

# Dear Debbie...

## Your questions answered by Debbie Reilly

**“Whenever I do cross-country, I have a problem taking my horse into water. He always refuses, and I don’t want to battle to get him through it. How can I make him more confident when it comes to water, as I don’t want to bully him?”**

Please be reassured that fear of water is a perfectly normal instinctual behaviour for the horse, and your reluctance to ‘bully him’ is well founded. As a flight animal, trapping your horse into a situation where you say, “you must do this or I will hurt you” only serves to increase their fear, minimises their ability to learn and reinforces the fact that water should be avoided at all costs in the future!

Therefore a calm and confident, step-by-step approach of ‘shaping behaviour’ needs to be adopted, whereby you lead by example, and build his trust and confidence in a steady progressive manner.

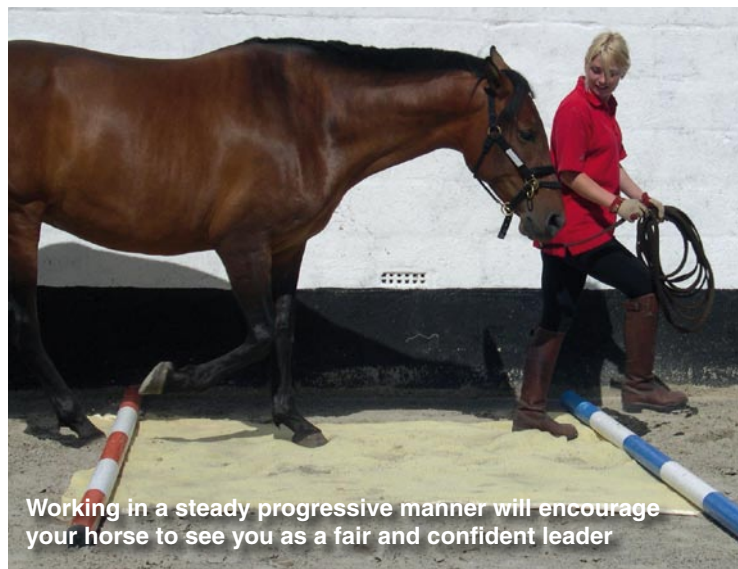
Starting from the ground, you will need to gain his trust and respect by working through the halter training I have previously described (see loading problems in the June edition). School your horse within a safe environment, giving clear choices and consequences and ultimately causing him to willingly be with you. Your aim is to get him to walk at your shoulder when you move forward, to stop when you stop and to back up when asked, all with no pressure on the halter at all.

Once this has been achieved, I would recommend you start to ask him to walk over some potentially scary objects - a jump pole, followed by a white sheet and finally a blue tarp, is often a good progression. If there is any resistance shown, calmly school him with clear and consistent consequences, rewarding any positive steps until he is walking happily over each object.

When first negotiating these objects, take care not to be in a position where you are in the way of your horse if he decides to rush or even jump the object. If he does, allow a clear path of no resistance and repeat from the same side - he will quickly decide it is a waste of energy!

With these steps in place, you can start to work through the same procedure for the water. Find or create a small depression in the ground that is only slightly wet to start with. This should be large enough so that the horse cannot step straight over it or easily side-step around it. Once you are walking happily through this you can start to add a little water to create a muddy patch and gradually continue adding water until you are walking through water. When he is happily following you through, you can finally ask him to stand and relax in there for a few seconds, creating a pleasant association.

Once he is happy with this you can start to work through the water with a rider on. Start with someone on the ground to take the lead if there are any hesitations, as the transformation from being led to going out in front alone can be quite a leap for some. I also like to long-line my horses over objects and through water to help with this transformation, but this does require a high level of skill in long-lining.



**“I have a young, six-year-old horse, but recently I seem to have lost my riding confidence with him. He is spooky and rushes when I get on, he then puts in a few stops and sometimes bucks or bolts. I have managed to stay on until now, but I’m losing my nerve more and more, to the point where I sometimes make excuses not to ride him. My partner wants me to think about selling him, but I don’t feel this is an option, as in every other way we match. He is a joy to own, has good stable manners - he can be a little bolshy to bring in and out of the paddock sometimes, but generally he’s very good.**

**“He is also very nervous in traffic - he has been brought up on a farm with lorries, tractors and other farm machinery, but still gets extremely panicky when one comes near - he will try to spin around and bolt and becomes really frightened. I haven’t done a lot of hacking out because of this. I’ve tried many calming supplements and have had his teeth, back and tack checked - there don’t seem to be any problems at all. I need advice as I am losing confidence fast, but I really don’t want to sell Freddie.”**

This is an interesting question with a number of different related aspects, but my biggest concern is the mounting problem and associated panic reactions that you have described, as this is such a vulnerable time for any rider and potentially highly dangerous. Whilst your horse is clearly trying to tell you something, loud and clear, admitting that you are losing your confidence is a big step in the right direction, as your nervousness and anticipation will certainly serve to exacerbate the problem. ‘If the predator is tense and anxious, then the prey animal better watch out!’ Therefore my advice to you is to listen to your horse, and if you don’t feel safe and comfortable riding at this time, then don’t do it. Most problems like this are caused by either pain, fear or learnt behaviour, very often a combination of these. We therefore need to work through a steady process of elimination to identify the cause of his behaviour, whilst working on rebuilding your trust and confidence in each other, from the ground up.

Clearly you have already started the elimination process by having his teeth, back and saddle checked. Although a brief word of warning as in my experience things can be missed, so do ensure you use a reputable specialist within each area. I also find a good physio can shed light on tight and/or tender areas that can sometimes be hiding an underlying cause. As prey animals, many horses that are in pain or have a weakness will tend to function in a state of ‘Amber Alert’, being highly instinctual, spooky and ready to run at the front of the herd. This state gives them the ability to mask weaknesses from predators and is often seen in times of stress. Rider technique can also be a cause of discomfort and even pain, so this also needs to be considered.

Throughout this process of elimination you can start to address some of the other causes of fear or learnt behaviour from the ground. The occasional bolshiness you describe whilst leading, and the fear of traffic, indicate a slight

imbalance in your leadership and his trust in you. Start with the halter training I have described in previous answers. When this is clearly established within a variety of environments you can start to get creative and work through some trust-building exercises. Working quietly and calmly through a variety of potentially scary situations within a safe environment, will help to shed light on your relationship, any communication problems and serve to rebuild your confidence in each other.

Breaking down each goal into tiny progressive steps also highlights the triggers for his behaviour. For example, will he approach and stand quietly and calmly next to the mounting block with no tack and let you rub him all over? Will he do the same from both sides? Does he start to react and move as soon as he is tacked and standing next to the mounting block, or when you lift your foot toward the stirrup? Does he first get panicky when he sees something up above his back, when he feels weight in the saddle or when something touches his flanks? Working through each little step, rewarding his positive actions by moving away and calmly schooling any negative reactions will gradually break down any fears and associations he has built up.

I also like to use long-lining as an assessment and training tool to ensure the horse is moving well, happy in the mouth, responding nicely to aids and taking direction from you from behind him, without getting panicked. When you are comfortable that he is pain free, happy to be with you and responding quickly but calmly to your requests from the ground within a variety of potentially challenging situations, you are most of the way there. The final step is to work through the mounting problem itself, which I would strongly advise is done with the help of an experienced trainer. I advise most people to use a mild training halter, like the Dually Halter, underneath the bridle. (Ensure your horse has been properly schooled with the training halter before you start to work through the mounting process.) This allows any schooling to be done without interfering with the bit and mouth, as holding tight onto the reins is often a trigger.

Working as a team, start with a leg up and belly the rider over (see pic 1). The ground person is there to school any movement whilst the rider is in a position to drop down if the situation is unsafe. Remember that as soon as your horse settles or stands quietly, dismounting will reward his behaviour. Once you are able to belly over with no reaction, and your horse will calmly walk a small circle to the left and right, you are ready to quietly sit up and repeat the process. Once you are happy with these steps you can start to reintroduce the mounting block (see pic 2). Always work in a way to avoid trapping your horse and forcing him to stand still, whilst allowing him clear choices and consistent consequences - this will enable him to stay calm and think, encouraging active learning.

There are no quick fixes, but if you focus on achieving your goals and make it as easy as possible for your horse to do what you would like him to do, you will be amazed how quickly issues can be resolved.



**1. Safety is paramount with mounting problems**



**2. Avoid trapping your horse, allowing clear choices and consistent consequences**



**3. Work calmly through each progressive step, schooling any negative behaviour and rewarding the positive**