

Rider confidence

Trick of the mind

Discover how to suppress your inner demons using nothing but your brain

Words: Images, Johnson Photography Mark Hamling

MEET THE EXPERT **Vicky Smith**



Vicky Smith, a personal and corporate people development specialist, has been a nervous rider for more than 20 years. Too afraid to hack out, let alone compete, Vicky's riding eventually became confined to the indoor school. In order to face her fears she turned to her corporate people

development specialist in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and now competes at Medium level dressage - she's even fulfilled her lifelong dream of jumping a cross-country course. So sure these NLP techniques can help anyone, Vicky's spent the last seven years working with nervous riders as the founder of Inspirational Riding Solutions (IRS).

For more information visit www.inspirationalridingsolutions.com

Most riders experience a loss of confidence, a pang of fear or a wave of nerves at one time or another, but for some the problem can become long-term. With the help of our expert Vicky Smith we tell you how to restore your confidence with some simple techniques, using nothing but your mind

AFRAID BUT UNSURE WHY?

Most riders come to me following an incident such as a fall or bad spook. Negative experiences such as these can lead to uncontrollable nerves and even fear, but quite often we're not aware of the original cause of our worry.

My job is to help riders remove the layers of negative emotions, behaviours and beliefs

created at the time of the event and beyond, freeing them of their emotional baggage and allowing them to achieve their goals.

I do this using a dual approach:

- **Firstly** by working with the unconscious mind
- **Secondly** by creating practical tools and strategies



Boost your confidence
YOU & HORSELIVE
Get our advice at this year's Autumn event on 17-18 November. For ticket details see pages 72-74

Clearing negative emotions and limiting beliefs

The unconscious mind is essentially in charge of the body. For example, when driving we can reach a destination with no recollection of how we got there - that's our unconscious mind looking after us.

Additionally, our unconscious mind creates beliefs about ourselves, others and our abilities - both negative and positive.

After a negative riding experience we hold on to an emotional memory of that event. Our unconscious mind then looks out for similar situations in order to avoid them and protect us from harm.

To stop the situation occurring again it generates the previous negative emotions and creates what are called limiting beliefs, resulting in (unhelpful) behaviours such as nerves and fear. There are, however, a variety of techniques that can be used to clear negative emotions and limiting beliefs.

IDENTIFYING THE CAUSE

First I have to find the original event where the limiting belief was created. Most people don't know what this is and quite often it's not even related to riding. To find it I ask lots of questions to unearth the original event, then I can use NLP techniques to clear the

negative emotions followed by the limiting belief. This is done by creating new neurological pathways in the brain in order to break the pattern of negative behaviour.

BREAKING THE PATTERN

New neurological pathways are created when you confuse the normal pattern of associated response in the brain. Instead of letting the unconscious mind automatically generate negative emotions and limiting behaviours associated with riding, I confuse the pattern so it can no longer operate on autopilot. It then has to create new emotions and behaviours and it's important that these are positive. That doesn't mean you'll never feel negative emotions again, far from it, but you will be free of irrational responses when you ride.

TIMELINE THERAPY

In order to create these new neurological pathways, I ask people to track back through their memories to find events that hold key emotions

such as fear. I look for the first memory of fear, not the most recent, nor the most powerful. Most people develop emotional memories before the age of five which is why they're unlikely to recall the memories potentially causing their problems. Also, these memories aren't likely to seem significant with years of life experience

under your belt, but because they hold associated emotions and behaviours, our resulting behaviour can seem irrational.

ANCHORING

Anchoring is used to trigger positive emotions when you need an immediate boost.

To put an anchor in place, think back to a time when you were really happy. Visualise that time, clearly picturing the images, hearing the sounds and remembering how you felt.

At the height of your happy feeling put in place an anchor - this is a physical action such as pinching your hand or arm. Practise using your anchor and eventually it will create an automatic link or trigger to your positive, happy emotion.





It takes three experiences - good or bad - to form a belief

Remember

Beliefs sit at the unconscious level, so we're not aware of them, but we are very aware of their impact, negative or irrational emotions, and behaviours

Practical coping strategies

The parallel process to working with the unconscious mind is creating pragmatic actions, giving the rider a practical way to cope. If, for example, you struggle with your confidence at competitions, when hacking or when jumping, you might head to a venue or

your yard feeling positive, following timeline therapy, only to get in the saddle and feel afraid and anxious. This is because the unconscious mind needs to be convinced that things have changed - a process known as the convincer strategy.

Convincer strategy

Most people need to experience something three times in order to believe it. For example, they might have three falls before creating a limiting belief that riding is dangerous. Equally, most people have to have a positive three times in order

to counteract their limiting belief.

To fulfil someone's convincer strategy, the coping techniques on the next page can help to provide distractions in order to prevent the unconscious mind from reinstating limiting beliefs and fears.

"I was struggling so much"



“Margaret Hinzacka tried an Inspirational Riding Solutions (IRS) course

In 2010 I broke my ankle when mounting in stiff, new dressage boots - unable to get my footing in the stirrup! ended up sitting down behind the saddle, causing my horse Charlie to bolt and me to drop to the floor! I had six months off riding but up until that point I'd been happily competing in dressage at Medium level. When the time came to get back on all I could think about was falling off and hurting my ankle.

I was very sceptical about IRS - it's just not something I would ever do - but I was struggling so much that I thought I should give it a go.

I booked myself onto one of the three-day IRS Confident Rider courses with Vicky and her colleague Francis Wilson. Lectures in the morning were followed by group sessions in the afternoon (three people per group). I even went for a hack with Francis where I used the visualisation technique as I rode.

When I went home I didn't feel any different but I persevered with the visualisation and breathing exercises. On my first hack I felt a little jittery but quickly my worries seemed to fade. I honestly can't tell you what changed or which technique helped me the most - all I know is that it was money well spent and my subconscious is definitely doing something different now. Vicky and Francis put 100% into the course and I'd recommend it to anyone struggling with confidence. I've got a different attitude to riding now and I'm finally enjoying my horse again.

Rider confidence

Physical relaxation techniques

Neuro-linguistic programming works on the belief that there's a powerful mind

and body connection - therefore, any negative thoughts you have will be

communicated to your horse through your body language.

Try these before you ride

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELEASE

Before riding, take 10 minutes' quiet time to practise this simple relaxation technique.

Play some calming music, take long slow breaths and then individually tense the major muscles groups of the body (feet, legs, buttocks, stomach, hands, arms, shoulders and neck) as tight as you can.

Hold for a count of three seconds, then release for a count of three seconds. Repeat three times before moving onto the next group of muscles.

This physically releases tension held in the muscles and mentally calms the mind, ensuring that you're in a good frame of mind before riding and holding less tension that could be communicated to your horse.

VISUALISATION

The unconscious mind can't distinguish imagination from reality, so by creating powerful, positive pictures of what you want, the unconscious mind believes they're real and creates positive associated emotions and behaviours.

Find a quiet place where you can sit undisturbed for 10 minutes. Close your eyes and imagine a picture of yourself riding really well. Everything is perfect. Visualise the look on your face and what's going on around you. Adjust the colour of the picture to make it really bright and colourful. Now 'step into the picture' and see it through your own eyes. Hear the sounds around you and, most importantly, feel the positive feelings. The more you practise this, the stronger positive beliefs and feelings will be.

Try these when riding

Only walk on when you feel relaxed



USE THE POWER OF FEELINGS

If, as you're putting your foot into the stirrup, you feel tense and stressed, make a conscious effort to bring about a feeling of relaxation throughout your whole body. As you pull yourself up, swing your leg over the saddle and sit down, let the feeling of complete relaxation wash over you. Only ask your horse to walk on when you can maintain that internal feeling of relaxation in both your mind and body.

DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES

Singing out loud or in your head before or as you ride is a great distraction technique. Choose to hear a tune or sing a song that's positive and upbeat in order to stop your brain from dwelling on the negatives.

Deep breathing reduces feelings of anxiety

Turn over to find out how another rider was helped



BREATHING EXERCISES

Deep-breathing is proven to reduce feelings of anxiety and fear.

So before you ride (or do anything that fills you with dread) take deep breaths from your diaphragm. If

you become tense when riding, stop, come back to a walk and again take long, slow breaths from the diaphragm, breathing in for a count of three and out for a count of four.

Continue like this for three to five minutes.