



Comfort Zones



Get back on the horse

Just get over it—push through

Stop being so afraid

These are the kinds of messages we are told (or we tell ourselves) about how we should respond to fear.

The common narrative is that to improve, we need to be outside our comfort zone. But here is the funny thing about comfort zones.

The more we push outside our comfort zone, the smaller our comfort zone becomes.

By going too far beyond where we feel safe, we create a bad experience for ourselves, whether something bad actually happens or it's just really scary, our zone of feeling safe will get smaller.

So how do we improve?

The key is to work at the edge of where you feel safe, doing something that is challenging, but then returning to what is easy. This is what will truly build your confidence and expand your comfort zone.

Remember back to our section in Module 2, "The Physiology of Fear and Safety" page 60. When we are in a state of fear, our perception of the world changes. We see and hear differently. At a certain point in the fear response, we lose our ability to think clearly, and our body simply reacts. Many riders repeatedly put themselves in situations where this level of fear is triggered and then later chastise themselves for their response.

The first step to building confidence is to be very honest with yourself in what you are



actually comfortable with. This means setting judgement aside of what you "should" be comfortable doing, and listening to your body of what is truly ok. Where do you have to start "pushing" yourself, or tuning out from your body in order to keep going?

Is it at the pasture gait, the mounting block, before you ask for canter, when the jumps start getting raised?

We do need to challenge ourselves to grow, but too much challenge and we aren't showing our bodies and nervous systems "this is safe," we are only creating repetition of "this is scary."

You are the only one that knows what something feels like to you. There are times that we have the skills to ride at a higher level than we are, but our body still registers a fear response.

These are the times to pause, breathe, give the fear a number on a scale of 1-10, 1 being totally calm and 10 being panic. Wait until the fear lessens, not trying to push it down or talk your way out of it. Simply be with it, and breathe through it. When it has dropped down to a 5 or below, you can evaluate the challenge in front

of you and decide if you want to go for another canter or take that jump again.

By pausing you allow yourself to move through the feeling, you also allow yourself a moment to see your own patterns. Do you tend to always push through, or do you always back away from challenge?

Can you pause before you are in a place of fear? Instead of waiting for fear itself to stop you, pause before you need to.

These moments allow you to make the best decision for you. In the end, we need to each accept responsibility for what we agree to do, for the risks we decide to take.

In riding, a great degree of responsibility also rests with the riding instructor. You may trust them to give you a well trained horse, and to only ask you to do things you are prepared to do.

However, your riding instructor does not know what you are feeling, and when we choose to be conscious of our risk and conscious of the amount of challenge we are willing to take on, we are empowered.

Take a moment and consider an area where your comfort zone is being challenged. Describe the situation below.

Now, where do you find the edge of your comfort zone in this example? Remember not to judge how far back you need to go, but where do you first start feeling fear, and feeling uncomfortable?

The next time you are at this point, what is a way you can pause there, not pushing past, but just waiting and listening at that point?



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