

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International

# STRIDES

Vol. 29, No. 4

Fall 2023



Ensuring Excellence and  
Changing Lives Through  
Equine-Assisted Services

## SAFETY AND STANDARDS ISSUE

Building a Culture of Safety

The Value of Virtual Site Visits

Choosing Safety Stirrups for  
Adaptive Riding

Creating a Records Notebook  
of Standards



PATH  
INTERNATIONAL

A photograph of a rider on a brown horse in an outdoor arena. The rider is wearing a dark jacket, blue riding pants, and a helmet. The horse is in motion, and the background shows a white fence and trees. There are two vertical purple bars, one at the top center and one in the middle of the page.

# Don't Get Back On Yet: Honoring the Aftermath of a Fall

By Lasell Jaretzki Bartlett

---

Although the hope is that this will never happen in any program, riders do fall off horses even during well-planned, safety-oriented lessons in a therapeutic riding program. Helping a rider's nervous system reset to feeling safe directly after a fall should go hand-in-hand with checking for a concussion and broken bones. Restoring the sense of safety for a rider who has fallen needs to be included in every lesson protocol. The safest way for riders to fall off is when they are supported by sidewalkers on both sides. As a rider starts very slowly to lose their balance, the sidewalkers can soften the fall on the way to the ground, helping the rider perform an emergency dismount. But what about independent riders, like Cathy, who ride without the safety net of sidewalkers?

---

▼ Independent riders need to be confident and well-balanced as they will not have the assistance of sidewalkers if they start to fall. Photo courtesy of Hearts & Horses, Inc.



## Response to a Fall

Cathy was a keen horse enthusiast, a teen with learning disabilities, social anxieties and awkwardness not uncommon for youngsters who have been traumatized, and this was her first fall from a horse. After losing her balance, she tumbled to the ground. Focusing on Cathy and initiating the emergency protocol for a fall became the highest priority. This means, don't move the person. Ask them to stay down as you clear the ring, call for help and go to the fallen rider's assistance. Check for breathing, responsiveness, pain, blood and any indication of concussion or broken limbs. These crisis response decisions lie with the instructor whose training and job description call for taking charge.

At the same time, instructors need to remember to monitor their own responses by checking their breathing, sense of being grounded and degree of arousal even while



◀ A rider may want to take things slowly after a fall, perhaps having a walk lesson with a sidewalker nearby. Photo courtesy of Hearts & Horses, Inc.

## Assessing the Autonomic Nervous System after a Fall

Can you think of a time when you were close enough to observe someone fall off a horse? You can help improve your ability to observe, and thus respond appropriately to a rider after a fall, by writing down what you remember noticing about the rider's:

- self-reported concerns
- hesitancy to approach the horse
- facial coloring (pale, reddened, splotchy)
- eyes (widening or narrowing, darting or fixated, pupil size, blinking rate, shifting from focused to peripheral vision)
- breathing (faster, slower, shallower, labored, constricted, erratic)
- voice (higher or lower pitch, faster or slower speech, fewer or more verbalizations, difficulty finding words or speaking)
- movement (tighter, awkward, jerky, uncoordinated, flaccid, too loose, showing signs of higher or lower muscle tone, bold, cautious)
- need for more reassurance than usual
- avoidant or delaying behaviors
- orientation to space, to people, to horses

Which would you like to notice next time you observe a fall? What else might you do to become more observant of the physiological, emotional and orienting states of someone who has fallen?

they assess a fallen rider. They need to watch for any anxious undercurrents that may start to surface. Bringing in another staff member—to assist and reduce personal stress by sharing the responsibilities—is vital because not only is the rider impacted by the fear response: the instructor, volunteers and even the rider's horse are also affected. Having someone with site management skills is indispensable, as is having someone with the capacity to be at ease with people as they come out of shock.

Fear of losing control, losing balance and becoming injured precede the shock that follows impact, when something happens too fast to experience, too fast to register and too fast to integrate. Cathy sat at a certain height from the ground with a plan where she and her horse were

going and at what speed. When her horse sped up, she couldn't adjust and go faster with him because her body stiffened as is normal with the fear response. In the discombobulation that ensued, she and her horse parted ways. Something to note: Sometimes a rider has the skills to ride independently, but not the physiological capacity to shift quickly with the horse. Horses are superb at shifting quickly. Humans, not so superb.

## Handling the Rider's Shock Response

Imagine an ocean wave. It builds, it peaks, it subsides. There is a pause before the next wave builds. Fear, other emotions and nervous system activations are like these waves. When the circumstances don't allow for a wave to peak and subside, that building energy remains in the body. This image of an arrested wave not completing its cycle describes the shock response.

Coming out of shock begins when the arrested waves resume their cycles by peaking and subsiding. Cathy's senses and nervous system commenced a reunion as she was lying there on the ground: breathing, blinking, verbally responsive, making eye contact, wiggling her fingers and toes. Slowly she started to test her extremities while following the direction to not move her head and neck. Her orientation was returning and she knew where she was and what had happened. So far so good. She had no broken skin, could move her limbs and her helmet was in place. But no emotion was showing up yet, nor the natural shaking or trembling that tends to accompany coming out of shock, and is commonly inhibited from an early age in our culture.

This shaking or trembling is a sign that the danger has passed and that the fight-or-flight system has



▼ To regain confidence after a fall, a rider may decide to walk on a lunge line with an instructor until they become inclined to take on more challenge. Photo courtesy of Lisa Miller Studio di Luce/Endeavor Therapeutic Horsemanship

turned off. It is the nervous system's way of releasing the overwhelming experience from the body. In this case, what needs to be released are the physiological changes from a fall that cannot be processed as fast as they occur. For instance, as the rider starts to fall, her instincts kick in to orient herself by moving to look for where to land most safely. There is also a natural defensive movement of the hands and arms to protect the brain as the rider falls. These responses—incomplete because it all happens too fast—live on in the body until the right conditions allow them to discharge through the shaking or trembling responses, which in turn allows the unfinished waves to peak and subside. There may also be emotional reactions waiting to surface.

Feeling safe is a prerequisite for coming out of shock and the

return of regulation. This sense of safety is provided through co-regulation, when the calm presence of one person helps the upset, disoriented person to settle from the physiological arousal of the fear response. Humans, horses and all other mammals are hardwired for co-regulation.

Whoever is the designated calm person, which could be the instructor or a qualified staff person or volunteer, lets a fallen rider know someone is with them, and they are not alone—someone is there as they are returning to a calmer state. The designated calm person should be able to support a fallen rider without their own personal fears interrupting the rider's process, and help the rider reconnect to a sense of grounded wholeness. The presence of a calm adult in charge lets the rider orient and settle at

their own pace. The designated calm person also supports the rider's own healing wisdom so they can allow their bodies to sense and release anything left over, as they start to complete the wave action and come out of shock into more regulated states. If this calm presence is missing at the time of the fall, the settling can happen later. Because the shock response, which is held in a rider's body, interferes with movement, confidence, attention and adaptability, the sooner this settling is facilitated the better.

## Falls Protocol for Lessons

In addition to the emergency protocol that every center observes, the following protocol for how to handle the aftermath of a fall will help a rider return to regulation. It will also help to address the physiological needs of everyone impacted: the instructor, the volunteer, the horse and the staff.

- **All staff and volunteers.** First—or simultaneously—take care of their own needs to settle, ground and restore their sense of safety in order to support riders and horses to do the same. Ask for support to settle if needed.
- **Instructor.** Direct the rider to rest in place, listen within and take time to let the body catch up with the fall experience. This could take five minutes, 25 minutes, or longer. Offer reassurance that the horse and other people are safe, which may include describing where the rider's horse is and who is with the horse.
- **Rider.** Assess from the inside for what feels okay, what hurts and what is not registering right now. Allow any shaking, yawning, rapid breathing, rapid heart rate, moaning or other sounds that want to

## Restoring Grounding, Confidence and Connection

The following exercises can help a rider reestablish trust after a fall. If you are not a mental health therapist, be careful about leading this activity with someone who has a history of trauma. In that case, either partner with a therapist or find grounding activities that do not have quite as much somatic input.

### Restore Grounding: Weightedness

Find a comfortable position sitting or standing. Notice your breath without changing it, and where you feel the pull of gravity. Think of this as resting down into yourself, resting into the earth, resting into this present moment. If your attention wanders, gently bring it back to where you feel the pull of gravity. Where specifically do you feel it? Feel the weightedness, the pull of gravity here. Find another place of weightedness and feel into that. Gently bring your attention back and forth between these two places. Notice the connection between the two, and notice if your breathing and sense of resting has changed.

### Restore Confident Balance: Rocking

Stand or sit comfortably with a friend nearby especially if you've had any jarring from your fall. Feel your weightedness, how gravity draws your body toward the earth. If sitting, notice if your weight down through your pelvis feels the same on the right side as the left side. If standing, notice if your weight down through your pelvis to your feet feels the same on your right as your left. Start rocking gently from side to side, just a very small, very slow

rocking motion. Slowly decrease the range of your rocking until you find a middle-balanced place. Pause and feel what this is like. Lean to the right a little, using a hand on something for stability if needed. Pause and feel what this is like. Lean a little more to the right until you feel the edge of coming off balance, then come back to middle. Pause and notice what's happening with your energy, breathing, heart rate and sense of contact with the earth/ground.

Lean to the left a little, using a hand on something for stability if needed. Pause and feel what this is like. Lean a little more to the left until you feel the edge of coming off balance, then come back to the middle. Pause and notice what's happening with your energy, breathing, heart rate and sense of contact with the earth/ground. Be curious about where you:

- are wobbly in each direction
- feel most stable
- tense up more to prevent falling over
- hold your breath
- relax and release your breath

### Restore Connection: Singing Together

Invite a friend or several friends to join you. Standing or sitting, choose a song you all know like Row, Row, Row Your Boat, holiday songs, Happy Birthday, or other children's songs. You can prepare pages with lyrics if needed for people who can read and want the written help. Sing or hum the song together. Pause and notice changes in how you are feeling. Share among your friends what you noticed. Explore the options to sing (1) while walking in the same direction, (2) while trying to walk in time with your friends and (3) while singing a familiar tune using made-up words.

happen. Make eye contact when ready. Communicate the inner experience with words when possible.

- **Designated Calm Person.**

This is a predetermined, specific role for the qualified staff member or volunteer whose primary focus is the feelings and sensations of the fallen rider. Recovery from falls does not happen in solitude. This person should arrive as soon as possible if it's not the instructor, and proceed with the following: Sit with the rider without getting upset when the rider is upset and disoriented. Remind the rider to take all the time needed to orient and start feeling safe in their body, in their environment and with their relationships. Give the fallen rider explicit permission

and emotionally neutral support to allow the normal body responses (movement, trembling, shaking it off, yawning, looking around for safety and quiet) while the adrenaline response—the incomplete wave—peaks and discharges. Offer a hand on the shoulder or arm as supportive touch to help the rider's settling and integrating.

## Follow-up After a Fall

The rider may or may not get back on the horse that day. It will depend on whether or not the rider is physically okay, not feeling any aftereffects off shock and is willing, without feeling pressured, to remount. However, remember that shock is designed to numb physical and emotional pain. With

some riders, the aftereffects of shock may show up later, be experienced and subside, so it's important to take some time to assess the rider's overall state. For someone who is still under the analgesia of shock, this is not the time to resume riding.

Recovering confidence and trust, in oneself as well as in the horse, is as important as recovering mobility, balance and coordination before a person is ready to ride again. This means taking things slowly, perhaps having the rider walk in lessons with a sidewalker nearby, or walk on a lunge line with an instructor until they become inclined to take on more challenge. Discuss with the rider how they would like to resume riding. Some riders might feel defeated or that they are going backwards or that the instructor does not view them as competent if the

▼ Whether a rider gets back on the horse following a fall will depend on whether or not they are physically okay, not feeling any aftereffects of shock and are willing, without feeling pressured, to remount. Photo courtesy of Lisa Miller Studio di Luce/Endeavor Therapeutic Horsemanship



instructor decided to incorporate a sidewalker or lunge line in the next lesson without the rider's input.

The exercises on page 32, "Restoring Grounding, Confidence and Connection" can also help people feel more like themselves and ready to resume the activities they love. Those who are still troubled by fear or disorientation from a prior fall may feel increased caution or uncertainty or may lose balance more often than before. They may simply wonder if prior falls and accidents are still affecting them. Processing these feelings with a licensed mental health professional, preferably one who has personal experience with horses, even someone who does psychotherapy involving equine interaction, can help restore a rider's confidence.

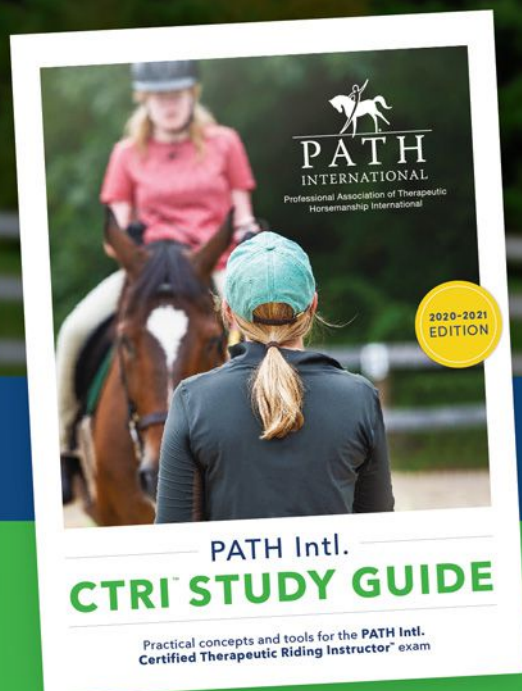
The good news? Even if riders seek help weeks, months or years after a fall, there's always hope for

restoring body connection, balance and confidence no matter how much time has passed. A person's bodily systems are waiting for the opportunity to shift into more functionality, more wellness.

As staff themselves become more familiar with their own nervous system responses and with releasing the shock of past fear responses—those incomplete waves—they can in turn better identify, assess and help riders allow the completion of the survival strategies that become involved during a crisis. Following this protocol after a fall allows the rider to naturally restore their physical equilibrium and emotional self-confidence. Cathy, for instance, resumed riding in future lessons and went on to become a valued volunteer supporting the center's horses on their lesson days.

Lasell Jaretzki Bartlett, MSW, is a licensed clinical social worker, Somatic Experiencing® Practitioner and trauma resolution specialist, as well as a PATH Intl. CTRI and ESMHL. She has presented at national and regional PATH Intl. Conferences and trained staff and volunteers in advanced horse handling skills at High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Sharon, VT. She now lives in rural Virginia with her human and other animal friends. This article is adapted from her book, *Getting Along with Rusty: Horses, Healing and Therapeutic Riding*. She can be reached at [www.lasellbartlett.com](http://www.lasellbartlett.com).

## Become a PATH Intl. Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor (CTRI®)



The best way to prepare for the PATH Intl. certification exam is to prepare with the assistance of the PATH Intl. CTRI Study Guide. Available in print and electronically, the sample questions and format prepare candidates for test day. Achieve your dream or help a mentee achieve theirs.

PATH Intl. Members receive a significant discount on this study guide and all education products.

Buy yours online today!  
[www.pathintl.org](http://www.pathintl.org)

