

Calming the Nervous Horse

What separates the spectacular horses from the good horses is their ability to handle pressure. Many horses become overwhelmed by the intensity of their training program and develop nervous habits, such as chomping the bit, muscle tension, insensitivity to cues, or spooking. A horse may also become timid and nervous about missing a cue from their rider. This is the opposite of what we want from our horses. Instead, we want a confident, relaxed horse that will keep a quiet composure, and one that can process challenges or training commands, instead of panicking.

The worse cases are horses that have so much anxiety that simply walking calmly around the arena on a loose rein is difficult. What has happened is that the horse has lost its ability to think for itself and the horse has developed anxiety about not doing things correctly. These horses need to re-learn how to think for themselves and realize that I am not going to push them, and that they have all the time that they need to do an exercise.

The first step to calming a nervous horse is to start with the basics of walking around the arena on a loose rein. By giving the horse a loose rein, I eliminate any possibility of giving the horse cues to follow and I give the horse freedom to think and process. To help the horse to relax without adding more pressure, I use one of two techniques - the half-halt or the one-rein stop. The severity of the horse's anxiety and the horse's personality determine which technique I use. For a horse that fights the bit by leaning against it or shaking its head, I use a one-rein stop. By reaching up the rein and pulling the horse's head to my foot, I eliminate the possibility of having a tug-of-war match. If the horse accepts pressure on the bit, then a simple half-halt can be used by gently pulling back on the reins until the horse's pace slows. By working through these two techniques, I am re-channeling the horse's energy instead of eliminating it. I want energy for performance, but I want a quiet energy that allows the horse to process cues and confront obstacles. Remember, I want the horse to want to perform, not a horse that dreads being saddled.

I start by dropping all of the contact on the reins and allow the horse to walk freely around the edge of the arena. It does not matter the pace of the walk as long as the horse is walking. The pace will slow down as the horse becomes more relaxed and confident. If the horse speeds up into a trot or running walk, I'll use either the half-halt or a one-rein stop to bring them back to the walk. Once back to the walk, I release the reins again and allow the horse to walk freely. It will take many times of returning the horse to the walk before the horse realizes that it is okay for them to just walk and that I am not going to ask anything else of them. The goal for the first day is to get the horse to walk freely on its own around the arena just once. If this comes quickly, then I'll change direction and do the same exercise in the opposite direction. I do not want to ask for too much in the first few days because it can cause the horse to become bored and impatient, and all of their anxiety will be re-triggered. Baby steps will lead to more progress than will rushing through the exercises.

Once a horse can enter the arena and calmly walk the perimeter without any stress or anxiety, the next step is to work on calming the trot or running walk. I use the same exercise as I did in the walk. The goal is to develop a relaxed gait with a long stride, free of any tension. When I first ask for the trot, or running walk, I don't want to rush the horse into it. I want to give the horse time to think about what I am asking and calmly

speed up into their gait. I start asking for the trot or running walk by clucking or by applying soft leg pressure. I increase the pressure until the horse responds by speeding up. By gradually increasing my aids for the gait, the horse does not feel rushed and does not have the chance to panic over what is being asked of them. I then allow the horse to enter into an easy gait, and if the horse speeds up from that gait, then I use the one-rein stop or half-halt so the horse realizes that there is no need to rush. If the horse chooses to slow down on their own, then I reward them by patting them on the neck and allowing them a minute to take a deep breath. Then I ask for the gait again. Since I am working with a horse that has a tendency to work with a lot of anxiety, I am going to reward them when they want to relax and slow down.

The amount of time that it takes for a horse to fully respond to this exercise can vary depending on the anxiety level of the horse. It is important to stay patient because once a horse feels comfortable with its rider, they can begin to build trust in each other. The hardest part is developing a foundation to build upon. Nothing can be built on a weak foundation. It's a strong foundation that is the basis of lasting success.