

Tame That Lizard Brain!

BRAIN TRAINING FOR RIDERS



Unlock Your Riding Potential with StressLess
Techniques for Conquering Fear, Improving
Performance, and Finding Focused Calm



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Your Brain on Stress:

Meet Your Inner Lizard

Another lovely summer day, another cross-country course walk. I stood in front of the cordwood jump, the first sizable fence on my cross-country course, and felt my stomach flip over. Just like that green table I told you about in the Introduction, it looked bigger than anything I'd ever jumped before. (Bet you're sensing a theme here.) I swear it got bigger as I stood there.

As usual, the Committee in my head started yammering: "Can you really handle that? It's huge. What if you miss your takeoff spot? What if you mess up your horse? She's green, remember, and if you scare her, you're going to screw her up for life. You could have a rotational fall and get really hurt—it just happened to a Big Name Rider, it could happen to you—and your family will be watching and your friends will be watching and...." I took a deep breath and slowly blew it out.

"Time to practice what I preach," I thought, and reminded myself, "My horse doesn't care. We jumped bigger on Tuesday." Standing back from the jump again, I repeated my mantra for the course: "Sit up and kick, sit up and kick." It started to look a little less gigantic. I ran my hand across the top of the jump and walked past it. A friend of mine was walking by at that moment. I rolled my eyes at her and said, "Hours

and hours of wanting to throw up, all for six minutes of adrenaline rush. We are a sick, twisted bunch of individuals.” She laughed and answered, “Yeah, but we can’t not do it, can we?” The next morning, as I crossed the finish line grinning, I was reminded of how right she was.

Since you’re still reading, I assume that you love to ride; in fact, I’m willing to bet that riding for you is probably equivalent to breathing, or at least to really *living* life. It’s not a hobby; it’s a way of life. You may have given it up for periods of your life to go to college, start a family, or build your career, only to pick it up again because you couldn’t stay away. At least once a day there is a post on my Facebook feed referring to riding as an addiction, an obsession, an all-consuming passion.

And yet you probably have moments like my course-walk experience when you think, “You know, I could just go home and clean the garage like a normal person.” Riding may be your greatest joy, but it also stresses you out at times. You may get nervous at shows, or in lessons, or when you jump, or ride outside of the ring. You may be absolutely terrified of cantering across a field. You may be scared of your horse because you feel overwhelmed by his powerful stride, or because you’ve been tossed by his athletic buck. The feelings may be so intense that your mother, your best friend, or your significant other asks, “Why are you even riding? It just makes you miserable.” And yet you keep coming back. You can’t *not* keep coming back.

This first chapter explores why riding, this sport we love so much, can also stress us, worry us, even scare us. You’ll learn how and why your brain reacts with fear, and why your body and mind respond in certain ways. You’ll come to understand that anxiety is not the enemy, and I’ll suggest more useful ways of seeing your fearful emotions that will set the stage for increasing your confidence in the saddle and your deep enjoyment of the sport.

WHY DO YOU RIDE?

Whether you ride for pleasure or competition, relaxation or exhilaration, your reasons for riding are uniquely yours. There are no right or wrong reasons, as long as your riding brings you joy. However, when you run into obstacles in riding and become frustrated or discouraged, it's easy to lose sight of what you love about the sport in the first place. The following exercise can help you reconnect with the things that you love about riding and horses. This is the only time I'll ask you to do a visualization exercise! Read all the way through it before beginning the exercise, because it's easier to do with your eyes closed.



Exercise: Visualization

- 1** Find a place where you can be alone for at least 10 minutes.
- 2** Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and take a few deep, slow breaths. As you breathe, allow your outside thoughts to fall away and let yourself settle.
- 3** Now call to mind one of your favorite memories of riding. Play it through your mind as if it is happening to you now, as if you are inside a movie of the memory.
- 4** In your mind's eye, look around and notice what you see. Where are you? What color is your horse's coat? His mane? What are you wearing? What season is it, and what is going on around you? Notice all of your surroundings, whether they are passing by quickly or slowly, if you are alone or with others.
- 5** Feel the sensations of your body: How fast are you traveling? What gait are you in? Is the air warm or cool? Feel your horse moving underneath you, the reins in your fingers, your seat in the saddle or on his bare back.

6 Hear the sounds around you: hoofbeats, your horse's snorts, the creak of your tack, your breathing, the wind in your ears. Are there voices nearby, or sounds of birds or other animals?

7 Breathe in and smell your horse's scent, the air around you, the scent of your tack.

8 Notice your emotions: Are you exhilarated, excited, peaceful? Allow yourself to enjoy the memory all the way until its end, then gently blink your eyes open.

While it's still fresh in your mind, take a notebook, journal, or in notes on your tablet or computer, write down what you experienced and felt inside your memory.

Ultimately, this is why we do this: it's because we want to have these experiences and feel these emotions.

When I lead this exercise in workshops, I watch all kinds of emotions play across people's faces: joy, peace, excitement. There are also people who say that the memory makes them sad because they have lost these joyful feelings and are afraid they won't be able to ever get them back again. If this describes you, the rest of this book will help you regain these emotions and help you love your riding again.

Before we move on, I want you to notice one more thing about this exercise: *absolutely nothing happened just now*, and yet you felt the emotions of that memory as if it were actually occurring. You weren't riding, your horse wasn't here, but *your emotions reacted as if you were actually having that experience*. *This is extremely important*, and we'll focus on it in detail throughout the book.

WHY DO I *DO* THAT WHEN I'M NERVOUS?

- “When I’m in the warm-up, there’s so much static in my head that I can’t even hear my trainer.”
- “No matter how many times I practice my dressage test, my mind goes blank when the judge rings the bell.”
- “At home I’m pretty good at finding my distances to the jumps, but at the show I pick at my horse and my rounds become all herky-jerky. It drives my trainer crazy!”
- “I *know* I should sit up if my horse bucks, but in the moment I lean forward, pinch, and grab his mouth anyway. It’s so frustrating!”

Do any of these statements sound familiar? I hear dozens of complaints just like them in my lessons and clinics, and I’ve voiced many of those same complaints myself. Our behavior when we’re stressed, nervous, or scared is often the opposite of what we know we *should* do. Why does this happen? In order to understand this maddening phenomenon, we need to understand how the brain works when we’re afraid; to understand the brain, we need to go back to Darwin.

A QUICK TOUR OF THE BRAIN

The human brain has evolved over millions of years. It’s now a complex, intricate structure capable of processing staggering amounts of information in the blink of an eye. But at the beginning, it was a much simpler organ. As vertebrates (any creature with a spinal cord) evolved, they developed a *brain stem*, now located at the base of our brain at the back of our head, just above the spinal cord. The brain stem controls the body’s “housekeeping” functions: breathing, heartbeat, digestion,

and other ongoing processes that keep the body alive.

As evolution continued, we developed the capacity for emotions. The *amygdala*, which sits very near the brain stem, is the part of the brain responsible for these basic emotions: happy, sad, mad, and scared. Nearby is the *hippocampus*, which has a large role in memory.

The area that includes the brain stem and the amygdala is often referred to as the “Lizard Brain” or the “Reptile Brain,” because reptiles seem to have been the first animals to possess this area.

Much, much later, we evolved our *prefrontal cortex*, a very large section located just behind the forehead. This is your “Rational Brain,” the part of the brain that controls logical thought: it allows you to plan that after you read this chapter, you need to pick up your son from soccer, buy grain, and remind your spouse that tomorrow is recycling day. It also allows you to do cool things like think in the abstract and come up with great inventions like saddles and Velcro and duct tape. We tend to rely on the prefrontal cortex to get us through the day. Twenty-first century Western culture places a heavy value on things like logical thinking, planning, and verbal abilities, so it's usually steering the ship under normal circumstances.

There are many other structures within the brain, but the Lizard Brain and the Rational Brain are the ones that are the most important for our discussion here.

Your Brain on Stress: The Fight or Flight Response

We humans like to view ourselves as rational creatures who make reasoned, logical decisions and choices. Ideally, we want our choices to support our long term goals. But as much as we *know* that an apple is better than a cookie and that paying the electric bill is more important than the tack shop's clearance sale, our Lizard Brain couldn't care less about “long term health” or “financial stability.” It thinks only about the immediate moment, and it cares about only one thing in this moment: survival.

Winning the evolution game is about surviving long enough to reproduce and pass on your DNA to the next generation. Up until very recently, humans lived in an environment with lethal threats all around: saber-toothed tigers, poisonous snakes, enemy tribes. Our ancestors that survived long enough to reproduce didn't survive because they avoided fast food and gluten and balanced their checkbooks every week; they survived because their brains developed a mechanism to get them out of danger as fast as possible. This mechanism is known as the Fight or Flight Response (FOFR). Here's how it works:

Imagine you're grooming your horse and you're leaning over to brush mud off his belly. Suddenly he kicks up at a fly and you jump out of the way just in time to avoid being kicked yourself. You realize he came dangerously close to nailing you right in the head! Now imagine how you feel: your stomach is quivering, your heart is pounding, your hands are shaking a little, and every muscle is tense. You've just been protected by your FOFR.

Remember the *amygdala*? Think of it as your body's alarm system. When your brain perceives a threat in the environment, the amygdala signals the brain to engage the FOFR. A surge of stress hormones, primarily adrenaline and cortisol, are released into your bloodstream and trigger a rapid series of physiological changes. Your heart beats faster to get more blood to the major muscle groups in your arms and legs, which tense up to prepare to fight or run. You breathe faster to get more oxygen into your bloodstream. You start to perspire. Blood is channeled away from your extremities and momentarily unnecessary organs such as your stomach.

This is why you may get cold hands and butterflies in your stomach when you're nervous, and why you have such a hard time relaxing your muscles enough to deepen your seat and stay tall in the saddle.

An important point to note here is that the FOFR can activate when it perceives *any* threat. It responds whether that threat is physical, such

as a kick from a horse, or psychological, such as the worry that you'll forget your reining pattern. It also gets activated *whether the perceived threat is real or imagined*. This is why you can feel jittery just picturing your horse bucking you off.

Remember how you felt those wonderful emotions in response to your favorite memory of your horse? Your brain responded to the memory by creating real emotions, experienced in the present moment, even though they were triggered by your imagination, and not by an actual present-moment experience. The Lizard Brain can't tell the difference between something you imagine vividly and something that's actually happening.

On the positive side, you can feel great when you imagine something wonderful; on the down side, you can panic your Lizard Brain by picturing something terrible happening. You can also make your Lizard Brain angry (the fight in Fight or Flight) by imagining a conflict. (Ever re-live an argument with your significant other in your mind and find yourself angry all over again? Hello, Lizard Brain!)

One more interesting thing happens during the FOFR. The *prefrontal cortex*—the Rational Brain that thinks things through logically—*shuts down*. It's never even consulted in the Fight or Flight process. It's as if you were flying over southern California at night, and all of a sudden, Los Angeles went totally dark. The FOFR flips a switch, and off goes your Rational Brain.

At first glance, this may seem like an evolutionary design flaw. Why on earth would you want your logical thinking capacity disconnected? However, it makes sense when you look at it from a survival perspective: Imagine you're a caveman a hundred thousand years ago. One morning, you stroll out of your cave and spy a saber-toothed tiger stalking in the bushes. Your Rational prefrontal cortex might say something like this: "Oh, hey, a tiger. Or is it a lion? Nope, it has saber teeth, definitely a tiger. What should I do? I could hit it with my club—no, that's in the

cave. I could climb that tree or hide behind that rock, but it might find me. I guess I'd better run—" CHOMP!

By now, the tiger has finished his delightful lunch of cave-human. In life-or-death situations, reasoning and logic simply take too much time. Instead, the amygdala hollers, "TIGER! RUN!" and you live to see another day.

This, dear rider, is why you can't think straight when you're extremely nervous: your amygdala has hijacked your Rational Brain. You're not stupid or inept; you've just allowed your Lizard Brain to run the show. It thinks you're being attacked by a tiger, so it tries to get you to safety.

I mentioned earlier that the Lizard Brain can't distinguish between a psychological threat and a physical one; it uses the same response for both. This is why a dressage judge can send your heart pounding and wipe your brain clean of everything you knew five minutes ago.

My Lizard Brain is why my stomach started doing acrobatics when I simply thought about jumping that big cordwood on my cross-country course. To the Lizard Brain, a threat is a threat, and you either need to kill it or run away from it as fast as possible. It doesn't see any other alternatives. This in an unfortunate reality of evolution: it moves much, much more slowly than our cultural development has done.

In the last 200 years or so we have eliminated nearly all of the daily *physical* threats that plagued our ancestors. In their place, *psychological* stressors such as financial concerns and fear of emotional rejection have grown instead. However, the human brain has not evolved to keep up with this rapid shift, so we're stuck with the FOFR as our instinctive reaction to stress of any kind. Fortunately, there *are* ways of managing the FOFR and regaining control of your thinking, and I'll discuss them throughout the remainder of this book.

Instinctive Reactions vs. Effective Responses

Another physical response to anxiety needs to be mentioned here: the tendency to tense up and lean forward, especially when you feel like you're going to fall off your horse. We all know it's wrong, but we all do it at least some of the time. Why would we do something that's the complete opposite of what we know to be right? Again, the answer is survival. Babies are born with very few fears, but one of them is the fear of falling. Humans are born with a reflex to protect ourselves during a fall: we curl up into the fetal position. We literally spend nine months practicing before we even join the outside world! The fetal position does a brilliant job of protecting our inner organs *once we are already falling*; it just doesn't help us when we want to prevent the fall in the first place. In order to ride well, then, we actually have to override our most ancient instinct. It's pretty amazing that we're actually successful most of the time!

“Excuse Me, But Who Thought *This* Was a Good Idea?”

Many people get a bit exasperated with me at this point. “But Andrea, I love to ride and I know how to do things correctly in the saddle. I've had hours, even years of experience. So why do I still get freaked out at random times by something I know how to do, and that I love so much?”

The answer goes back to slow evolution and the Lizard Brain, which doesn't share our Rational Brain's love of logic. Look at it from your Lizard's point of view for a moment: you want to climb up on a 1000-pound creature so that your head, with its soft, fragile brain, is seven feet or more from the ground. The creature is a flight animal that runs away first (really fast) and asks questions later. You're going to ask this creature to carry you over all kinds of terrain at speeds of up to 20 or 30 miles per hour. You might even make it chase after other animals or jump over obstacles that may not fall down when you hit them. If you're