

Sherree sees such riders for two or three sessions, or in workshops over two days, and finds this is enough to help them.

Causes of confidence issues

There are various reasons why riders lack confidence and Sherree will treat clients differently depending on the cause.

For example, they might struggle to move forward after a bad experience. In this case, she would work with them to 'destabilise' the memory, so it doesn't continue to illicit the same fear response.

Sometimes, the problem lies with the rider's focus. "It might be that they are external referencing," says Sherree. This means they are looking to see how other people rate their abilities, rather than drawing on their own views.

Other riders focus on the height of the fences, for example, instead of the clear round they want to achieve. "A course is just a dressage test with some extra big canter strides in it – when you think of showjumping in those terms, it's not so daunting," points out Sherree.

Then there are issues with skill sets. Out of her research focus group of 11 participants who had confidence issues, four had bought young horses. If someone is not experienced training a youngster, it is not surprising they lack confidence doing so.

Riders can simply find that when they get older, or have children, they risk-assess more, which lowers their confidence.

But experience can rebuild confidence, too, as Sherree explains: "It's up to your instructor to teach you within your comfort zone until you have enough positive experiences and this evidence of your success starts to take the place of negative beliefs or concerns."

Conquering fear

Bravery, they say, is knowing the risks and doing it anyway. Riding is a risk sport, and respect for the dangers involved is understandable, perhaps advisable.

"Appropriate fear exists, but it can be set too high," says Sherree. "Some people's fear of spiders in this country is not justified – sure, there's a reason for it, and in a country where spiders are poisonous it is justified."

To gain control of their unjustified response to a scenario, Sherree teaches people to change their emotional state.

"Imagine you are in a traffic jam," she says. "Look about and you will see people

responding in different ways. Some will be banging the steering wheel; others will be trying to see what's going on. I'd rest my head back and do a short meditation. You have to learn to control your emotional state in that 15 minutes when you are sitting there, because whatever your reaction, you aren't going anywhere."

Sherree begins by teaching clients about adrenalin. When we are afraid, adrenalin kicks in. It is the body's natural response, enabling any animal to fight, take flight or freeze by pumping more oxygenated blood to the muscles they might need to use.

"You must tell yourself adrenalin – and the reaction it brings – is not something to be frightened of," explains Sherree. "Adrenalin will only last for 90 seconds – unless you are in a state of worry and keep rebooting it with concerns of 'what if?'"

That is to say, when you are riding across a motorway bridge and you think: 'What if my horse spooks and I fall over the edge?', or: 'What if she spins round when she sees the plastic bag?'

With those thoughts, you're keeping the adrenalin pumping, so your heart is

likely to race and your breathing quicken, as you remain in a state of anxiety.

"Instead, say to yourself: 'Ah, adrenalin – that can help me focus; now this is what I choose to focus on...'," suggests Sherree. By acknowledging it, you're one step closer to controlling it.

"Conscious breathing can dissipate the anxiety. Then you must refocus, choose to concentrate only on your horse and where you want to go. That can be enough to get a grip on your fear."

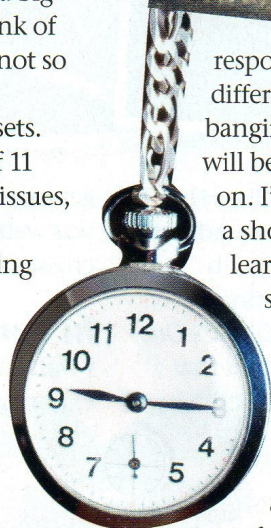
If you've experienced hypnotherapy, this is the point at which you would bring to mind your desired state and colour, too (see page 60).

By choosing to take long, deep breaths, you can start to convince your brain that you are not afraid, as your body does not react with calm breathing when it is in a state of concern.

"The more you practise, the more you can control your emotions," says Sherree.

"Never underestimate the importance of breathing and focus. Where you put your focus is where you put your intention." This is true whether your intention is riding down that centre line, around that course of fences, or over that motorway bridge.

Many riders lack confidence, but it can be rebuilt



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