

Boost your confidence

If nerves are holding you back, help is at hand – confidence coach Jenni Winter shows you how you can enjoy riding again

Have you ever wanted something badly, but the thought of actually doing it left you in tears? Isobel Brooks has set her heart on enjoying the hundreds of acres of off-road riding she has access to at the yard where she keeps her "bombproof" cob Ozzy.

Yet, even just thinking of leaving her safe zones close to the stables causes her to panic.

Isobel's fears stem from an incident which occurred on a riding holiday 23 years ago, when she threw herself from a bolting horse. Despite not having caused any serious physical harm, it has had a crippling effect on her mentally.

"I have the most amazing horse, and incredible countryside to explore, but I just can't do it," she says. "I vividly remember the absolute terror I felt all those years ago and when I think of hacking out, the memories come flooding back.

"I have tried to get over it, but nothing works.

"When I get nervous I shorten my reins and lean forward to the point I'm almost standing in the saddle. I can upset even the safest of horses.

"I don't want to be in a situation where I'm scared of my own horse."

Horse arranged for Isobel to have a session with confidence coach Jenni Winter, who uses neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) as one of her tools to change the way the mind processes a memory.

"The brain doesn't know the difference between real and imagination," says Jenni. "So, we can get sweaty palms and a sick feeling in our stomach just by thinking of something that scares us. We don't have to be experiencing it at the time.

"It is possible to overcome an issue like Isobel's – what I have to do is show her how to tell her brain what to do."

OUR EXPERT

Jenni Winter



Jenni is an NLP practitioner, a certified equine assisted coach and a keen riding club competitor. She runs her own coaching business and helps riders of all levels.

OUR RIDER

Isobel Brooks



Isobel, 37, suffered a blow to her confidence aged 14 when she suffered a bad fall. This led to a fear of hacking, which still affects her 23 years later. She owns a cob, Ozzy.



Jenni wants to help Isobel change the way her brain processes a memory

Watching a movie

Jenni says she needs to hear what happened, but doesn't want to bring the emotions flooding back.

"Your fall is in the past and you are moving forward," she tells Isobel.

"Telling you will probably make me cry," responds Isobel. "It's so frustrating – I take Ozzy to clinics and I enjoy jumping small fences but hacking fills me with dread."

Jenni asks Isobel to tell the story, but in a special way.

"Relate what happened as if you watched it in a movie – tell me what Isobel saw," she says. "Give as much detail as possible but you won't be there. Disassociate yourself with the event."

Isobel takes a deep breath: "This shouldn't be difficult as it feels like it was yesterday."

After a pause, she begins her story: "As a 14-year-old, Isobel had been regularly having riding lessons. Her parents booked her a riding holiday and she was excited about the trip."

She goes on to describe how she had never hacked out before, but this was the main riding activity on the holiday.

"A couple of days into the trip, it was very hot so someone made a decision to ride out in the evening," Isobel continues. "The horses hadn't had their dinner and were not happy about it.

"Isobel doesn't remember much about the ride itself, but on the way home they turned down for home down a track – like an alleyway – towards a 20-acre stubble field.

"The horses started to jog but Isobel wasn't worried at this point."

Jenni's six top confidence tips

1 Stay in the present. Notice when your mind is going off into the future and bring it back. Think about what's happening now.

2 Before you ride, take a moment to ground yourself (see page 51). This is a good way of keeping yourself in the here and now, and you become aware of what's happening to you physically, rather than what's going on in your mind.

3 Don't place too much focus on your horse. Be aware of him and how he is reacting, but you are the decision maker in the partnership.

4 Think back to times you felt positive and confident and paint a clear and colourful picture of how it was.

5 When you feel happy and relaxed away from your horse, remember how this feels so you can recreate it when you are riding.

6 Don't talk in negatives – be positive and you'll feel confident. Talk or think about things as a positive or in neutral terms. Don't think 'Here comes a scary tractor', just think 'It's a tractor'.



Isobel wants nothing more than to explore beautiful countryside on board her horse Ozzy



Isobel conjures up a black and white movie of her accident, which she watches in fast forward and rewind

“My biggest dread is going for a ride and turning for home”

“She was riding a Fell pony and an instructor came over and said because he had a habit of bolting at this point, Isobel should swap with her.

“Isobel jumped off and went to get on the instructor’s horse. As she swung herself into the saddle, he took off.

“Isobel had never felt so scared in her life because they were heading towards a road, at full speed. She thought she was going to die.

“The young Isobel made a snap decision to throw herself to the ground, badly grazing her arm, but living to tell the tale.”

Setting achievable goals

Because Isobel’s fear stems from one event, Jenni states it should be straightforward to solve.

“We need to encourage your brain to take a different pathway, by changing how you think,” she says. “Confidence coaching is different to instruction. People think the more you are told to do something, you’ll be fine. but that doesn’t work.”

To give Isobel something to work towards, she is asked to come up with three goals, the ultimate one being the most scary.

“My biggest dread is going for a ride and turning for home, because I think Ozzy is going to take off,” states Isobel. “There is a particular alley which leads back to the yard from the far fields. Like the one in my story, it opens out into a big expanse I want to be able to ride through this alleyway, back towards the yard, and not panic.

Her second goal is to ride around one of her safe fields next to the yard, without getting into a panic if she sees a dog walker on the footpath.

“I get terrified if a dog comes into the field, but they don’t chase or attack us, so it’s silly,” she says. “I will go into my defensive position, and all this does is tell Ozzy there’s something to be frightened about.”

The third goal is to ride along the lane which goes through the farm. “It is a bit of a stretch for me, but something I could try,” she states.

She says after last year’s Wellington Horse Trials, some wooden cows that had decorated a fence were stored along the lane.

“When Ozzy saw them, he put his head in the air, and I went into panic mode,” says Isobel. “They were moved almost a year ago, but I haven’t attempted to ride past that spot since.”

Fast forward and rewind

Next, Jenni asks Isobel to set up an imaginery cinema screen in the distance.

“Think of an old black and white film that’s a bit crackly and jumpy,” she continues. “Like a Laurel

and Hardy film, for example. Then, come up with a song that plays at a wedding or party that has an embarrassing dance to go with it.”

Isobel decides on the YMCA, before being asked to remember a point prior to the accident when she felt comfortable. She says this was in the alleyway, before swapping horses.

“When did you feel happy again,” asks Jenni?

Isobel replies: “This wasn’t until my parents picked me up on the Saturday – four days after the accident.”

“I want you to watch the film of the incident again, starting at the alleyway, and finishing when your parents collected you,” says Jenni.

“The film should be in black and white – like a Laurel and Hardy movie – and the YMCA is going to be playing as the soundtrack.

“But this time, fast forward it – you’ve got to get from start to finish in five seconds.”

Isobel looks a bit unsure, but says she’ll have a go. “Five, four, three, two, one, stop,” Jenni counts down softly. “Did you get it all in?”

“Yes,” said Isobel. “The funny thing is, I remembered things that we did during the

holiday, after the accident, that I had totally forgotten about.”

Then Jenni wants her to watch the move in four seconds. Then in three, two and one.

“It’s all a bit blurred now,” says Isobel.

“Good, that’s brilliant,” responds Jenni. “That’s exactly what I wanted to achieve.”

The final task of the exercise is to watch the film in reverse, in five seconds initially, and eventually zipping through it one second.

“Now, when you think of the incident, how scary would you say it is?” asks Jenni.

“It almost seems funny now,” replies Isobel.

Developing a strategy

It’s time for Ozzy to make an appearance, to help Isobel perform an exercise in the arena (see panel, right).

After completing the obstacle course, Jenni says they need to put in place a strategy to help Isobel cope with her hacking fears.

She asks her to think about a particular time she got a buzz out of riding.

Isobel relates a time when she did a cross-country schooling session and cleared a course of small fences.

She says it made her feel happy and relaxed: “It was such a lovely feeling and it made me feel that Ozzy and I had a great partnership.”

Next, Jenni asks her to come up with a series of words and phrases to represent this feeling. This is what she comes up with:-

- A colour: Blue;
- A shape: Circle;
- A word or phrase: Accomplished.

“OK, your ‘blue circle of accomplishment’ is going to be very important,” says Jenni. “It will help you recreate a positive, relaxed feeling.”

Jenni spots that as Isobel talks about her ‘happy time’, Ozzy shows signs of relaxing – he lowers his head and licks and chews.

Isobel is astonished at the reaction: “It is amazing that I can be stood here, talking and thinking about something, and my horse reacts like that to my emotional state.

“It really makes me think about how I affect him when I’m in the saddle.”

She repeats the obstacle course (pictured right) – with her blue circle of accomplishment at the forefront of her mind – and Ozzy walks out more willingly.

He strides happily through the alleyway and Isobel doesn’t circle – she goes straight to where she wants to be.

You’re grounded

After a short break, Jenni introduces a meditation exercise. Isobel stands in a comfortable position, and opts to have her eyes closed.

“Imagine roots coming out of your feet, going down into the ground and fastening themselves around a rock, or something solid, that locks you to the earth,” Jenni says.

“Have a feeling of solidity up to your knees, your hips and your stomach. You are feeling heavy and grounded.

Getting the horse's perspective

Jenni wants to observe Ozzy’s reaction to his owner, to interpret what he is picking up from her – positive or negative.

In the school, the coach asks Isobel to create something that represents her fears, using whatever is around her



Ozzy doing a poo in the ‘alley’ reflects the fears of his owner



When Isobel is more relaxed, Ozzy strides out

After a bit of pondering, Isobel lays two planks on the floor to represent the ‘alleyway’ to the big field, and two blocks at the top of the arena to represent the yard.

The space between the blocks and the alleyway is her safe area.

She is sent off to lead Ozzy through the obstacles. After leaving the yard (the blocks), she circles a few times, which represents getting anxious about going out on a hack.

Jenni notes Isobel has a tight hold on Ozzy’s lead rope and she continually gives short, gentle tugs on it.

The hold she takes gets stronger as she approaches the planks.

As he enters the alleyway, Ozzy stops and does a poo.

Horses lighten the load when they are nervous and Jenni translates this as Ozzy picking up on his rider’s nerves and believing there is something to be scared about.

“It is significant that he did a poo in the area that represents the alleyway, which is the scariest bit for Isobel,” says Jenni.

On completing the exercise, Jenni gets Isobel to think of what it’s like to be relaxed when riding. She asks her to come up with the percentage of control the rider should have.

After some discussion, they agree on 75 per cent with the rider and 25 per cent with the horse.

“This allows the horse to look at things, but the rider determines what is safe and what is scary,” says Jenni.

Riding Confidence



The grounding exercise helps you stay in the present

"At the same time, a beautiful ray of light fills your head and your body."

Jenni tells Isobel to be aware of her breathing and her clothes on her skin, before bringing her back to the present.

"This exercise is about controlling which thoughts are in your brain and it helps you stay in the present," says Jenni.

"What I want you to do is transfer the feeling to the saddle, so you feel grounded with Ozzy."

Hacking out

With Ozzy tacked up, it's time for Isobel to get on board. Jenni adjusts her leg position, to give her more security in the saddle. Then, she checks Isobel still feels grounded, and asks her to think of her blue circle of accomplishment again.

Isobel leaves the safety of the arena and walks towards the lane. She states she can feel herself sitting up straighter in the saddle, rather than creeping into her usual defensive position.

As Isobel enters the section of the lane she's been avoiding for almost a year she admits she has a feeling of apprehension.

"But I am staying positive and I haven't changed my body position," she tells Jenni.

"Stay in the present," Jenni reminds her. "Don't bring negative feelings to the fore."

What is most incredible, is that as Ozzy walks calmly down the field with his rider relaxed in the saddle, large, noisy tractors are haymaking in the fields on either side of the pair.

Jenni notes how Isobel is taking control of her horse, without dominating him, and is asking him to walk forward in a good rhythm. This, in turn, is giving him confidence.

At the bottom of the lane – barely a quarter of a mile from the arena – is a gate to a busy road.

"I've not been this far," Isobel says. "The sound of the traffic used to bother me but not today."

Her biggest fear has been turning for home, but today she calmly asks Ozzy to walk in a circle and, with a big smile on her face, heads back to the yard.

Stretching the comfort zone

Jenni wants to allow the techniques Isobel has been working on to sink in to and doesn't want to push her too far. However, to end the session, Isobel takes Ozzy into one of her 'safe' fields.

Isobel confesses, though, that she hasn't ridden to the bottom of the field before, which she does today.

"I would never have come in here with a tractor working in the next field, and even some new cross-country jumps that have been built would have put me off," she says.

"It seems that all the negative feelings I have had before have simply disappeared.

"Before today, I couldn't control my body and as soon as I perceived fear I would lean forward, grab the reins and panic.

"After the grounding exercise, I feel like I'm glued to the saddle and the things that used to scare me just don't any more.

"It is a very strange sensation to be able to sit up here and not feel fear. It's incredible."

Jenni informs Isobel that the mind is a muscle and needs to be exercised. "You need to build up to your number one goal gradually, stretching your comfort zone a little each time," she says. ■

● Jenni provides confidence coaching to horses and riders of all levels. To find out more, visit: www.heartofconfidence.co.uk.

Goal setting – getting it right

When you want to achieve something, or are trying to overcome a fear, it's good to set goals. However, Jenni says it is important you don't push yourself too far, too soon.

She says there are three zones:-

- The comfort zone: which is where you feel safe;
- The stretch zone: you stretch yourself when learning new skills, for example;
- The panic zone: you are in a place where you feel out of control.

"Work out where your comfort zone is," says Jenni. "It is good to stretch yourself, but you only want to do so five to 10 per cent at a time, so your comfort zone gradually expands.

"If you go too far and enter the panic zone, your comfort zone will shrink back.

"There is a danger that it could be smaller than before and you will have set yourself back."



Isobel is all smiles as she hacks past her 'scary' spot