

Fear Is.....

Your mouth goes dry, your heart starts pounding, your legs begin to tremble and your breathing rate goes up. There is a knot in your stomach that feels like it's trying to climb into your throat and you feel sick. Every little noise or movement startles you, even your sense of smell seems to be heightened, your brain screams danger, you want to run away, you are afraid.

We have all experienced the above sensations to a greater or lesser extent at some time in our lives, this emotion that overwhelms us has a name, fear. All living things have built in mechanisms to alert them to danger, to keep them safe and ensure survival, the more complex the organism the more complex the mechanism and in all animals this can be expressed as fear. Think of fear as nature's way of saying "pay attention". Without fear then an animal could quickly be injured or killed as it takes no notice of dangerous situations. How would a zebra survive if there was no inbuilt fear of predators, how would we have survived if we did not have a fear of predators? Both human and horse are "pre-programmed" to respond to certain stimuli that may indicate a risk of injury or death to themselves and both have a set physical response to ensure human or horse removes themselves from the danger forthwith.

Humans living in remote environments where there are no emergency services or even modern medical facilities have a high sense of self preservation. They are as careful as they can be when out and about, watching where or how they step, ensuring they do not risk injury through carelessness or, if in areas where there are man-eating predators around, through lack of attention. These people seldom take great risks, unless of course the rewards outweigh the danger. Everything is analysed and weighed and judged in accordance to potential benefits against potential death. The urge to survive will be the deciding factor.

In our modern societies we live a sanitised life with no immediate need to watch for a predator, or so we would like to think. The truth is that our inbuilt warning system, fear, has simply moved onto a different set of stimuli that may prove a threat to our survival in our concrete jungles. This set of rules has to be learned and is part of our culture when growing up. Children are taught quickly by their parents that heat or fire burns and hurts, that cars and lorries and therefore roads are dangerous and can kill. In our world the predators take the form of vehicles, modern appliances, electricity etc. This shows how versatile our programming is and how our ability to control and channel our fear onto appropriate stimuli for our environment is a learned conscious process. Of course there are still some "throwback" stimuli memories such as a fear of spiders, snakes, dogs, small spaces etc that lurk in our programming but which can be controlled to a greater or lesser extent.

We even use fear as a form of entertainment. You all know the thrill of an amusement park ride such as a rollercoaster. You enjoy that small knot of fear for those short minutes, you enjoy the "kick" it gives you and how it stimulates your senses. Deep down you know that although things appear to be dangerous and out of control they really aren't and that a high number of safety mechanisms exist to ensure your survival. The same goes for a horror film etc, you enjoy feeling afraid, getting a "scare" because you know that it is not real and that you cannot be affected or injured by the film. In this sense we use our programming in a controlled manner, to keep our senses sharpened, just in case!

There are those of us who are classed as "thrill seekers" who put themselves into real life threatening situations such as base jumping, parachuting, etc or any high risk sport and who intentionally stimulate the fear response in order to get a kick out of the physiological responses set up to keep us out of danger. They will tell you that they never feel more alive than when they are participating in such activities and this is due mainly to the heightened state of awareness that our body goes into when stimulated by fear. If asked if they are afraid most would say, "not afraid, just nervous or excited" this is still a fear state but highly suppressed or controlled. If these participants were to let fear get out of control then there would be a high risk of them losing reasonable thought and panicking, this would surely result in their death or serious injury. Likewise, if they did not have a controlled fear state then the lack of nature's "pay attention" command may cause them to become complacent and may also lead to death or serious injury. Most accidents happen in these high risk situations when people become "over confident" or complacent and their state of stimulus is diminished.

Anyone who says that they are never afraid are either lying to themselves or else cannot recognise the mechanism when it kicks in, it may be that their fear stimulus is very repressed or has not been programmed the same way as other people. In any case the majority of us experience fear regularly in our lives and it is not always a bad thing. The trick is recognising when we are afraid and being able to use logic and rational thought to control the level of fear and channel it productively. Fear is only negative when we allow it to gain full control and override our thinking. In this state we are said to be in panic when our bodies will go into full fight or flight mode and we are incapable of reason. I hope that no one ever finds themselves in such a state but it can happen in situations where people develop phobias.

It is perfectly normal for people to feel fear when working with or riding horses. Our instincts tell us that these animals are extremely strong, fast, unpredictable and capable of injuring or killing us. Combine this with our habit of putting the horse in situations where their own survival mechanisms are having to be suppressed (such as going into small dark spaces like stables or trailers etc, allowing a predator to handle them or sit on their backs, to put their safety at risk by jumping large obstacles or going over unsafe ground) then it is perfectly logical for our brains to be telling us that we should keep well away from this potentially dangerous animal. It is how we control or channel this natural fear that is all important. By keeping that little bit of extra awareness about us when working with horses we can begin to see and experience the world as they do. Remember, their survival mechanism is pretty much switched on all the time and their levels of awareness of their surroundings is far greater than ours so by allowing our fear mechanism to kick in slightly we can hope to improve our responses and sensitivity to their world. This is a very controlled sense of fear, it is an awareness, an alertness, a focus of our minds onto the present moment, in other words we allow ourselves to live in the moment as the horse does.

There are many of us who are not comfortable with the use of the word fear as they feel that being afraid is a weakness and yes, in certain circumstances it can be. That is when we allow fear to control us and stop logic from being applied. We have horses because we love the animal and enjoy their company, if we allow our fear to rule our lives then we cannot enjoy the situation because we have lost control and there is a real risk of being in danger because of this lack of control. It is easy for our fear to take control and it can happen in the silliest of ways, we may not have even been injured, or fallen off, but we allow our imagination to take over and become afraid of maybe being injured, or falling off, this is where we become afraid of a "what if" situation. In other words we are afraid of something that may or may not happen in the future.

This makes no sense. One thing that horses can teach us is to be aware of here and now. Deal with what is happening at the moment, the future has not happened yet and the past cannot be changed so is unimportant. What we do at the moment will dictate the future, so it is here and now that our focus must lie. I am not saying that we should not bother about anything, far from it. As I mentioned earlier we need to have an edge or awareness at all times around horses but this must be controlled, it is good to be aware of what can happen and steps to take to prevent things going wrong. For example, if you are working with a horse who is prone to kicking then it is advisable that you have some form of control over the horse when you are working with them, tie them up, have a head collar and lead rope on at all times, don't stand behind the horse or invite a kick, try to remove or fix the cause of the problem then in the future you will not need to be afraid of being kicked.

Some horses will not respond favourably to a human who is afraid. Some will see it as a weakness and one thing horses do not want is a weak leader. This can make some horses very defensive and afraid themselves as they want to get away from the fearful energy being projected at them by the human. Others will become aggressive and will challenge the human, taking control over the situation and instating themselves as the leader. In this situation things can spiral out of control very quickly and can lead to disaster. Sometimes all it takes is for the human to let go of their fear and this can be prompted by getting to a point where they have to take action. This action can be seeking help from professionals or by finding that inner strength themselves where logic takes over and they can see they have been causing the dangerous situation to occur by being afraid.

It takes a very brave and strong person to admit they have been afraid or even feel fear. In our society we seem to make fear seem shameful or negative and this can block a lot of people from being able to regain control because one of the first steps you have to take to lose your fear is to admit you are afraid.

By recognising this state we can then analyse our reactions using logic. We may still feel the physiological responses but we can learn to suppress them long enough to allow us to realise they are unfounded. Sometimes this can simply be done by focusing our thoughts or concentrating completely on the task at hand, if we are focused on what we are doing we will not have time to feel the full affects of fear.

We all go through stages in our equestrian lives where we must overcome fear. I went through a phase where my horse had learned to manipulate my fear to get what she wanted. My fears were not unfounded, in order to get to our usual galloping strip we had to ride over a 15 ft wide, side less wooden bridge over a canal. I was terrified of what might happen if we accidentally fell into the canal as I knew we could both drown. My horse sensed this fear and knew exactly why I was afraid. Her motivation was to get to gallop as quickly as possible and being extremely impatient she did not want to wait till we were over the bridge. So, using horse logic, she would prance and side step, bunny hop and try to leap forwards as we were crossing the bridge. She was absolutely aware of where she was putting her feet and there was simply no way she would have allowed herself to fall over the edge. I however fell for it hook line and sinker and would let her go into gallop the moment she started her nonsense in case she fell into the water. As a result it got to the stage that she was mucking around before we even reached the bridge and it was just downright dangerous for me to let her gallop over the sometimes slippery boards. I began to think that I simply could not take her for a gallop anymore and when I confided in my friend my fear her response was simple (and quite harsh). She said "If you're so afraid of your horse that you won't gallop her then you need to sell her." It was an extreme statement which shocked me into reality. My friend went on to explain that the only reason my horse was behaving the way she was behaving was to manipulate me and control the situation. She said that my horse knew I was afraid and was just trying to scare me into doing what she wanted. She also said that once my horse had learned this trick she may well use it in other situations and that would ruin my confidence and ruin a perfectly good horse. What she said made sense, but how could I change things? My friend said, "If she doesn't think you are afraid then she will stop her mucking around." "The next time she starts her nonsense just laugh out loud at her." I looked at my friend as though she were mad, but, willing to try anything we set out for the gallop together. Right on cue my horse started her cavorting and I squeezed out a very feeble and pathetic excuse for a laugh, it was difficult because I felt as though my heart was in my mouth and my throat had closed over. I heard the ridiculous sound I was making and then I really did laugh at what must have been a really funny scene to watch. As I started to laugh I felt my horse pause in confusion then, with a snort of disgust she went back into walk and strolled over the bridge and waited for her command to go.

There is a logical reason for this to have worked. By laughing I was automatically relaxing my body and my instinctive flight responses began to switch off. I was losing my fear. My horse felt this and realised the game was up. She used her sensible nature to go back to behaving and we got along just fine. Of course, I am not suggesting that you simply laugh at your horse to "fix" any "problem behaviour", far from it. What I am trying to illustrate is that it was my fear that was fuelling the situation and that by letting go of my fear there was no situation to fuel. This was a real revelation to me and it really highlighted the importance of your intent, or feeling inside and how it can make or break you and the animals you work with.

I was lucky that I had a friend who was confident enough to point out my weaknesses and that I was not so insecure that I couldn't accept that I had a weakness and that I was causing the problem. As mentioned earlier there are a lot of people who are afraid or fearful of all sorts of things. It may not be obvious to all, sometimes the fear is connected with riding, handling, doing certain things with the horse, but the most dangerous fear of all is the fear of admitting you don't know what to do. People will blindly go on doing things that are simply not working for them or the horse and create a very dangerous situation because they will not admit that they are wrong or that they don't have all the answers. It is ok to not know everything. It is ok to need help and ask for help, it is ok to be afraid. A word of warning to the wise. There are some people who deliberately use their "fear" to manipulate others to support them both mentally and physically. They get everyone around them to do their work because they are so afraid. It is a generous thing for one human being to help another overcome their fear, but sometimes you have to ask yourself are they really afraid or are they being lazy and manipulative. These people will drain you both emotionally and physically as they will expect you to support them all the time and in reality these people may not even realise they are doing this. It may be necessary for you to draw the line. Yes offer support and advice, but don't fix the problem for them. It

is up to each individual to take responsibility for themselves and their own fears and to make the effort to work through things. As my friend told me when I was afraid, if you truly cannot fix this problem then you must sell your horse, both for her benefit and for yours. Some people simply cannot or will not make the effort to overcome their fear and as a result they have a detrimental impact on the horses that they own or work with.