

Danee's Horsemanship Hints

Separation Anxiety and the 50 foot Trail Ride

You decide to go for a trail ride and your quiet well mannered horse suddenly becomes psychotic. How do you teach your horse to enjoy trail riding?

If you have riding buddies with unflappable trail horses the solution may be as simple as asking them to escort you on a few boring trail rides (aka, no galloping off and leaving you behind!), but if your horse is truly terrified on the trail, or you are trying to teach your horse to be comfortable on the trail by himself, your best bet maybe the repetitive 50 foot trail ride.

The procedure: First, do whatever you need to in order to have your horse mentally quiet and prepared for a good ride. Maybe that means warming up in the arena, or doing some ground work first. Once he is mentally with you, it's time to hit the trail! Only go as far as you can with him being 100% mentally okay. Maybe that is only 50 feet away from the arena or barn (hence the title), but that is alright. You can build from there. The first moment you feel your horse start to worry even the tiniest bit, turn around and ride home. There are many signs that your horse is just on the edge of fear. If he is sucking back or gets tight physically and loses the swing in his step, it is a warning that he is no longer comfortable emotionally. Maybe his head comes up and his ears start swiveling around nervously. The point is you want to recognize the small signs early. Don't keep going until he is truly nervous. When a horse is panicked he cannot physically control himself, and if he cannot control his own legs, don't think that you will be able to control them either! Only ride where he is emotionally comfortable, but do ride to the edge of where he is emotionally comfortable before turning around and heading home. Once you are home, ride down that same stretch of trail again. Ride it ten, twenty, or one hundred times if you have to. Eventually, you can ride a little further before your horse gets tight and nervous. If it feels like you are making no progress, don't sweat it- often horses show very little progress initially, until they are convinced you are not going to force them to go further than they are comfortable with, and then suddenly they will go much further away from the barn while remaining calm. It is very important to promise your horse that you will not push him past his fear threshold and then to keep that promise. Once you fry your horse's brain it is very hard for him to regain composure. The point is to practice being calm on the trail- even if that means it's a really short trail ride! Eventually, he will gain the confidence to go trail riding for miles.

