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In a recent eNews article “Getting Back in the Saddle: Managing Fear”,¹ Nettie Barr of www.canadiannaturalhorsemanship.com discussed how fear can limit us from doing the things we enjoy and she proposed a number of very useful strategies for overcoming fear issues related to horses.

Fear Limits our potential:

In my work as a Success and Performance Coach, I see people struggling with fear on a daily basis. In fact, it is my belief that fear is the primary limiter of human potential. When I work with athletes, students, professionals, and business people from all walks of life who feel they are not living up to their full potential as human beings, I consistently find that these people are wrestling with the same challenges, which can be summed up in one word – FEAR.

Creating success through personal leadership:

Realizing our human potential and creating true success in our lives is best accomplished through developing a true sense of personal leadership - which includes becoming good at managing our fears. For this reason, much of the work I do is centered around empowering people to “Lead Their Best Lives”. I personally believe that we each need to define what success means to us individually, because success can mean different things to different people. It is my belief that success is not a destination we arrive at, but instead, is a process of ***creating the life we were meant to live***

while

realizing our gifts and our potential as human beings

. It is only through managing our fears that we may live to our fullest potential, and provide the leadership our horses, our organizations, our communities, our children and our world require. Many people talk about being a leader for their horse, but we can only be a good leader for

others if we are first and foremost a good leader for ourselves. This is true of leaders in the business world, in politics, in our communities, in sport, and with horses. Good leaders earn the respect of those they lead by being a model of excellent personal leadership. Life is really a mirror and horses provide the ultimate mirror to demonstrate this truth. If you are nervous and unsure, your horse will sense this in you. Horses, like humans, want their leaders to instill confidence and security – through demonstrating confidence and security. They need this even more when there is newness, change, risk or potential threats. A true leader helps people work through their fears, just as a true leader for their horse helps their horse work through their fears.

What is fear?



When I discuss the concept of fear, I am not really referring to the sweat-filled fear you might feel when coming face to face with a grizzly bear on a mountain path. What I am referring to are the psychological fears we may or may not be aware of which keep us from learning all we can learn, from doing the things that make us better each day, from being the leaders we require to be our best, and the leaders our horses require to be their best. There is also the very real fear you might feel around a 1000-2000 lb. animal which has the ability to harm you very quickly. This is a real fear which should not be taken lightly. Horses may challenge us with physical fear but they also provide an opportunity for greater awareness and understanding of our subconscious psychological fears. These are the fears we develop as we grow up by adopting the limiting beliefs and fears of those who we look to as role models – our parents, teachers and society as a whole. These fears play out in our lives as the fear of failure, rejection, of being judged, or of not being good enough or not being smart enough, and the fear of success itself. When we find ourselves in a situation which we have subconsciously associated with one of these fears, we tend to shrink from living up to our true potential due to the physical fear response which such situations provoke within us. The truth is that EVERYONE struggles with fear of one kind or another. In fact, there are a number of core human fears that are common to almost every human being. The key is to develop a better awareness and understanding around our fears and to create strategies for overcoming these fears. Rather than seeing fear as something to be avoided or something to be ashamed of feeling, we need to embrace our fears as normal, healthy emotions which can be our greatest teachers – if we let them. Our fears are not only indicators of what may be dangerous and should be treated with caution, from a physical perspective, but they are also sign posts indicating what we need to face in order to live our best lives. Courage is not the absence of fear, but instead, it is in doing the things we fear in spite of the fear we feel.

Why do we fear?

There is some very interesting and cutting edge research into the biological and social nature of

fear. Fear is tied to our fight or flight response – an evolutionary hold-over from when we were hunters and gatherers with many physical threats in the environment. In many ways we are neurologically wired for fear, much in the same way that horses are wired for fear. The truth is that at one point in our evolution being fearful, cautious and having a highly tuned fight or flight response system was critical for survival. In fact, during this part of our evolution it was important, for our survival, to focus on the negative aspects of situations – the aspects that could harm us. For this reason, in many ways we are hard-wired to think negative thoughts vs. focusing on the more positive aspects of daily life. The average human being thinks 60,000 thoughts per day and researchers have shown that ~80% of these daily thoughts are negative thoughts that we are not even aware we think. Our brain also evolved in three general stages. The reptilian brain developed first and was primarily designed to act on instinct. Our Mammalian brain – evolved later. The mammalian brain houses the amygdala, which is the storehouse of our emotions and is connected to endocrine glands. These glands produce hormones that affect our emotions. When stimulated, the fear response affects the amygdala which releases fear hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) and creates the symptoms of fear you feel such as a queasiness in your stomach, the increased alertness that you feel, sudden perspiration, or shaky hands. These fear hormones are good for readiness and for big picture thought, but actually make it difficult for us to think clearly concerning details. Now the key idea is this - the reptilian brain, the amygdala, and the fear hormones, developed over a million years ago at a time when there were real physical threats to our survival as a species. They served us well long ago when we had to face physical threats to survival on a daily basis. Now, although we live in a time when most of these threats to our survival are gone, we are still hard-wired for fear with a propensity for negative thinking. As E.O Wilson, the father of evolutionary psychology stated, “Human nature is a hodgepodge of special genetic adaptations to an environment largely vanished, the world of the Ice-Age hunter gatherer.”

Fear is also a learned response.

Our fears don't just come from our neurobiological network which has developed over millions of years of evolution. We also learn our fears in childhood through the process of enculturation – from the people who teach us how the world works - our parents, teachers, and from society as a whole. So we are actually taught to fear by those who teach us how the world works. We crave the love of our parents more than anyone else and at a subconscious level we try to be like our parents to gain their love and acceptance. Perhaps your father was afraid to take risks, then you are also likely afraid to take risks. Maybe you were reprimanded by a teacher when standing up to speak in class, or perhaps you were laughed at by your classmates. These experiences may have become a subconscious fear - perhaps a fear of public speaking, or perhaps a fear of not being good enough. And you may not even know you have these fears. Because most of the time our fears live in our subconscious, and what we allow into our consciousness is only the tip of the iceberg. Like the bottom of an iceberg, most of our thinking and most of our awareness is beneath the water in the realm of the subconscious. It is our responsibility as highly evolved human beings committed to really living our potential, to dive under the surface of the water to get to know our subconscious, and to get to know the fears and beliefs that we might not even know that we have, that are limiting us in our lives. You might look at your life and say “No I don't have any fear” but the truth is that you do, in fact we

all do. We are simply not aware that we have them. The truth is that “We don’t know what we don’t know”.



Our ability to overcome fear.

The third major part of the brain, the neocortex, evolved much later and was the last part of the brain to develop. It is the area of the brain where the intellect lives and is responsible for higher thought and higher learning in humans. While the reptilian brain simply acts on instinct, the neocortex instead has the capacity to evaluate situations and offers us the ability to think and reflect. Ultimately, it gives us the capacity to act as highly evolved human beings with the capacity for higher reasoning. By using our neocortex, we can actually out-think the natural instincts from the reptilian brain and, in doing so, out-think our fear and our natural tendency to focus on the negative aspects of situations.

Read our June 24 eNews for Part 2 -- Joel tells us how to overcome fear...