Accidents: bad events in the past boost the sense of risk
Benefits: if the benefits of the activity are not clear it is judged to be riskier.
Reversibility: if the effects of something going wrong cannot be reversed, risk rises.
Personal risk: if it endangers me, it’s riskier.
Timing: more immediate threats loom larger while those in the future tend to be discounted. (1)

Did you know that we have 2 minds? HEAD and GUT: Head is logical and methodical—it is where fight/flight lives, it’s the conscious mind—it’s rational. Gut is instinctive and elusive it makes use of experience and memory, it is our unconscious mind and judgment. Fear is certainly the most effective way of gluing a memory in place, next is emotion. (1) You didn’t choose to have a brain that is capable of intense anxiety; it’s not your fault. However, you can learn to be honest about them, change your relationship with them, and live with them in conditions of greater ease. (2)

Let me start by saying that I have no training in the field psychology, so my observations and experience come through years of working with people and equines. I love to teach people about the joys of riding and driving, but have come to recognize individual’s fears that are holding them back from their potential and enjoyment. I was curious about how to help them, and also learn about dealing with my own daily anxieties. Our fears can be a minor annoyance, or it can be so overwhelming, that it’s physically and mentally debilitating. Thus, my personal quest to learn more about the subject! Part of my research is based on responses from a questionnaire I put out over the internet. I had an overwhelming response in requests and responses to my questions. People WANTED to talk about their fears!

I asked people to share with me their fears about riding and driving, how it affects them, and how they deal with it. Fear comes in many forms and from many places, but most originate from a bad experience. Let’s acknowledge the fact that horse activities are dangerous, and the potential for injury is likely. There are some people who get a physical high from a lack of fear, pushing for the adrenaline rush. However, most people don’t, and get more fearful as they age. With age comes wisdom from life experiences. Blame that on your ancestors, who thru the millennia shared their experiences with the very genes that make up who you are! Many responses were that fears started from accidents—ridden, driven and human error. Here are some examples of common problems:

**Inappropriate horse for skill level of handler, or lack of adequate training of equine for discipline:**
A lack of knowledge, with little or no instruction, which resulted in significant injury. The equine didn’t like discipline. Fear of the equine’s unexpected reactions, and not being ready—transference of anxiety to equine. Repeated accidents lead to disposing of the equine. Knowing that the equines’ behavior was risky, but continued to ride/drive. Ignoring one’s instinct (GUT/HEAD) to not trust the equine.

**Age related fear of injury:** Limited mobility, balance, and endurance. A fear of falling into/out of the carriage or falling off a riding horse. Mortality—fear of permanent injury, pain, having a long hospital stay or death. Loss of income.

“Fear became progressive due to pains related to so many replaced body parts, and re-injury. Aging and an inability to do anything about it. My past injuries are catching up and limiting my enjoyment, but not stopping my activities”. Survey response

**Unexpected stimuli or events:** The horse reacted to unexpected stimuli—noises or a branch hitting it from behind—resulting in a flight reaction. Experienced being hit or a near miss by a vehicle while riding or driving.
“My accident started as a series of unfortunate stimuli events that snowballed resulting in a runaway. Long lasting fear of the event—debilitating fear that lasted for months.” Survey response

“Psychological trauma of the carriage overturning and my passenger getting severely injured. Runaway carriage wreck resulted in an injured horse which was a steady lesson horse up to that point. He experienced a flight response to visual stimuli, where instinct overcame training. Sometimes accidents just happen and are beyond our control. I relive the accident over and over” Survey response

“Observing a driving accident with catastrophic injuries. It’s made me more cautious and fearful. Guilt and anxiety at not being able to render assistance”. Survey response

I personally found this answer very interesting, and I sure hope it wasn’t after one of MY presentations!

“Fear presented itself after attending a safety presentation—found out what can go wrong—realized personal lack of knowledge in chosen discipline, fear manifested in ‘What if’s? and never knew how many things could go wrong! Anxiety transferred to equine. I went to smaller equines to deal with fear/intimidation”. Survey response

I learned that many people share common experiences. Any of these sound familiar to you? Some of the solutions suggested to the above are: To change disciplines if appropriate. Become more safety conscience—wear a helmet, safety vest, and use reflective safety wear. To become better educated in your discipline and skills.

“I accept the fact that some things aren’t fun anymore, and acknowledge that I have a smaller comfort zone than when I was young”. “I’ve accepted my riding accidents, and have given up riding. Learned from a driving accident and have moved forward. The accidents have made me a better driver”. Survey response

I inquired if people had learned something from their accidents and experiences.

**Does this affect your desire and/or ability to enjoy our horses? Do you still ride or drive?**
A great percentage responded that they are disappointed with age related limitations, but very few were willing to give up horses entirely. For some, going to a smaller size of equine was their solution. A very small number of respondents chose to get out of horses completely.

**If you have injuries or limitations does it affect your driving or riding?**
Again, age related problems were a common thread. Another issue was lack of control over one’s driving or riding environment- a lack of safe, appropriate areas to drive/ride horses. Not having consistent helpers or using helpers with varying skill levels, was also a concern. One response was that the person could not drive the vehicle that the accident occurred with.
We’ve discussed people, but what about our horses? They can, and ARE affected too. Horses are a fight, freeze or flight driven animal. Horses that have been involved in an accident can develop fears too! Trust is a balance between your relationship and the realistic sense of your horse as a horse.

What training techniques have you implemented on getting your equine over its’ fear?
Some horses can just be hooked back up quickly, or ridden back to the ‘scene of the crime’ and ‘de-sensitized’, and everything is OK with no lasting effects. Others may have to be taken back to basic training to find the holes in both equine and handler’s abilities, with lots of exposure to strange stimuli to bombproof and build up confidence again. Others shared that they’d ‘re- homed’ the horse, gotten professional training, changed the discipline more suited to the equine, or found a more suitable handler.

Do you trust your equine after your accident the way you did before the accident- is it a safe horse?
Do you still have the equine? If not, what is the equine doing now? Is it still riding or driving?
About 50% answered NO. They sold it or ‘re-homed’ it. Some kept the horse as a pasture pet until they died of old age. While many equines have long careers with different owners in the same or different disciplines, for others the choice was to euthanize, which is a very difficult decision based on their fears that others might be injured. I then inquired about, what techniques do people use to overcome the fear? and if they could tell someone something inspirational to help them get past the fear what would it be? I had pages and pages of advice and responses on how people coped with their fears. It was like an anonymous confessional experience. I feel honored that so many shared their candid responses.

Seek professional psychotherapy help. Friends are great listeners, but sometimes it takes a professional to get to the heart of the issue and pinpoint the fear.

Use a qualified horseman to help you evaluate your next equine, so you can get an appropriate equine equal to the skill level of handler and one capable of performing the chosen discipline well. Many people get into trouble from being ‘over horsed’, or under educated. Use trainers, take lessons, go to clinics to increase your knowledge and confidence. In the long run, it’s financially wise to spend money on training, verses medical bills! Work with a driving/ riding buddy if possible for mutual support and safety. Be realistic of your abilities and how they may have changed thru the aging process.

I personally do this technique and find it very effective!

Be kind to yourself, and realize that the fear is a very natural reaction, and use it to come to a better understanding of yourself and your limitations. Don’t allow it to cripple you, but be realistic about what is reasonable for YOU in YOUR circumstances. Own your decision and be comfortable with it. It’s OK to change course- you don’t have to prove anything- don’t give into peer pressure. Take things in baby steps at your own pace.
BREATHE! Holding your breath creates tension, which transfers down the reins to your horse. He loses confidence in his ‘leader’, and becomes anxious too, which then becomes a vicious circle each feeding on the other until something happens. Sing a song or talk to yourself or your horse. Shake out your arms and throw away the tension!

Use common sense and listen to your gut instinct and voices in your head! Get back on! Ride or drive as quickly as possible to face those fears head on. Time is your enemy.

My wish is that you find something that will work for you in dealing with your fears so that you may continue to enjoy your horses.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed effort to convert retreat into advance” Franklin D. Roosevelt

References:

The science of Fear- Daniel Gardner (1)

Overcoming Anxiety – Dennis D. Tirch, Phd (2)

Patricia Demers is a trainer and clinician in So. California, and can be contacted at Carpediemfarm@aol.com