



BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE WITH *hypnosis*

Recent research has reported that hypnotherapy can improve a rider's confidence. **Sarah Jenkins** puts the theory to the test

Sherree Russell Ginger is a clinical hypnotherapist and riding instructor. In 2012, she carried out research that suggested rider confidence could be improved by up to 51 per cent following just one session of hypnosis.

Horse knows many readers have attacks of nerves, and we are not immune to

them ourselves, so we went to Sherree's Sussex base to experience hypnosis and see what advice we could glean.

Sherree helps people tackle issues in all aspects of their lives, but half of those who come to her are riders suffering confidence issues. All ages and levels are affected – from beginners to Olympians – so you're in good company.

"The majority of riders who come to me are women, and often horses are the one thing that gives them relaxation and joy," says Sherree. "When they struggle in this area, it can be emotional.

"Riding confidence issues impact other areas of life, too. You take it as evidence you can't cope in a given situation, so your self-efficacy in general is damaged."

Sherree sees such riders for two or three sessions, or in workshops over two days, and finds this is enough to help them.

Causes of confidence issues

There are various reasons why riders lack confidence and Sherree will treat clients differently depending on the cause.

For example, they might struggle to move forward after a bad experience. In this case, she would work with them to 'destabilise' the memory, so it doesn't continue to illicit the same fear response.

Sometimes, the problem lies with the rider's focus. "It might be that they are external referencing," says Sherree. This means they are looking to see how other people rate their abilities, rather than drawing on their own views.

Other riders focus on the height of the fences, for example, instead of the clear round they want to achieve. "A course is just a dressage test with some extra big canter strides in it – when you think of showjumping in those terms, it's not so daunting," points out Sherree.

Then there are issues with skill sets. Out of her research focus group of 11 participants who had confidence issues, four had bought young horses. If someone is not experienced training a youngster, it is not surprising they lack confidence doing so.

Riders can simply find that when they get older, or have children, they risk-assess more, which lowers their confidence.

But experience can rebuild confidence, too, as Sherree explains: "It's up to your instructor to teach you within your comfort zone until you have enough positive experiences and this evidence of your success starts to take the place of negative beliefs or concerns."

Conquering fear

Bravery, they say, is knowing the risks and doing it anyway. Riding is a risk sport, and respect for the dangers involved is understandable, perhaps advisable.

"Appropriate fear exists, but it can be set too high," says Sherree. "Some people's fear of spiders in this country is not justified – sure, there's a reason for it, and in a country where spiders are poisonous it is justified."

To gain control of their unjustified response to a scenario, Sherree teaches people to change their emotional state.

"Imagine you are in a traffic jam," she says. "Look about and you will see people

responding in different ways. Some will be banging the steering wheel; others will be trying to see what's going on. I'd rest my head back and do a short meditation. You have to learn to control your emotional state in that 15 minutes when you are sitting there, because whatever your reaction, you aren't going anywhere."

Sherree begins by teaching clients about adrenalin. When we are afraid, adrenalin kicks in. It is the body's natural response, enabling any animal to fight, take flight or freeze by pumping more oxygenated blood to the muscles they might need to use.

"You must tell yourself adrenalin – and the reaction it brings – is not something to be frightened of," explains Sherree. "Adrenalin will only last for 90 seconds – unless you are in a state of worry and keep rebooting it with concerns of 'what if?'"

That is to say, when you are riding across a motorway bridge and you think: 'What if my horse spooks and I fall over the edge?', or: 'What if she spins round when she sees the plastic bag?'

With those thoughts, you're keeping the adrenalin pumping, so your heart is

likely to race and your breathing quicken, as you remain in a state of anxiety.

"Instead, say to yourself: 'Ah, adrenalin – that can help me focus; now this is what I choose to focus on...'," suggests Sherree. By acknowledging it, you're one step closer to controlling it.

"Conscious breathing can dissipate the anxiety. Then you must refocus, choose to concentrate only on your horse and where you want to go. That can be enough to get a grip on your fear."

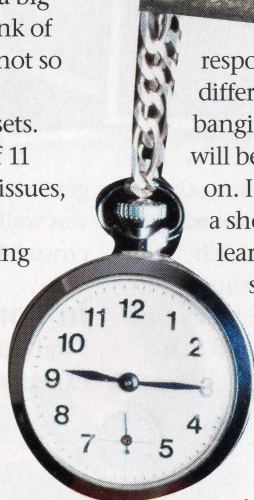
If you've experienced hypnotherapy, this is the point at which you would bring to mind your desired state and colour, too (see page 60).

By choosing to take long, deep breaths, you can start to convince your brain that you are not afraid, as your body does not react with calm breathing when it is in a state of concern.

"The more you practise, the more you can control your emotions," says Sherree.

"Never underestimate the importance of breathing and focus. Where you put your focus is where you put your intention." This is true whether your intention is riding down that centre line, around that course of fences, or over that motorway bridge.

Many riders lack confidence, but it can be rebuilt



By taking long, deep breaths you can start to convince your brain you are not afraid



Putting hypnotherapy to the test

HORSE DEPUTY EDITOR SARAH JENKINS GIVES HYPNOTHERAPY A TRY TO SEE IF IT CAN HELP HER OVERCOME A FEAR OF RIDING ACROSS MOTORWAY BRIDGES

I was apprehensive about being hypnotised to get over my fear of riding across motorway bridges. But nowhere near as apprehensive as I am about riding across said bridges, which is why I decided it was worth a shot.

My prior understanding of hypnosis was the participant lost consciousness and there was a risk they'd emulate a chicken should someone click their fingers at them a few days later.

Sherree put me at ease, explaining it wouldn't be anything like that. I would be in a relaxed state, but able to get up and leave the room at any time.

Before the hypnosis, we discussed my phobia, where it might have come from and how it manifests itself.

In short, I have to cross a motorway bridge with low sides to access brideways. Yes, my horse is good on the roads. Yes, I'm confident hacking her out. No, she's not likely to launch sideways, hurling me over the precipice. But, then again, she is a horse.

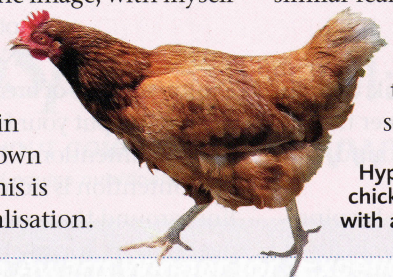
When I ride across this bridge – I've done it twice, in company, with a lot of encouragement from my hacking buddy – I can feel my heart beating through my chest, I struggle to breathe and my muscles get tense. Basically, the mere notion terrifies me.

Being hypnotised

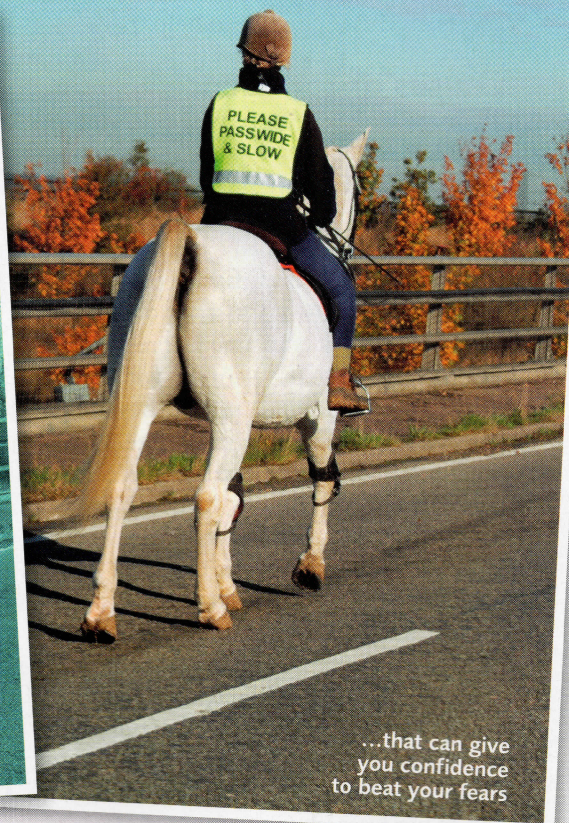
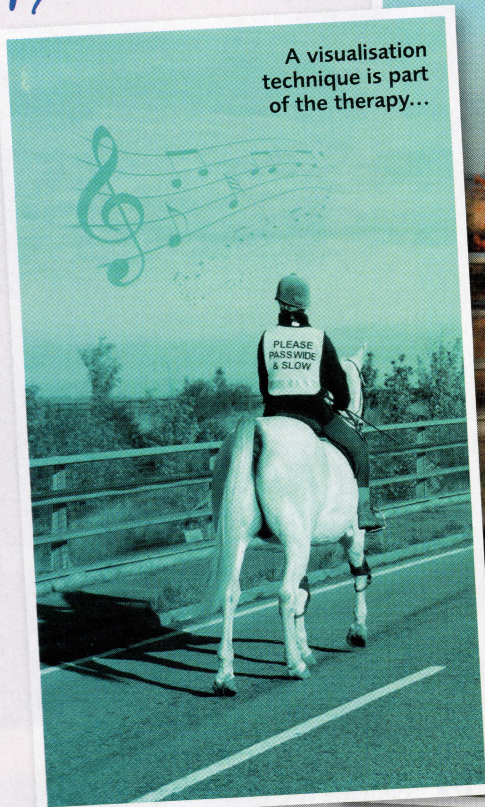
While sitting in our comfy chairs, Sherree told me to close my eyes.

She asked me to imagine I was looking at a black-and-white cinema screen, watching a rider cross the bridge in the way I'd ideally like to do – relaxed and smiling, with their horse calmly strolling along.

I had to replay the image, with myself in the scenario on the screen, so I was riding across the bridge in the way I'd ride down any other lane. This is kinaesthetic visualisation.



Hypnosis needn't be about doing chicken impressions – it can help with a range of issues



I had to give this image a colour that I liked, and after that, set it to a soundtrack – a song I find uplifting and which reminds me of a really happy time.

I went with turquoise, and Elbow's *One Day Like This*. Sherree later shared that her song for such occasions is Aretha Franklin's *I Will Survive* – each to their own.

She explained that, by simply closing my eyes and taking slow, deep breaths, I could put myself into this relaxed state and start to access my subconscious.

In this state, Sherree reassured me that crossing this bridge was something I could do, on my calm horse, just by focusing on where I wanted to go. I began to feel like I could do that, recalling the image, the colour and the song.

She reminded me I have overcome similar fears of heights before. We work in a glass office block at *Horse*, and on my first day in the new building it took me some time to work out how to

get to my desk, as there was no way I was walking over the glass bridge that crosses the atrium on the ninth floor.

In conclusion

I walked away from this, my first experience of hypnotherapy, feeling like I'd just done a relaxing yoga session, and with a different mindset.

My fears didn't seem so justified; I was willing to give traversing the bridge a go. And I realised that, just as with the glass bridge at work, the more I crossed it, the smaller my fear would be, until it disappeared.

I was sceptical about the process, and perhaps you have to believe something will help you in order for it to work. If you are open to the idea, and struggle with confidence in your riding, it wouldn't hurt to give someone with Sherree's expertise a try.

I certainly came away with 'tools' to help me recover my composure and kick on when facing situations I might otherwise lack the ability to negotiate with confidence. Skydiving, anyone? **H**

I realised that the more I crossed the bridge, the smaller my fear would be