

Mind Make Overs

April Clay

The ‘shoulds’ and the ‘have-tos’
Many riders don’t see the initial problem with telling themselves they should and have to do something. It can feel motivating to some. But if the sheer number of these kinds of statements accumulates, it can feel more like pressure.

“Not only did I think I should not have bad riding lessons or make mistakes, I thought my horse should always behave the way I wanted him to. And I do mean always” says Dennis, a self proclaimed perfectionist. Not surprisingly, ‘should’ thinking often goes along with perfectionism. After all, should is a way of stating an expectation, and in the most rigid way. If you tend to think this way, you also need to ask yourself whether you extend these statements to others. Do you believe your horse, your coach and your friends should behave a certain way? Do you often feel disappointed when they don’t?

Makeover: If you are feeling a lot of pressure from ‘shoulding’, there are a few fixes. One is to be a little freer or looser in your thinking. Instead of rigid, impossibly high expectations, try adapting some flexibility. Instead of one acceptable outcome, encourage yourself to aim for a range. Dennis came to realize that good and bad days are necessary to training. He also expanded his definition of acceptable mount behavior. “Now I really keep in mind that my horse is going to have good and bad and everything in between days. He will not be perfect, no matter how much I want him to be. He is no machine, and neither am I, so I decided to

choose not to treat both of us that way.”

The second fix is one Dennis just described, it involves changing your ‘shoulds’ to ‘I want to’ or ‘I choose to’. This language shift will help you dissolve the pressure that goes along with this habit. Instead of feeling like you are forcing yourself to do something, you will be refocusing yourself on what you have the power to choose.

What if?
‘What if’ thinking is the hallmark of the anxious mind. What if I fall off, what if I make a fool of myself, what if I can’t get my nerves under control, what if my pace is too fast. In the ‘what if’ land of thinking, thoughts breed like rabbits. There is no end to the number of catastrophes your mind can dream up.

Kara has such a mind. “Especially just before a show, I can spend hours thinking of things that might go wrong. I usually don’t sleep well for the same reason. It’s like I want to get ahead of the game by thinking of how I could prevent all these things from happening. But, usually I just get exhausted.” ‘What if’ thinking is exhausting. It takes a lot of brainpower to keep up with the onslaught of possibilities. It’s also tiring in another way, as it is tied to the stress reaction and an overactive adrenal system. So no, that physical sensation of tiredness is not just in



your head, it’s very much in your body.

Makeover: Practice thinking, ‘what is’. Every time you feel the urge to predict the future, bring yourself back to the present and anchor yourself there. This way, you will be dealing with what is happening in the moment and lower your overall sense of anxiety and doom and gloom. Chanting ‘what is’ to yourself as your mantra when you are tempted to think ahead can assist you in staying
September/October 2017

in the 'now'. Kara adopted a slightly different twist for her mantra: "I decided to keep going back to 'what now'. I like those words, they feel calming and help me focus on what is directly in front of me. Sometimes I also use the phrase 'ride your now horse' to remind me of what is happening right now underneath me- not what I think could happen or might happen. A cue change has been very powerful for me".



"I'll try"

There once was this strange looking little guy who proclaimed "Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try". His name was Yoda and he was full of pearls of wisdom just like that one. Have you ever tried to pick up a pencil? You either do or you don't. Usually when people say 'I'll try' it's a weak statement of intent.

Stephanie's coach was the one who first caught onto her 'try' habit. She kept hearing her say it again and again. "I'll try to keep my leg on better", "I'll try to keep better control of my pace." Her coach says: "I really started to see a definite pattern in Stephanie's language. Whenever I would give her instruction on what to do in a lesson she would often respond with 'I'll try'. Then a weak attempt would follow. I would reiterate the directions, and get the try thing again. I felt like pulling my hair out some days".

Stephanie's coach is right, a whole lot of 'trys' in your language usually signals doubt and apprehension. Typically there is a lack of commitment in whatever follows.

Makeover: Forget about trying. Commit to what you are doing. When Stephanie's coach would give her instruction, she began to routinely say out loud "I commit to getting those five strides" or whatever the direction might be. It made her feel like she was attacking her task instead of shrinking from it.

"I love my new word commit", she says "it makes me feel like I am really going after something. It also makes me think more about what I need to do to make it happen. I think before, I was just being more passive all around."

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