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5 EXERCISES FOR THE ANXIOUS HORSE

by Manuela McLean

An anxious horse usually displays a lack of rhythm and straightness. He changes speed and/or gait and wiggles his shoulders and bottom. The head and neck feel all over the place; up, down and sometimes sideways.



The rider of an anxious horse will feel a little out of control of speed and line and may be too afraid to get on if the horse moves off at the mounting block. The rider can end up riding defensively with abrupt movements and holding the reins too tight in case he speeds up, which tends to shorten the horse's neck and causes him to fight even more for some release of pressure. And because his head is in the air, the rider often wants to use the reins to bring the head down, which becomes confusing for the horse since the reins should primarily control speed and steering.



If this sounds familiar, you are not alone but having a few 'go to' exercises will help you, help your horse to relax! We're going to cover 5 quick exercises to help your horse relax

5 quick exercises to help your horse relax

1. Pre-ride Park
2. Eight Step Stop
3. Wiggle those worries away
4. Square dance
5. Lovely Long Steps

The above exercises train **Stop, Go and Turn**, which produce rhythm and straightness – the key components of relaxation. Ride all these exercises in an open natural outline.

It should go without saying to check for pain if anxious behaviour is new or you haven't investigated this as a cause. Also, check the horse's other needs are met, such as socialisation with other horses and plenty of adlib forage. A horse deprived of these basic needs is often insecure and anxious.

1. Perfect the park

Training the horse to stand still (Park), unless signalled to move is a great way to help the horse relax before you get on. After a few repetitions you will notice the head and neck relax, and the focus come to you. Practice in all locations around the work area.

This same exercise you can use when mounting, if he tends to move at the mounting block. Train him to stand and wait until you signal him to move.

We covered training park in this article: <https://esi-education.com/help-my-horse-paws-teaching-park/>



2. Eight Step Stop

Horses and riders thrive in a structured exercise! This one is simple – halt, then walk 8 steps. On step 6, ask for halt again. By step 8, he should be halted. Practice until he reliably halts by step 8 and ride it until he is anticipating the halt. This will help with 3 things.

- It will give you something to focus on, which will help you relax
- It will help you put your leg contact on his sides – anxious horses tend to make us take our leg off.
- It will develop a rhythm as the steps become even and slow.



Walk/halt transitions are covered in this article:

<https://esi-education.com/is-your-horse-heavy-in-the-reins-crooked-on-the-forehand/>

3. Wiggle those worries away

Another great structured exercise to test your turn and straightness. Ride off the arena wall, such as the $\frac{3}{4}$ line, turning left and right every 6-8 steps. Feel if each turn feels even. Work on the turn that feels heavy or delayed until both feel even. You can try opening your rein wider or lift the rein to encourage the foreleg to clearly open and turn. There should be no leg applied for turn – this is simple a rein response.

Practice turns first with your direct rein – rein opening away from the neck.

Once established, practice with your indirect rein – rein closing towards the neck.

4. Square dance

This exercise tests straightness and tunes up the turn. Ride a square of about 20m. Ensure each corner is squared, not rounded. The horse should achieve a perfect square turn in 3 strides.

Check the turns are achieved in 3 strides – you will find one might take an extra stride. Practice until even, either opening the rein wider, closing the outside rein to bring the shoulders around, or slowing the inside foreleg.



Test that the horse remains straight right until you ask for turn – many horses will start to drift before the turn so this is a great training opportunity to train self-carriage of line.

This exercise is another great way to keep you focused, and the horse responding to your aids.

5. Lovely Long Steps

What's one thing an anxious horse is sure to do? Take small quick steps. So, we train lovely long ones!

In the walk, apply a nudge with your heels. When the horse trots*, bring him back to walk and immediately nudge again (you are saying, "not trot, try another response"). Repeat until he offers longer steps instead of trot. To maintain the long steps, nudge every 3 steps, and correct any mistakes (such as trot) until the horse is now taking nice long strides. It will help to make long sweeping seat movements too – tense bottoms make tense horses!

*The relaxed horse may not offer trot, but the anxious one will likely offer trot because he will be sensitive to the leg.

This exercise works 2-fold because:

- *Long steps create longitudinal flexion, which is a relaxed posture*
- *It helps you put your leg contact on his sides.*

So, there you have 5 simple exercises if the tensions are high on your next ride!

Happy riding!

Manu x