



ESI  
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# **'Working through troublesome times'**

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***How to keep your confidence when working  
with your horse.***

Changes in confidence can happen so quickly – one day you're having a great ride, the next you're questioning everything. This is such an important topic because losing confidence is common, particularly:

- In spring when the horses sugar levels are high
- When it is windy
- When new animals (goats, alpacas, cows) appear next door
- When your horse is separated from his paddock mate/s
- When going out for a ride
- When riding/training in a new area
- When riding in a group
- When at a competition or training day.

All these things can cause horses can lose rhythm (they tend to speed up), steering and focus as they become distracted by certain situations. As always, it all boils down to the horse's responses to your cues of stop, go and turn on the day. The following points are very important to consider under normal circumstances, even when things feel to be going well:

- Does he respond immediately, or within 3 steps from light aids?
- Do you take care to ensure that the aids you use are clear and the same for each response?
- Do you use a different aid or cue for each response?
- Does he maintain the response once it has been initiated, i.e. self-carriage?
- Is he focussed on you and your signals?
- Is his posture relaxed and calm?

We have written in length about the various responses and the signals to use in-hand and under-saddle, but it is very easy for us to slip into old habits and nag our horse (repeating the aid constantly) and therefore habituate our horses to those signals. This can result in the horse becoming insecure, in which case the horse becomes less focussed and more distracted by the environment, becoming tense. This, in my experience, leads to the greatest loss of confidence for riders.

In this article, I will talk more about how to get your horse to relax, focus on you and be straight in his body, and the exercises you can use to establish this. Some of the exercises will help the groundwork become more established and others will be useful under-saddle.

**Training using an exercise is the best way to establish or regain control and the qualities of relaxation and focus. Leading or riding aimlessly can lead to unpredictable behaviours which can affect you as you lose your confidence in these situations.**

Of course, trying to be relaxed in the saddle or on the ground is not always easy to do when you are unsure, but giving yourself something to do such as an exercise to test your training or the responses you need can help greatly.

Counting steps or strides is extremely useful to establish a rhythm and riding a shape will help your steering and gives you focus on an outcome rather than worrying about what is going on.

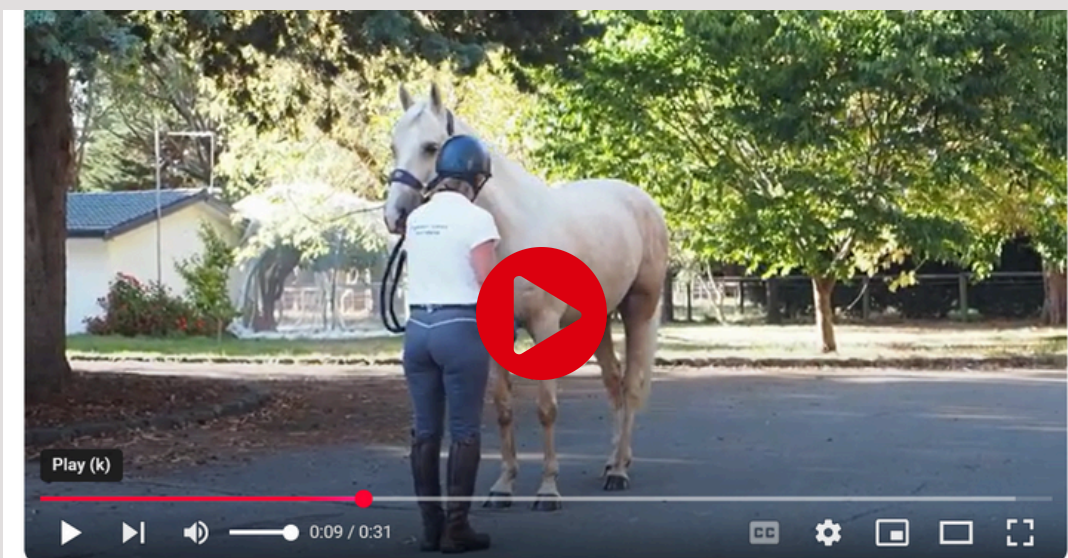
*If you are focussed on doing something you will be less likely to think about the 'what ifs' and 'buts'!*

## Establishing a rhythm

One of the best exercises I use when leading from the paddock to get my horse's focus, and establish relaxation and rhythm is:-

From halt, leading the horse as normal, walk 4-6 steps then swap the lead to your left hand, turn and face your horse to stop using a lead aid toward his under neck, then turn yourself sideways and ask for walk and walk beside him again as normal.

Repeat this exercise until the horse leads forward, stops when you turn to face him and does not walk until you ask with your lead aid. (see video below)



Walk halt exercises in-hand



Here are some helpful hints to establish this:-

- Apply the lead aid forward with your right hand before stepping forward yourself, then walk as your horse steps forward.
- Prepare to stop by swapping your lead to your left hand and turn your body to face him and applying the stop aid with your left hand. Aim for your horse to stop with his forelegs square or beside each other.
- If he stops with one foreleg more forward, then step back that foreleg with your lead aid.
- If he stops too close to you (your horse's feet should be a meter or so away from yours) push your lead aid toward his neck (it is easier to push him back than to pull him back).
- 'Park' or stand still for the count of 2, before turning sideways to lead him forward with your right hand.

This is a fun little 'dance' to do and gets your horse to not only respond to aids but also to your change of direction as he learns to read your body cue. You will find later that the lead/rein response to stop improves when leading in the same direction as your horse.

This exercise will also improve rhythm and you will be able to lead him with a 'loosish' rein without him speeding up and over taking you, or even leading you! Any loss of rhythm can be corrected with this exercise.

Under-saddle, the exercise is similar, with lots of transitions from walk to halt or from trot to walk, the more frequent the transitions (every 6-8 steps in walk, 6-8 strides in trot) the more the horse begins to anticipate them and needs less pressure of the reins and legs to achieve them and the more comfortable and relaxed he is to sit on.

With practise the outcome is rhythm. Your horse stays at the same speed on a 'loosish' rein, he feels more relaxed, and you feel more confident. Aim for your transitions to be smooth, as jerky movements tend to scare horses.

### **Some more helpful tips:-**

- Prepare your body to stop by engaging your core and dropping your elbows closer to your hips – this helps you to be strong and maintain your position while applying a pressure on the reins.

- Breathing out during the transition is useful to drop your energy level.
- Lift the reins up rather than pulling back as pulling back can make him brace his neck.
- Squeeze your calves only (not your heels) and lighten your seat (lift your pelvic floor) for upward transitions. Digging your heels into his sides is often associated with undesirable behaviour.
- If riding walk to trot transitions, try to sit the trot, it should be just a little trot that you are able to sit to. Sitting the trot makes it easier to prepare for the walk transition.

It is wise to practise these transitions as part of your everyday ride so that when the situation is more difficult it will be something the horse is familiar with. Aiming for transitions to be on your line will produce roundness. The reins should not be used 'to pull his head in', it is the horse's back that lifts as he relaxes that enhances roundness.

***A horse that maintains rhythm without being held with the reins or legs is in self-carriage.***

## **Park**

Check 'park' every day and everywhere, in all situations especially when saddling up and grooming as this will set his affective state 'put him in a good mood' for the day. So, if your horse doesn't park

without a saddle and bridle then he is unlikely to do so when ridden.

'Park' is your best friend, it promotes relaxation. The horse learns to stand still until asked to move. Using food to keep your horse still can be useful BUT it does not train him to 'Park'.



A horse should stay parked regardless of where you move or stand and should only move if asked to do so from a signal or cue.

- Any failure of 'Park' e.g. he moves his left foreleg forward needs a step back of that foreleg.
- If it is a hindleg moving, then that hindleg needs to be stepped back.
- If it is 2 legs, then both need to be stepped back.

**A loss of 'Park' leads to anxiety as his legs move in one direction or another or all over the place. He is freewheeling out of control**



**‘Park’** under-saddle means that at halt if you give forward with the reins, he does not move forward or sideways.

- A little step back is all you need to do if he moves.
- Try to keep him facing the same direction, using a turn aid to do so.
- Praise and scratch while parking to establish a good habit.
- Train your horse to ‘park’ at the mounting block, this allows you to get on safely and position yourself ready for your ride, he should only move forward if you squeeze your calves toward his sides.
- Using a food treat makes the mounting block a pleasant place to be (instructions for this so it doesn’t become an issue)
- Start with a short period of ‘park’ for example count of 2 or 3 and gradually extend the time frame.
- If you feel you can’t control ‘park’ and you feel your horse is about to move, pretend it is your idea to move by using your leg aid, then gradually try again.

**Parking under-saddle is convenient for mounting, standing and watching, standing in a line up and out on a trail. Horses relax when they stand still!**

## **Focus**

Focus is basically flexion when your horse looks at you with his eye and relaxes his neck as he does so. When leading, watching the eye closest to you is useful to see when you have it and when you don't. Most people lead on the left side of a horse, but it is useful to be able to lead on both sides.

*When he is not focussed and you are leading him on his left side:-*

The left eye looks to the right and the top eyebrow lifts, (there will be wrinkles above the eye), the back of the left eye rolls to the right often showing the white sclera, as he looks up and away from you.

*When he flexes or focusses on you:-*

The left eyelid is soft, and his eye will turn to you and become soft and focussed, his neck will drop, the sclera is less visible or not at all depending on his eye.

## Exercise for focus and flexion

It is often easier to train flexion in hand, at the halt.

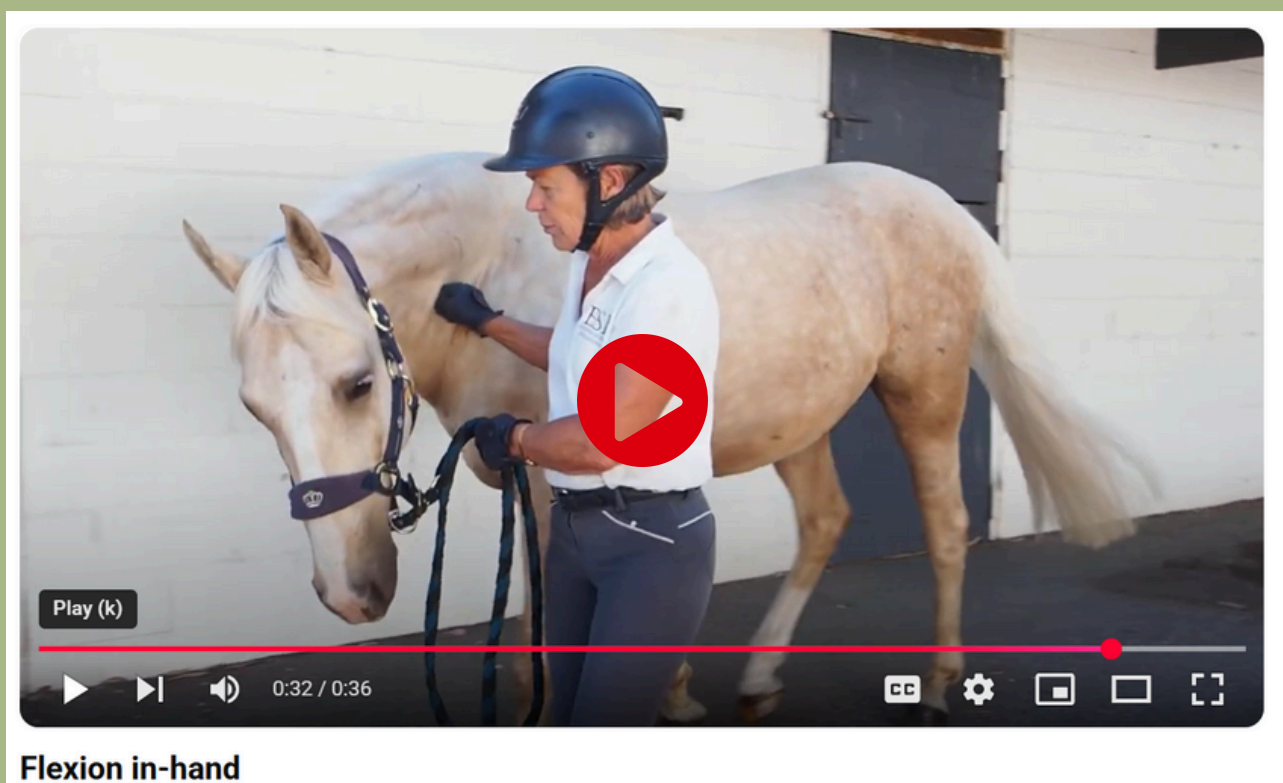
- Take a feel of the left side of the headcollar or the left rein asking your horse to turn his nose to the left.
- Then use your hand, finger or thumb to push the base of his neck away. A massaging technique can help.
- He should begin to flex, soften his eye and relax and lower his head and neck.

Once flexion has been achieved, then begin the exercise in walk. This can be done in a halter or a bridle, using the side of the headcollar or the left rein.

Walk a small circle, holding the head collar or left rein in your left hand, train your horse to move his neck away from you from a touch of your finger on his neck along the brachiocephalic muscle or under neck. The head and neck of the horse forms a curve and drop lower when the response is achieved. Initially you may have to be a bit stronger either by pushing your fist, touching him with the knob of the whip or end of a bamboo stick.

- Establish walk on a circle
- Hold the rein or lead in your left hand and push his neck away with your right hand.
- Look at his eye whilst you are doing this and target the response of the eye softening (no sclera)
- The upper eyelid relaxing as well as the neck folding away from you and lowering.
- The horses outside shoulder should also move to the outside so targeting the push of your hand as the inside foreleg is on the ground will help but initially you may have to push until the shoulder moves away.

The result of this is that you will be able to lead your horse calmly with a relaxed neck and focussed on you and not the external environment. A little touch of your finger on his neck will remind him to focus!





Under-saddle, steering a horse is crucial in controlling line. Helpful exercises to do are wiggly lines, squares or triangles. A 15 m triangle is a great fun exercise to ride, the degree of turn is a little more difficult and will help slow a horse that is tense or has fast legs. In any of these exercises, both direct and indirect turns can be used.

To ride the **Wiggly line**, the turn steps are counted as 1 and 2 then ride straight for 6 steps and turn again.

This is the most basic of all exercises using direct and indirect turns where flexion and bend are not required initially. Riding a circle, increasing and decreasing the size of the circle using both turns is a useful way of developing some flexion, but the shape of the circle can be a little hard to maintain and the outcome of the turns can be difficult to feel. Riding more definite shapes can be very useful if your horse is distracted or you feel a bit worried.

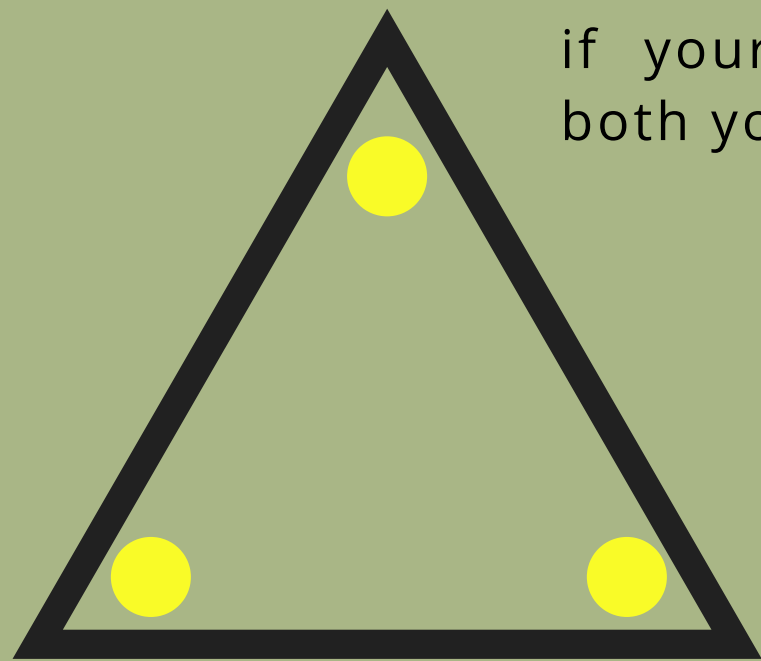
## Riding squares or triangles

Set out some cones, barrels or poles to go around and ride as close as you can to them in walk before trying the trot. Use cones to help you achieve this (see diagram). It is hard to do but helps you to focus on your line (aiming not to knock anything over) and again gives you and your horse a job to do **so 'that little worried voice inside your head doesn't keep on talking to you'.**

In these exercises you can use either direct or indirect turns and if your horse responds well to both you will find that he will flex

in the direction of a direct turn and away from the rein in an indirect turn.

In fact, using just direct turns to go around the corner initially helps



- 15M triangle with cones

you to focus on that response only, then you can change to using outside indirect turns to go around a corner instead

In a direct turn, the horse should look to the direction of travel and the rein be positioned slightly away from the neck.

- Your inside shoulder goes back a little as the rein aid is applied away from the neck.
- Your outside thigh goes toward the saddle.
- Touches of the whip on the outside shoulder at the turn can improve the response to turn or vibrations on the turning rein.
- It is important that the riders outside shoulder and arm do not go forward when doing this as the horse is more likely to fall out through the shoulder and less likely to turn - don't turn as if you have handle-bars in your hands!

Using an **outside indirect turn aid** where the rein goes toward the neck and the horse moves his shoulders away from the neck rein helps to straighten a horse in a turn. This is particularly useful if the horse is bending his neck too much and falling out.

- Your outside shoulder goes back a little as the outside rein is applied toward the neck
- Your outside thigh goes toward the saddle.
- Touches of the whip on the outside shoulder at the turn can improve the response to turn or vibrations on the turning rein.

**Inside indirect turn aid** where the inside rein can be used to flex a horse to the inside and increase the size of a circle or curve by moving his shoulders to the outside.

- Your shoulder is back on the same side as the rein aid.
- Your inside thigh goes toward the saddle.
- More pressure on the rein (lift the rein or vibrate it) can be used to achieve this.
- Touches of the whip on the outside shoulder at the turn can improve the response to turn or vibrations on the turning rein.
- The horse should move his shoulders and bend his neck a little away from the rein.
- The eye 'flexion' on the side of the indirect rein should become visible.

*The ultimate aim of flexion is that all you have to do is put your shoulder back to get your horse to flex with a small contact on the rein whether doing a direct or indirect turn.*

## **Legs as part of the turn or straightness**

How many times have you been told 'use your outside leg' or 'put your inside leg on'. Have you ever thought, what does this mean to my horse and what response do I expect him to give?



## When you think about the leg parts, you have:-

- **Thighs** - useful in a turn, left thigh against the saddle to turn right and right thigh opens a little to allow the shoulder to turn in that direction. Vice versa for turning left.
- **Calves** - when these are used together the horse should change gait.
- **Between calf and ankle** - used to quicken a horse's tempo, they can be used together or separately to quicken one hind leg or the other.
- **Heels** - can be used to lengthen a horse's stride, they can be used separately to lengthen.
- **Lower leg (back)** - this part of your leg including your inner thigh on the same side is the aid to yield or cross the hind legs.

As a rider you might use different aids to these and that is fine but what one needs to remember is that each aid means a different response and cannot mean two or more responses because if you are a horse there can only be one signal for one response. Part of the anxiety your horse might exhibit may be related to this conundrum, just imagine if the letter 'A' was sometimes the letter 'B', how on earth would we learn to read or write – how frustrating!

There is of course an associated seat cue involved as part of the corresponding leg aid, this is called a compound aid.

So, if the seat cue does not produce the response, then the leg aid can. Confidence and control of a situation are interrelated and there are many ways to control emotions particularly the way we breathe and how to shut out that little voice in our heads that can be so negative. Mindfulness is a great tool. I hope that the exercises I have given help you as a rider if you feel unconfident to have something to do in those situations.

*Take care to be clear with your aids for your horse's sake and for him to respond correctly to help build your relationship with him and remember lots of reward and scratches.*

***Manu xx***

