

**PART ONE** *In this feature. . .* ➤ Teach your horse to deal with anxiety ➤ Make him more responsive ➤ Help him stay calm in any situation

# Creating CONFIDENCE

*A calm horse isn't just a pleasure to ride and handle, he's also much safer to be around. Warwick Schiller explains how to give your horse a confidence boost*

**H**orses are flight animals, but this instinct to run at the first sign of trouble can cause problems. Regardless of whether your horse is a sensitive soul or super-confident, it's possible to help him be more able to deal with any spike of anxiety he may experience. This control and ability to think through a situation forms the basis of achieving a well-rounded, relaxed and responsive horse in all situations.

## Finding the balance

Horses tend to either be quiet, lazy and unresponsive, or responsive but tense and wound up. Neither is helpful for training and instead, you want your horse

to be somewhere in between – quiet but responsive. The key to achieving this is bothering him a little so he's responsive, helping him get over it so he's quiet, then bothering him a bit more and getting him over it again. This is similar to cognitive behavioural therapy, which is used to help humans overcome all sorts of problems.

For this process, I use two techniques – desensitising and sensitising. Desensitising gets your horse used to something happening to him. If you do lots of it, he'll be very quiet but also very dull. Sensitising asks him to actually do something – if you do lots of this, you'll have a responsive horse, but he'll be quite anxious. If you keep switching between these two techniques, you'll start to find the middle ground. ➤

## State of mind

Purposely making your horse anxious may seem like a bad thing, but it's important to stress horses a little bit when you train them because when they switch from using the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest or relaxation mental state) to the sympathetic nervous system (the more heightened and alert state) and back again, they get a dopamine release. Lip licking is a sign of this – when a horse licks his lips, a lot of people think he's relaxed, but it actually means he's been slightly stressed and he's come back down from that.

You're trying to turn him into a dopamine addict so he craves the release he gets by coming down from a stressful episode. He should then start to look for the solution to the situation so he can get the reward of dopamine.

If you imagine your horse's mental state as a pyramid, the bottom two levels are controlled by the parasympathetic nervous system and the ones above are the sympathetic nervous system



## Our expert



Originally from Australia, but now living in California, USA, **Warwick Schiller** is a performance horsemanship trainer. He holds clinics around the world, demonstrating methods based on how horses think and interact.

**Step one** **Desensitising**

The aim of this is to present your horse with something that bothers him slightly, then give him the opportunity to find the solution to make it go away. Many people think you need to desensitise your horse to lots of different things, but you don't. This exercise isn't teaching him to not be anxious about one thing in particular, it's helping him learn to cope with an anxious situation in general.

**How to do it...**

At first, only apply the minimum amount of pressure. Try throwing a leadrope over his back – this shouldn't be a big deal because he's probably had a saddle swung over his back for years, but for many horses it can still cause anxiety. Throw the rope gently, but try not to hold him still – allow him to move away from the rope but stay with him. Walking towards his hip so your feet are pointing at his quarters means he has to begin to cross his hindlegs over. He won't be able to do this if he's mentally tight, so once he does it's a sign that he's starting to relax.

Keeping throwing the rope until he's completely still – even twitching counts as moving away. The rope isn't hurting him so eventually, when running doesn't make it go away, he should try stopping of his own accord to see if that works – never ask him to stop. As soon as he does stop, you must stop throwing the rope.

Once he's had a breather and time to relax, repeat the process. This time, he should stop running away from the rope much more quickly because he's remembered what worked last time. Give yourself plenty of time to do this because once you've started, you have to keep doing it until he's changed his mind about running away. You also need to throw the rope over both sides of your horse, so that he's evenly desensitised.

It's important to start with desensitising him to something as small as throwing the rope first so you can use it to help him relax when you start to sensitise him with bigger things later on.

...and soon he'll decide to stop running away



“When you're teaching your horse, you can't tell him the answer, he needs to find it out for himself in order to learn”

**TOP TIP**

It's best to use a long leadrope for groundwork. Avoid using a lunge line, as it's too long and you're likely to get in a tangle.

Allow him to move his feet away from the rope...



**Bring him back**

After you've done the desensitising exercise a few times your horse may stand still when you throw the rope, but that doesn't mean that he's okay with it. It's more likely that he's starting to shut down.

If he's mentally present, your horse will move his eyes, but if they aren't moving, he's in the shut-down state. It's like when a cat plays with a mouse and the mouse is frozen still, letting him do it. It's a chemical reaction in the brain and all animals, even people, have the ability to zone out and pretend they're no longer in a scary situation. This can happen with groundwork if, at the end, you don't make sure that your horse has come back to you. Behaviourists call it learned helplessness.

To bring him back to you, rub him with your hand until he blinks – this is a sign that he's broken out of the shut-down state. The best place to rub is on his withers, where horses mutually groom each other, because there are bundles of nerve endings there that stimulate relaxation. Horses need to have social bonding for cohesion within their group and these nerve endings feel really good when they're scratched, but they're in a place your horse can't reach himself. He needs to make friends so he can have that feeling of relaxation.

Rub his withers to help him relax



**Step two** **Sensitising**

It's now time to do the other part of the process and get his feet moving. To do this, you need to get him a little responsive and that's also going to make him a little anxious.

Getting him to move is important because this is how horses establish dominance. If you put two horses in a paddock together who have never met before, the first thing that happens is they figure out who's who and one will get the other to move his feet to assert dominance. This establishes their relationship.

A lot of people start to move before their horse, which straightaway puts them in the submissive role. Instead, stand still and ask him to move in the opposite direction to the way he's facing – there's no point asking him to do something he's already doing. He's got to go by yielding, so his front end pivots in the direction you want him to go before he starts to move off. Asking him to yield is a good way of spotting if he's reluctant to obey your aids.

One of my key training principles is that you don't ask your horse directly to do the thing you want him to do, but instead ask him to do something that inadvertently causes him to do the thing you want – for example, using transitions to teach him to collect, because he can't do one without doing the other.

“Getting him to move is important because this is how horses establish dominance”

**How to do it...**

Use pressure on the leadrope to ask him to move and if he doesn't, back up your aid by waving a flag or something similar – he should move off around you, away from it. Once he's done a circuit or two, use pressure on the leadrope to ask him to stop and move his quarters over. He should yield with his quarters this time so he's facing you, causing him to cross his hindlegs before coming to a stop. If he stands still once he's in position, then leave him alone.

If he doesn't stop, back up your aid – step over so that you're ahead, but not directly in front, of him and wave the flag so he turns around away from it and goes the other way. He's allowed to move his feet, but he has to do so in the way you want him to until he gives an indication that he'd like to stop.

Keep repeating until he learns that ignoring your halt aid means he has to turn and move off in the other direction. Never make him stand still – ignoring your aid is okay, as long as he's prepared to do all the extra work that comes as a consequence of that. Horses are energy conservers and will instinctively try to find the solution that requires the least work, so eventually he'll learn to take the easy option.

**TOP TIP**

If you don't have a flag, try tying a plastic bag or rag around the end of your schooling whip. Alternatively, use another novel object, such as a foam pool noodle.



Ask him to move with the rope



If he doesn't go, back up your aid with the flag



Allow him to move his feet away from the flag



Ask him to yield his quarters so he crosses his hindlegs



If he faces you and stands still then leave him alone

**Step three**

**Bring him back down**

When he's responding well, you need to help him come back down so he can get a dopamine release. Do exactly what you did before – throw your rope over his back until he stands still, then rub him until he blinks.

It will take longer than when you first desensitised him because he's now sensitised, which means he's more reactive. However, it should be easier to get him to respond to your leadrope aids. While before you had the two separate states, you're now reaching a point where he's quiet but responsive, which is the end goal. Now he should be relatively calm with the rope, so the next step is to desensitise him to the flag.

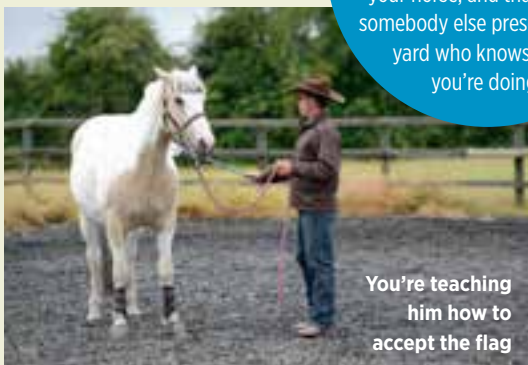
Lead your horse in a spiral, holding the flag out in front of you so he's following it. We're all braver when something scary is going away from us, so this will help him gain confidence and gradually he'll close the distance between himself and the flag. When he's walking forward and following the flag well, start to wave it around and then, still waving in exactly the same rhythm as before, walk towards him.

Watch his expression to see when things are getting too much for him. If his head goes up a bit as you get closer, he's not okay anymore. Stop walking but keep waving the flag and watching his expression, waiting for him to relax, blink or lower his head. When you get these signs, stop waving the flag, retreat and go back to your starting position so he can have a little break. You're teaching your horse that you're empathetic to how he feels and that he can trust you. As he starts to realise this, you should be able to get closer and closer each time you restart the exercise. Horses experience anxiety when they don't have control over the situation, but this shows him that he has control – questioning the primary instinct to run away and, instead, relaxing and investigating the flag makes it go away.

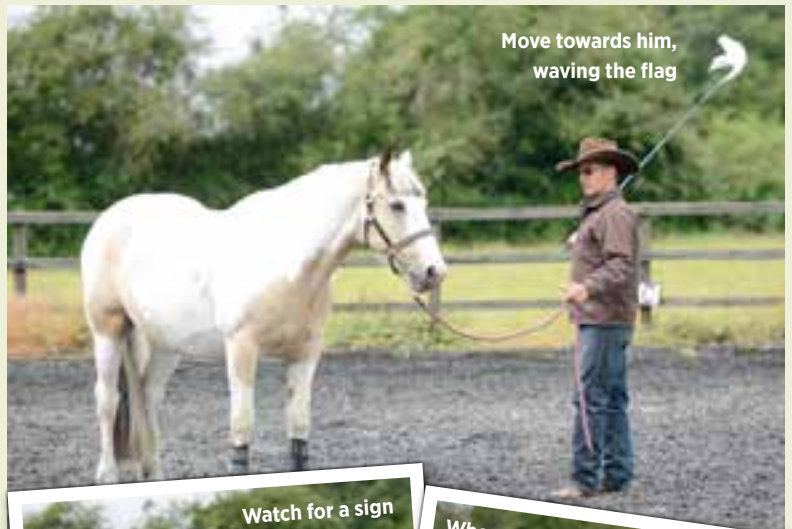
The aim is to be able to rub the flag against your horse's side. You're not trying to force the flag on him – instead you're trying to teach him how to accept it so you could rub it on him if you wanted to.

**TOP TIP**

*H&R recommends that you always wear a riding hat, gloves and sturdy boots when doing groundwork with your horse, and that there is somebody else present on the yard who knows what you're doing.*



**You're teaching him how to accept the flag**



**Move towards him, waving the flag**



**Watch for a sign he's not okay**



**When he relaxes, go back to the start**



**Repeat**

Now he's desensitised to the flag, you need to sensitise him with it again so you eventually the flag could mean 'go', 'stop' or nothing at all, depending on the situation and how you use it. You want him to analyse every situation and think about how he's going to respond, rather than instinctively panicking.

As before, ask him to go with your leadrope aid and if he doesn't, use the flag to send him away. He may keep trying to stop because he's desensitised to the flag and thinks it means stop, but keep asking him to move. The flag doesn't mean stop, unless you're using it to back up asking him to halt with the leadrope.

Desensitising him for half an hour, then sensitising for half an hour straight doesn't work, in the same way that walking for half an hour, then trotting for half an hour doesn't teach collection. You've got to keep cycling between the two, until you eventually get to quiet but responsive. It doesn't happen straightaway, but transitioning between the two mental states helps your horse learn in the same way that transitions help him learn collection.

**Teaching control**

You're trying to teach emotional intelligence and show your horse how to control his adrenalin levels, meaning he should be able to think his way through problems rather than running away. By providing the problem yourself, he can experience and deal with it in a controlled environment, making anything you encounter together in the future much simpler. ■



*Next issue: Part 2*  
Teach him to respect your personal space

**Never miss an issue! Subscribe at**  
[horseandrider.com](http://horseandrider.com)