

Anger:

Don't Let it Rule Your Ride

By April Clay, Psychologist

You catch a glimpse of the squirmish out of the corner of your eye while warming up for your class. A well known trainer is taking her horse to task a little too brusquely. Yanking, spurring and yelling appear to be a normal part of this person's discipline tactics. You look away in disgust, but with a vague recollection of the time you felt close to losing it out of sheer frustration yourself.

It's a topic we like to stray away from. Most find it somewhat uncomfortable. We are, after all, in the age of the 'sensitive' rider. This barrier of shame is unfortunate in that what can and does happen is an escalation of a very preventable problem.

Are strong emotions getting in the way of your relationship with your horse? Many riders do experience feelings of intense anger and or frustration, but often they don't know how to deal with them- or even if they should be talking about them. But make no mistake, emotional reactions can cause just as much trouble in our equine relationships as they do in our human ones.

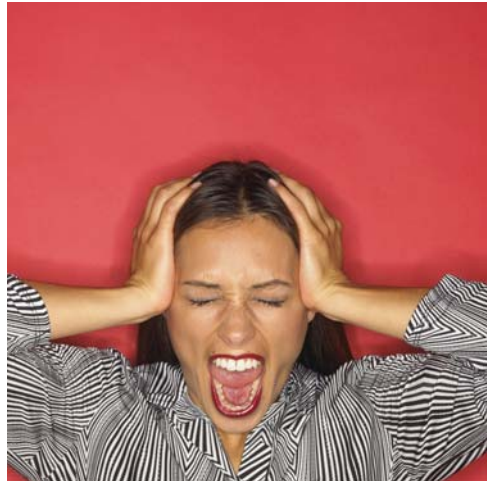
As with the human sphere, however, it is important to remember that anger is a normal human emotion. Thinking you can prevent yourself from ever feeling angry again is not a realistic goal.

What is reasonable is to strive toward understanding and managing your anger. Countless other athletes have learned to use this skill, and you can too.

Anger and your horse

Anger can range from a feeling of minor annoyance to full blown rage. If it gets out of control or is expressed inappropriately it can really hurt your riding and your horse. It is however, a normal emotion that can help protect us from threats when needed. It can also be helpful in other ways, like inspiring action. For the rider, it may translate into increased amounts of tension to convey the importance of a message.

But when it is bad, the consequences to your equine partner are clear. When riding with intense feelings of anger, you may not be yelling literally but often this is the equivalent of what your horse experiences. Anger produces a distinct physiological state, and as a result your energy changes. This energy resonates through your body, your chief mode of communicating with your mount. To your horse, your regular aid



comes across like its being dictated from a loudspeaker. Your own fight or flight response has just set off your horse's, which leads to a potentially big complication. Where we have the capability of regulating and tempering our fight or flight response, our horses do not. They are instinctually driven prey animals that are going to stay firmly footed in their fear response until you give them a good reason to move.

How do you know if your anger is becoming a destructive force in your relationship with your horse? You might say there are three common scenarios. The first is when anger leads to inappropriate aggression that engenders not respect but fear in your horse. The second, when the intensity of the feeling disrupts your thoughts and therefore your problem solving ability. Finally, when anger is really masquerading as another problem we have to face: our fear.

Anger and aggression

You all know the rider that crosses that line into aggression, even violence with their horse. It used to be part of an accepted method of 'taming the horse'. The idea being if you established a dominant position, you would have control and get the results you wanted. Obviously there are still people who follow this philosophy; even though it is now widely known it creates more distress rather than relieving it. But, there are also others who end up going too far simply because they don't have the tools to manage their frustration.

One important key with this type of anger expression is getting to know your own body. Tension will always precede this type of explosion, and if you can get to the point where you can detect this, you are well on your way to managing your response. If this tension is allowed to go by unchecked, there is a good chance it will result in the rider 'discharging' the energy- usually against the horse.

You can get to know more about where your body stores tension by practicing progressive relaxation. This exercise involves alternately tensing and relaxing all the major muscle groups in your body one by one (shoulders, upper arms, etc.). If you do practice, you will find out where your tight spots are and can then be more aware of what is going on in this 'area'. Other indicators of escalating tension to watch for include difficulty breathing, sweating and dry mouth.

While it is difficult to halt the physical aspect of an anger response immediately, you can think about diffusing it before you take action. One very effective strategy you may want to employ is simply to take a time out. You could also refer to it as damage control. Strive not to say anything to your horse that has not been planned as an intentional message. You may be very clear about what you need to do, like how to deliver an aid correctly but this goal can be thwarted by the experience of an intense emotion. People react in a number of ways to the feeling of anger but here is a common denominator: it changes your ride. Repeat this very important fact to yourself until you get it: "it changes your ride". And as a 'trainer' (we all are, whether we get paid for it or not) this is the last thing you want.

So to exercise damage control: get somewhere, drop the reins, take a few deep breaths and clear your head. Make a conscious decision to change the state of your body and

mind. Try visualizing your 'emotional reading' as a temperature gauge that you slowly see dropping down as you breathe. Practice this whenever can, it's a good skill to have when something unexpectedly upsets you, particularly at a show. If you have practiced, you'll know what to do, and have confidence you can do it.

Angry thoughts and actions

Probably the most effective strategy in dealing with anger is to develop the ability to distinguish between thoughts, feelings and actions. We know feelings to be a collection of sensations, but what we choose to do with those sensations is entirely separate. This is where our perception or thoughts come into play. How you interpret an event will determine what your feeling is about it, and will then influence what kind of action you choose to take.

Everyone has a 'thinking style'. Sometimes, we can distort either what we presume our horses or others involved with our sport to be thinking. The end result is we fuel our own anger and either suffer needlessly or make poor choices in responding.

You might have thought or heard something similar to these statements:

My horse is such a jerk, he never listens

My coach wanted to see me fail, I just know it

This is terrible, a disaster and I'll never get over it

These are thoughts that are automatic, or habitual. We are used to having them in certain situations. They lead us nowhere productive and keep us from solving problems. To catch these distortions you will have to become more aware. As the feeling of anger is often what is first noticed, ask yourself what your perception is telling you in that moment. Keep a thought journal with these kinds of observations and you can then begin to review the validity of your thoughts. You will start to see a pattern, and the way in which your thoughts become, well, twisted. To untwist, follow these rules: identify the distortion (are you making assumptions, personalizing without evidence?), counter the distortion and identify a call to action.

My horse is such a jerk, he never listens (my horse is not listening to my aids today, I'm going to go back to basics until I feel his focus return)

My coach wanted to see me fail (I can't assume that, I have to find out what she thinks so I will ask her directly)

This is terrible, a disaster (I don't like what is happening but there must be a way to fix it. I'll figure out what is going wrong and then get someone to help me figure out a way to resolve it)

You might come to think of your newly rewritten thoughts as your *cool thoughts*. Practice them often in your known tough situations and you will get better at responding to and working out your anger.

Anger and fear

Sometimes you can get to the root of your anger by asking yourself what your fears are. Are you afraid of making mistakes, looking foolish, losing control, falling off, not being number one? Many people would rather feel anger than fear. Take for example the rider who has an intense fear of losing control and getting hurt. She deals with this anxiety by getting upset with her horse. "Dumb horse, won't listen!", she says in her head as she persistently jerks on his mouth. The truth about this rider is that she believes herself to be the 'dumb' one, and is terrified this will result in her falling off. This pattern will likely continue, and escalate, until she is able to make this connection. You have to be willing to face your fears in order to dissipate your anger.

The experience of frustration often has roots in unmet expectations of some kind. Perfectionists know frustration all too well. Because they are constantly dissatisfied with how they are performing, they are (surprise!) constantly frustrated. They are also constantly coming from a place of fear- often of not being good enough. These riders need to take a good look at their expectations. Examples of unrealistic expectations include: neither me or my horse should be allowed many mistakes or we are not good enough, I should be able to solve a problem on the first try, my horse should know what I am asking at all times, if I don't win it means I am failing. Do you find anything familiar about these beliefs? If your answer is yes, seek to redefine your expectations, if you make them more realistic and you should notice a drop in your frustration level.

You will also need to learn to manage that fear as you work through changing your expectations. If you find yourself building in that fear and frustration, make a conscious effort remind yourself of what you are trying to do in that moment. Simplify your focus, do not let your emotions 'take over' and dictate your actions. Just as you would not allow a fresh horse to misbehave, do not let yourself do the same when in the grip of a feeling. If your horse was acting fresh and goofy, you would lead him firmly back toward his work, and this is what you need to do with yourself too. In marital arts, this concept is sometimes referred to as "going back to the form". A marital artist may have things come up- emotions, thoughts and other distractions, but he knows his job is to get back to his form, or get back to his job. Same with you, you can even experiment with using the key phrase "back to form" as a cue to refocusing your energy.

Whatever your reasons for the presence of anger in your riding, understanding is very vital. It can help you solve the puzzle- determine what the signal is all about, and then develop a plan to deal with it. Don't let anger rule your ride, but do let it inform your ride.