

# Emotional Centering in the Saddle

— by Lynn Clifford, MA —

*Before you put your foot in the stirrup, prepare yourself to be fully present.*

*In over 30 years of exposure to horses and the people that accompany them, I have heard countless stories that start out something like this: "If only I had listened to myself that day" or "I knew something was off with my horse the moment I walked out to the pasture." Each of these stories, sadly, had an unhappy ending of some sort. It often involved broken bones, as well as something harder to heal than bones—broken enthusiasm, trust, and self-confidence.*

*Hearing these stories—and knowing that many could have had more positive endings—is my motivation for writing this article. It is intended to support you on the journey of relationship, both with yourself and with horses. The article explores the concept of emotional centering (EC) as it applies to equestrians, how EC can be lost, and/or what may keep us from finding it in the first place. It will also help you evaluate your EC. (See box on next page.)*

## What is emotional centering and why is it important?

The attitude that you bring to the barn affects your relationship with others, including your horse. Emotional centering allows a horse handler to make clear decisions that are based on the collective information received from the handler's mind, body, and emotions. When all of these

elements come together in a balanced way, greater safety, security, peace of mind, and enjoyment are achieved for both horse and human.

## What causes loss of EC?

While the following is by no means a conclusive list of reasons for losing emotional centering, it describes some common causes. You might consider their influence on your past and present relationship with your horse. Feel free to add more from your own experience.

• **Not trusting your instincts.** The folks in the introduction above, all of whom had stories with unhappy endings, had one thing in common: They

*To experience the best partnership and performance with your horse, Emotional Centering is fundamental.*

pushed aside their own internal judgment system. For many, this internal judgment has never been developed or was simply squelched at such an early age that they lost touch with it. Nevertheless, for equestrians it directly affects working with horses. (It is also a much larger issue in the lives of many people.)

• **Unclear or unfair motives.** Some people approach the pasture, stable, or arena expecting the horse to "fix" their day or life concerns, arriving with the expectation they will be taken care of by their horse to varying degrees. Others simply take their frustrations out on their horse. For many of us, time with horses serves as decompression from the trials of life, and that's okay. Just remember that it can backfire when spending time with these intelligent, living creatures that have minds and personalities of their own.

• **Lack of preparation.** Lack of preparation to work with your horse includes omitting the schooling that would have allowed your horse to be more supple and focused. It also includes beginning your ride without your own emotional and mental preparation. Adequate preparation includes acknowledging the cares of your day and then choosing the best way to proceed.

• **Mind games.** As humans we tend to hang on to outmoded ways of thinking, at times lingering in the past. For example, we may mentally and emotionally hold on to an incident that happened months (or years) earlier. This influences our ability to obtain and filter information from our horse in the moment. It can also create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

• **A mismatched partnership.** There are many riders who enjoy an ideal partnership with a beloved equine. They feel well-matched and, for the most part, safe with their horse's



Roger Blake

*Lynn Clifford with Tambore, a Lusitano stallion. He was the two-year-old "Champion of Champions" in halter at the National Brazilian Lusitano Horse Show and was imported from Brazil by her mother as a three year old. He is now eight. Tambore has been trained by Lynn's mother, Helene Asmis of Casa de Brio, and knows lateral work and offers cross-disciplinary talent in Western pleasure, reining, Dressage and hunter pleasure. Tambore also has comfortable gaits and helps provide long sessions for riders wishing to develop their seat.*

behavior. Others are over-mounted but feel compelled to continue with a horse not suitable for them physically or mentally. Even in collaboration with a trainer or instructor, a mismatch of partnership can happen. Ultimately, mismatches lead to growing frustration and/or lowered self-esteem, which in turn damages the capacity to be emotionally centered.

• **Lack of knowledge.** Despite the fact that there is an enormous, at times overwhelming, amount of information to sort through in the equestrian world, sometimes we just don't have the knowledge we need to make wise decisions regarding our horses. This can be true on a short-term or long-term basis.

• **Performance anxiety.** This can occur whether someone is on the trail and feels pressured to "keep up" with their buddies (in terms of speed or degree of challenge), are entering a competitive arena, or simply perceive they are being observed and perhaps criticized while they are schooling their horse. Performance anxiety occurs any time we leave our internal frame of reference and become concerned about external approval. At this point, we have left the relationship with our horse (and ourselves) and are paying attention to real or imagined standards that have nothing to do with the moment or what your horse needs.

## Becoming more emotionally centered in the saddle —

In addition to exploring the areas mentioned above, the ongoing practice of knowing your horse and knowing yourself is invaluable in becoming and remaining emotionally centered. Although over time rapport can develop between horse and rider, every moment is a new moment, and both humans and equine are capable of growth and change.

• **Know your horse.** I know a particular horse that I can ride bareback on the trail, and with few exceptions I have a calm and positive experience. There is another horse that I can only take out on a trail when I feel like my inner reserves and resources are quite intact: I know he will try to give me a run for my money—literally. My knowledge of both of these horses is built on personal experiences with them over time and not on fantasy of what I wished they were. My choice of which horse to ride at what point helps me ride emotionally centered.

## EC Self-Evaluation

Rate yourself on a scale from one to five, five being *absolutely* and one being *not at all*. Be as honest as you dare (no one else needs to see this) and feel free to elaborate with notes in the margins.

- 1) Do you take responsibility for yourself, and ultimately your horse, by having fair expectations and standards for both? \_\_\_\_
- 2) Are you *really present* with your horse, paying attention to the subtle (or not so subtle) cues they offer while you are leading, grooming, and tacking. Do you pick up on signs indicating that they got up on "the wrong side of the hay pile" that day? \_\_\_\_
- 3) Do you feel completely comfortable with, and optimally supported by, your current instructor or trainer? \_\_\_\_
- 4) Do you feel comfortable, respected, safe, and supported by the human herd you hang out with at the barn or on the trail? \_\_\_\_
- 5) Is your current horse the best fit for you emotionally and/or do you generally feel safe with your horse? \_\_\_\_
- 6) For the most part, do you know what you need to know in order to evaluate the appropriateness and level of training you will do with your horse on a given day? \_\_\_\_
- 7) Can you feel your whole body and stay aware of your senses (sound, sight, scent, etc.) while you are with your horse? If you lose this awareness, do you have the skills to bring yourself back to the present moment with yourself again? \_\_\_\_
- 8) Is your breathing full and easy the majority of the time you are around your horse, both on the ground and when mounted? \_\_\_\_

Based on your score, you can evaluate areas you may wish to explore further, change, and/or get some support for, in order to be more emotionally centered in and out of the saddle.

• **Know yourself.** Essentially, this can be summarized with one question: Am I trustworthy? This means can I trust my "yes" and my "no" as well as my "I don't know—let me take a breath here" on a given day? If I do not trust myself, then asking my horse to trust me is unrealistic.

This is not about being perfect; it is about being engaged in developing a solid relationship with myself. I generally feel comfortable with my self-care boundaries when it comes to horses. And I trust myself not to cross them without sincere evaluation.

I also know what pushes my buttons with horses. Therefore I can evaluate what I want on a given day and can choose consciously. Am I in a receptive, quiet place where I simply want to revel in memories of my girlhood riding bareback? Or do I feel like this is a day when I have a lot of patience and willingness to see something through if an issue should arise? In the latter case, am I emotionally centered enough inside myself to be

there for my horse until there is some sort of resolution?

## If you choose EC —

If you choose to explore the emotional centering journey for yourself, develop the art of questioning and be willing to take the time to listen—to yourself and to your horse. Consider getting support if you are dealing with issues that confuse, frustrate, or overwhelm you. Working with a mentor, such as an instructor, trainer, coach, and/or counselor, can be particularly helpful, especially if you have experienced a frightening situation with a horse or simply don't know how to proceed.

Becoming emotionally centered in the saddle is a lot like being emotionally centered in life: Although the bumps are guaranteed, you will find it easier to ride them out if you stay open to inquiry and develop some tools to use along the way.

*Happy trails!*

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