



Easing Back In

Returning to riding after a number of years away? These 12 steps will help you get confidently back in step with your horses.

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Are you a “re-beginner,” lacking confidence and facing fears when it comes to getting back in the saddle? Here are 12 tips to help you regain your comfort during your riding comeback.



Can you identify with being a “re-beginner rider,” with fears and anxieties that somehow hold you back? I sure can.

In my case, fear as a rider hasn't come from a singular event or a terrible wreck. It's evolved over the last 15 years, while I was immersed in being a mom and working, and not spending much time in the saddle. Little by little, my confidence with horses began to fray, like strands of a rope pulled by distance. A combined loss of physical condition and lack of self-trust cut away at those strands until there wasn't much left to hang onto. Where I was fearless, I'd become fearful, and what used to feel like second nature now felt like unfamiliar (and treacherous) ground.

Back in the saddle again, I know that I'm a different rider (physically and emotionally) than I was 15 years ago. I feel, if not like a true beginner, like a re-beginner.

If you find yourself returning to riding after a long time away—whether because of an injury, life commitments, or financial constraints—you might be wondering where to begin to rebuild confidence, strength, and trust. I've been wondering the same thing. So I asked trainer and author Mary Midkiff the ins and outs of staging a comeback.

Here, she offers 12 steps for building confidence and easing back into the saddle. They're making a difference for me, and I'm betting they will for you, too.

1. Take Stock

“You have a different body than you had 10 to 15 years ago. It's like coming back to riding as a beginner,” Midkiff says. “Safety, comfort, and approach are all of great importance.”

To get in the saddle, you have to start with your feet firmly on the ground. “First,” says Midkiff, “evaluate your lifestyle.” Be realistic and look at how much time you can devote to riding, how physically active you are, and what your commitment level is. “Are you hoping to ride competitively, or wanting to ride recreationally? Write down what you're willing to do, and what you're not willing to do,” she says. “Decide on your level of comfort. Maybe jumping or riding a young horse or going out for a six-hour ride in the mountains are no longer considerations,” she adds.

By intentionally focusing on what you want to do, you'll begin to see where you need to start.

2. Begin With a Horse You Trust

“Start out with a good, solid horse-rider partnership,” says Midkiff. “Your horse should be well matched to your expectations. If you were interviewing this

horse, would he fit the job description?”

If you feel a little over-mounted with your own horse, try starting with a veteran lesson horse. Build your confidence and get yourself saddle-fit on an unflappable horse in a comfortable setting, then gradually work back to former levels of horsemanship. (If you can, consider putting your own horse in training so that when you're ready for him, he'll be fit as well.)

Midkiff also suggests that if you have a mare, you should be aware of her hormonal cycle. “Mares cycle every 21 days. In the winter, some go dormant, some don't; and in spring, some are very hot. Mares can be flighty and hyper or distracted and unfocused. You may have a hard time with a mare that isn't paying attention to you, so make sure she's on some sort of hormonal support.” She adds that herbal support can help balance a mare's hormones.

3. Keep Safe on Top

“Always, always wear a helmet,” says Midkiff. “Safety is No. 1, and there are lightweight, well-ventilated, comfortable helmets available.” Wearing a hel-

met may also give you a measure of safety that will lessen anxiety.

4. Get Geared Up

“Your saddle has to be supportive of you. Women should look for a female-friendly saddle,” Midkiff says. She suggests you choose a saddle that will line your body up biomechanically so you can sit comfortably and securely. “As we age, our ability to recover quickly from a spook or jump is not as instantaneous as we'd like, and our reflexes slow down,” Midkiff points out, adding that the right saddle will give you a secure base to optimize your reactions.

“Men can sit in virtually any saddle, but women can't ride securely in a men's saddle. Women need their stirrup bars farther back from the front of the saddle and a seat that's a little wider. The rise from the pommel to the middle of the saddle is not as severe in a woman's saddle as it is in a man's saddle.”

Midkiff also recommends using a rope halter with a 12-foot lead rope. “I like Clinton Anderson's rope halters,” she says. “With a long lead rope and that stiff rope halter, I can do amazing things, and the horse respects that.”

If you haven't used your gear or equipment in a long while, now's a good time to pull everything out, inventory what you have, clean and condition it, and check for any cracks or damage that might make it unsafe or unsuitable for use. You'll feel more confident if you know that everything is in good, safe working order.

5. Get Fit

When you rode before, you may have had a stronger core, or you might have been more fit overall. Fitness and strength can affect how solid you feel in the saddle and how well you react to a situation.

“Start looking at how to get back in shape,” says Midkiff. “You should be able to walk 30 minutes four to five times each week, and walking hills is even better. Walking gives your bones the impact they need to stay healthy and strong, and low-impact aerobic exercise stimulates brain function and gives your heart rate a chance to rise.”

To build your core and overall strength, Midkiff suggests taking a Pilates class. “I've been doing Pilates weekly for six years with a personal trainer. This gives me the absolute confidence of knowing I have that core to rely on. In my riding, it gives me strength to withstand those little baubles that horses give us.

HELP YOUR HORSE FOCUS

"I want my horse to think of me as the instigator of her peace," Midkiff says. That means creating rituals and therapy that'll make your horse relax when he sees you.

To foster her horse's relaxation and focus before trailering, riding, veterinary or farrier care, or showing, Midkiff combines aromatherapy, massage, and acupressure.

"About six years ago I started working with an aromatherapist and asked her if we could experiment on horses. She told me about different plant essences that work, and we started experimenting with blends and recipes, creating one that was safe for horses."

She uses her InBalance blend (a combination of lavender, sweet marjoram, basil, petit grain, neroli, sweet almond oil, and sesame oil). It's a relaxing scent for riders, too (just a small dab will do, as it's concentrated for horses).

Midkiff starts her routine by rubbing a few drops between her palms and fingertips, and then massages it into her horse's nostrils. From there, she uses the heel of her hand to massage the corners of the lips for about 20 seconds. Because horses hold tension in their lips, gums, and palate, her routine also involves massage in those areas, before she moves up from the mouth to the jaw, poll, and neck. Once she's completed the massage, she turns to acupressure in the upper neck on specific points.

Midkiff advises riders to work first on one side, then move to the other. For more information, log on to her Web site, womenandhorses.com.

Yoga is another core-strengthenener. It also can improve your flexibility and is mentally calming. It can help you learn strategies for relaxation that may transfer to your horse and improve your sense of ease in the saddle.

And how long has it been since you tried a Hula Hoop? "A Hula Hoop is really great for freeing the hips and lower back," says Midkiff. "Sitting on a big physio ball and doing hip circles and pelvic tilts in front of a full-length mirror also improves flexibility." (*Note:* Always check with your doctor before beginning an exercise regimen.)

READING RESOURCES FOR EASING BACK IN



Build Complete Confidence With Horses: Beat Fear and Excuses and Attain Your Riding Goals, by Kelly Marks.



Pilates for Riders: Align Your Spine and Control Your Core for a Perfect Position, by Lindsay Wilcox-Reid.



Rider Fitness: Body and Brain: 180 Anytime, Anywhere Exercises to Enhance Range of Motion, Motor Control, Reaction Time, Flexibility, Balance and Muscle Memory in the Saddle, by Eckart Meyners.



The Smart Woman's Guide to Midlife Horses: Finding Meaning, Magic and Mastery in the Second Half of Life, by Melinda Folsie.



= available at HorseBooksEtc.com

6. Watch Your Weight

"If you're very heavy, you need to consider losing weight to ride. Understand that it *does* matter to your horse how heavy you are," Midkiff says. And it can affect your responsiveness and ability to move with your horse.

If you have a lot of weight to lose, you may find that riding gives you a stronger incentive to lose it. Walking and groundwork with your horse are not only great forms of exercise for weight loss, but also can help you build confidence and trust with your horse.

7. Go Back to Basics

Don't be afraid to start at the very beginning. If working with your horse on the ground has you uneasy, think about what you *can* do easily.

For example, start with grooming and groundwork, then, as you gain confidence on the ground, build on it step-by-step. Go from grooming to having a trusted friend longe you and your horse in the arena. You'll begin to build strength and fitness without anxiety over control. Then, you can transition from longe-work to riding in the arena.

"You don't want to set yourself up for being afraid and nervous and hesitant about things. Your horse will pick that up," Midkiff advises. →



Remind yourself that you're capable and that your horse isn't out to hurt you. By beginning with a horse you trust, you have a solid foundation on which to build a positive relationship.

8. Ease Up on the Caffeine

Some foods and drinks can ratchet up your energy level in ways that your horse will sense as well.

"If you know you're going to be with your horse choose decaf coffee, herbal tea, juice, or a smoothie rather than coffee or energy drinks, especially if you already have jitters. Just keep caffeine out of that part of the day," Midkiff says.

9. Answer Yourself

"I'm 57," says Midkiff, "and I find that I do think, *what if*. But you could say 'what if' every time you go for a drive in a car or every time you cross the street."

To try to quiet that voice, answer yourself with a positive. "Go back to a time when you had a big 'what if' that you made it through and recovered from. Fit that memory right into your narrative, almost like a friend standing there reminding you that this happened, you handled it, and you were OK. Re-install your confidence," Midkiff says.

Even if time has passed since that incident, remind yourself that you are capable, and your horse isn't out to hurt you.

10. Stay Focused

When you arrive to work with your horse, be present, Midkiff says. "Focus yourself by leaving gadgets and work and other

thoughts behind. You'll be amazed at how much more learning (in less time!) your horse can take in when his human partner is present, participating, and positive."

If you've had a really intense day, or you just aren't feeling your best, Midkiff suggests going back to basics.

"Do some simple groundwork for 30 minutes or so. It'll make it more constructive and relaxing for both of you."

11. School for Strength

Even if your aim is to trail ride, and not compete, schooling your horse in an arena will strengthen your endurance and fitness and sharpen your reaction time.

"Try trotting your horse over poles; going around and over obstacles; and doing figure-eights, serpentines, and lateral work to build strength for pleasure rides," Midkiff advises.

12. Set a Peaceful Intention

Midkiff points out that it's important to learn to release tension and to relax and focus, not just with horses, but also in your daily life.

"If you aren't able to do so, your frantic, stressful existence will come across to your horse," she says.

Yoga and meditation cultivate deep breathing and relaxation, and there are meditative and visual techniques that

give you a sense of peace. Midkiff also suggests using Bach's Rescue Remedy, a homeopathic tonic that involves a few drops under the tongue.

A strong proponent of aromatherapy for horses (page 47), she also recommends aromatherapy for riders.

"When you go to the pasture or barn or pull into the stable area, begin some deep breathing exercises and rub a few drops of calming essential oils into and around your nostrils and on your pulse points. Lavender, basil, mandarin, and lemongrass essences are analgesic and calming. This will begin the shift you need to meet your horse and step into his world," she says.

"Pretend you are entering the world's greatest psychiatrist's office and it's required that you spend a few hours with nothing else on your mind but healing yourself and enjoying your horse. When you meet and work with your horse with peaceful intention in your mind, body, and soul, you're grounded and fully engaged with your horse." ■

Based in Lexington, Kentucky, Mary Midkiff is the author of *Fitness, Performance and the Female Equestrian* and *She Flies Without Wings: How Horses Touch a Woman's Soul*. You can find more information about her books, training, and techniques at womenandhorses.com.