



Why Emotional Regulation Matters When You Ride
and How to Master It

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Why Emotional Regulation Matters

Your emotions directly influence both your riding performance and your horse's experience. When a rider is emotionally dysregulated, it can show up as tension in the body, unclear communication, rushed timing, or a subtle loss of trust within the partnership. Developing emotional regulation allows you to remain calm, present, and effective in the saddle — even under pressure.

Emotional regulation is not about “controlling” feelings or pushing through discomfort. It is the skill of noticing your internal state, regulating your nervous system, and making intentional choices that support both performance and partnership. This guide offers tools riders can use before, during, and after training to stay connected, grounded, and responsive.

In this workbook, I draw from evidence-based clinical and performance psychology approaches to help you identify and track body cues, accurately label emotions, recognize the chain reaction between events and riding responses, practice mindful awareness, and apply this information in real-time riding situations.

Included in this workbook:

- A pre-ride emotional warm-up to set your mindset
- In-the-saddle emotional regulation tools
- A post-ride reflection
- A seven-day emotional regulation challenge
- A rider self-assessment worksheet
- Rider Feelings Wheel

Tracking Physical Cues

Goal: Help riders recognize body signals that indicate an emotional shift before or during riding.

Why? Your body often signals an emotion to your horse before your mind labels it.

How to do it:

Body Scan Before Riding – Take 2 minutes to notice tension in your forehead, jaw, shoulders, arms, hands, hips, and legs. Notice your heart rate. Are you rushing to get in the ring? Rate each area from relaxed (0) to tense (10).

Breath Awareness – Count breaths for one minute and notice if they are shallow or deep. Shallow breathing often indicates anxiety or stress. Are you breathing into your belly for 4, pausing for 2-4, exhaling out through your mouth 6-8 like you're blowing out a candle?

Rider Posture Check – In front of a mirror, notice your posture before mounting. Are your shoulders forward? Is your back rounded? Does your hip hurt and your weight is on one side of your body more than another? How is your neck? Is it tight? Note your patterns over a week. For example: *"Before my ride: tight shoulders, shallow breath → felt anxious."*

Research in Psychological Science (Kleckner et al., 2017) shows that interoception (awareness of internal bodily states) is key for emotional awareness and regulation.

Labeling Your Emotions

Goal: Reduce emotional intensity and increase clarity through language.

Why? Putting your feelings into words reduces emotional intensity.

How to do it:

Feelings Wheel Check-In – Keep the “Rider Feelings Wheel” in your tack room or on your phone. Before each ride, point to the word that best fits your mood.

Emotion Sentence Starter – Write: “I am feeling ___ because ___.” This clarifies both the emotion and its trigger. Use simple phrases: *"I am feeling tense.."* or *"I am feeling hopeful..."*

Ride Reflection Journal – After riding, write three emotion words to describe how you felt during your ride. Circle the most prominent one.

Lieberman et al. (2007) found that naming an emotion activates the prefrontal cortex and reduces amygdala reactivity, making emotions easier to regulate.

“Trigger → Thought → Feeling → Action”

Goal: Identify the chain reaction between an event and your responses.

Why? To clarify for you the pattern of what happens and how you respond.

How to do it:

Daily Ride Log – Record: What was a Trigger (an event), What was your Thought (what you told yourself), What did you Feel? (your emotion), What did you do? (what was your action).

For example: *Trigger: horse spooked → Thought: "I'm losing control" → Feeling: fear → Action: tense up*

Pause & Replay Exercise – If something goes wrong in a ride, pause and replay it in your mind — this time imagining a more helpful thought and action. This is called thought reframing using visualization. *Example: Trigger: horse spooked → Thought: "Oops, okay I got this" → Feeling: amusement → Action: sink down into your stirrups, pull back on the reins, talk to your horse in a soothing manner. Walk. Then restart what you were previously doing without becoming emotional and annoyed or mad at your horse.*

Thought Reframe Practice – After writing down a negative thought, rewrite it in a constructive form. Example: “I can’t control my horse” → “I can slow my breathing and regain connection.”

CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) frameworks (Beck, 2011) show that tracking this cycle helps people identify and change maladaptive (when you do not provide an appropriate response to a situation) thought patterns linked to emotional responses.

Mindfulness Check-Ins

Goal: Increase present-moment awareness.

Why? To prevent emotional spirals. Regularly pause to observe your emotions without judgment.

How to do this:

3-Breath Grounding – Stop what you're doing, take three slow breaths, notice your surroundings, then return to your ride.

5-Senses Reset – Name one thing you can see, feel, hear, smell, and taste. This anchors you to the present moment.

Mid-Ride Pause – Every 10 minutes, walk your horse on a loose rein, check your breathing, and reset your seat and posture. Lift your shoulders up and let them relax back square.

Set a timer to pause every 2–3 hours. Ask: "*What am I feeling right now?*" Note both the emotion and the intensity (0–10).

Mindfulness-based interventions (Keng, Smoski & Robins, 2011) improve emotional awareness and reduce reactivity, even in high-stress performance situations.

Review Your Week for Patterns

Goal: Notice emotional patterns — when certain feelings tend to show up and what's happening around them.

Why?

When you recognize your common emotional patterns, you can *anticipate them instead of being surprised by them* — and prepare your body and mindset ahead of time.

Weekly Emotion Check-In

At the end of each ride day, jot a single word that best describes your dominant emotion (calm, tense, confident, frustrated) and rate its intensity from 1–5 — in your phone, notebook, or training journal.

Pattern Spotting

- At the end of the week, review your notes and look for repetition. Ask yourself:
- Do certain emotions show up before lessons, shows, or new exercises?
- Are there specific times of day, weather conditions, or situations that increase tension or confidence?
- Do my emotions shift once I'm warmed up or connected with my horse?

Pattern Highlighting – At week’s end, highlight any triggers or times of day that appear more than twice. *For example: "Do I feel more anxious before lessons? More confident after a good warm-up?"*

Pre-Ride Prep Adjustment – If you notice certain conditions cause tension (e.g., cold mornings), adjust your warm-up or mental prep accordingly.

Emotion researcher (Gross, 2015) shows that identifying recurring patterns allows for proactive regulation — addressing triggers before they escalate.

Disappointment

So how do you all handle disappointment?

Step 1: Ground Your Body

Before you start thinking about your ride, for 45 seconds I want you to :

- Put both feet flat on the ground.
- Press through your heels like you're riding.
- Slight bend in knees.
- Lengthen your spine.
- Let your shoulders drop naturally.

No breathwork. This is just a somatic tool to use.

Then say internally to yourself: "I am steady. The round is over."

"Ride the ground before you ride the story"

So why would this work? It engages your lower-body proprioception, it pulls energy out of your chest and into your pelvis and it signals physical stability to your brain.

Step Two : Bilateral Reset

I want you to gently press your left hand into right thigh. Then switch. Left, right, left, right.

Go slow and steady.

Then say internally: "This is one moment. I am still here."

So why will this work?

The left–right stimulation calms your amygdala, it reintegrates your cognitive processing and interrupts spiraling thought loops.

Riding the Wave

Ask yourself, “What sensations do I notice in my body?”

Ask yourself, “What’s the feeling that goes with it?”

Watch and let go of thoughts. Notice any urges. Locate that split second where you make a choice instead of acting on the urge.

Rider Exposure Ladder

Rebuild your confidence through gradual exposure:

Visualize the fearful scenario calmly (e.g., mounting, cantering, jumping).

Practice the movement on the ground or in-hand with your horse.

Repeat under saddle at a low-stress level until you’re calm and are steady.

Progress in small increments while using your regulation tools.

Graded Exposure Therapy

You can break down your fears into 10 steps from least scary to most scary.

“Let’s say a rider had a fall at a show and now feels anxious about jumping again.

Forced bravery says: ‘Get back in and jump the course.’

Graded exposure says: ‘Build the ladder.’

10-Step Exposure Ladder Example

(Least scary → Most scary)

1. Watch videos of yourself jumping successfully.
2. Stand next to a jump in the arena without riding.
3. Walk your horse over poles on the ground.
4. Trot poles.
5. Canter poles.
6. Trot a crossrail on a trusted horse at home.
7. Canter a small vertical at home with trainer.
8. Canter a small course at home with all your familiar fences.
9. Haul over and go school at a new venue.
10. Then, if you got through all of these steps, compete again at a show!

Your nervous system learns through repetition of safety — not through being overwhelmed.

Grounded Re-Entry vs. Forced Bravery

Fear in riders is not a mindset failure — it's a nervous system state. Forced bravery asks a rider to override their biology.

Step 1: Imagine the Scenario

Picture a moment when you felt scared riding—maybe after a spook, a fall, or a loss of confidence—but you told yourself:

Just get on. Push through. Don't be weak.

Step 2: Check your Body

Without changing anything, just notice:

Your breath — is it shallow or are you holding it?

Your jaw, shoulders, or hands — are they tight?

Your seat — does it feel braced?

Step 3: Name It

This is what forced bravery looks like in the nervous system:

The body is saying 'not safe'

The mind is saying 'do it anyway'

And you, the rider, are overriding your body signals instead of responding to them.

Step 4: The Cost

When we ride from forced bravery, we might technically stay on—but we lose:

Softness Timing Feel

And often, your horse's trust"

Forced bravery keeps you moving, but it doesn't keep you regulated.

Name the Emotion (Without Judgment)

“Saying to yourself my fear is present — I am not in danger, but my body is protecting me.”

Why it works:

Labeling reduces your amygdala activation and prevents shame-based escalation.

This shifts your from threat interpretation → to an observing mind.

Reclaim Your Agency First

Before moving forward, can you answer any of these three questions?

- If my fear spikes, can I stop?
- Do I have permission to dismount?
- Can I change the plan?

If any answer is no, the re-entry should pause. Rule: No agency = no exposure.

Ground Your Body Before Asking Your Horse

Take 30–90 seconds, mounted or unmounted

Choose one:

- Extended exhale breathing (inhale 4 / exhale 6)
- Drop your weight into your heels + thighs
- Gently rotate your neck or do shoulder rolls
- Put a hand on your thigh + orient to 3 visible objects

Remember self- regulation before communication with your horse.

Start Below the Fear Line

You begin under the threshold — or not at it.

For Example:

- Walk only (even if you “should” trot)
- Ride on the buckle
- Stay on a known, predictable line, no galloping across the field
- One transition — then reassess

Your not proving anything. Your building safety.

Use Checkpoints

Every 1–2 minutes, ask yourself:

- “Is my breath steady?”
- “Can I feel my seat?”
- “Is my horse still with me?”

If your regulation drops → pause, downshift, or stop. Remember there is no “just one more thing” when dysregulated.

End on Regulation — Not Performance

Your ride ends when:

- Your nervous system returns toward baseline
- Your horse shows relaxation (he’s blowing, chewing, stretching, keeping a rhythm)
- You feel relief, not depleted

Remember success = a regulated ride !

Helpful Regulation Sheet

Pre-ride warm up to set your mindset

Before mounting:

- Inhale through your nose for 4, pause for 2-4, exhale slowly through your mouth for 6-8 (as if blowing out a candle).
- Set a positive intention for your ride.
- Visualize a calm, focused, and connected ride.
- Greet your horse calmly, making eye contact and connecting physically with a gentle touch.

In-the-Saddle Regulation

While riding:

- Focus on your breathing; match it to your horse's rhythm.
- Release tension in your jaw, shoulders, and hands.
- If you feel frustration rising, pause, breathe, and reset.
- Speak to your horse softly to maintain connection.

Post-Ride Reflection

After each ride:

- Identify moments where you felt most connected.
- Note any emotional challenges and how you responded.
- Celebrate small wins - even one improved transition or moment of connection counts.

7-Day Emotional Regulation Challenge

Goal: Build the habit of noticing, managing, and resetting your emotions in and out of the saddle. This will help you build awareness, control, and mastery over your emotions before, during, and after riding. Each day builds on the last, giving you practical tools to strengthen your connection with your horse.

Day 1 - Emotional Awareness Check-In

Focus: Noticing your emotional state before and after riding.

Before your ride: Pause for 1 minute. Rate your emotion intensity from 0 (calm) to 10 (high).

Write down 1-2 emotion words.

After riding: Repeat and compare.

My rating before my ride: _____

My rating after my ride: _____

Key emotion words: _____

Notes: _____

Day 2 - Pre-Ride Reset

Focus: Setting your emotional tone before mounting.

Before your ride:

Take 3 deep breaths.

Visualize a connected, calm ride.

State an intention aloud.

My intention: _____

Visualization notes: _____

How I felt after reset: _____

Notes: _____

Day 3: Visualize your ride while grooming your horse

Focus: Connecting your breath and body to your horse's.

Before your ride:

Match your breathing to your horse's rhythm.

Adjust your body to stay loose.

Do two or three small stretches before you get one.

Do two or three small stretches with your horse before you get one.

Breath awareness notes: _____

Tension release moments: _____

Effect on horse: _____

Notes: _____

Day 4: Pause mid-ride to reset your body and mind

Focus: Regaining composure mid-ride when emotions shift.

As your riding:

Halt or walk on a loose rein.

Take 2-3 breaths.

Let your hips relax. Let your legs lengthen. Put weight into your heels.

Release any tension in your jaw by smiling a quick smile, in your shoulders by rolling your shoulders, or in your hands and wrists by making little circles with them.

Notice any trigger moment(s): _____

My reset action was: _____

What happened as a result: _____

Notes: _____

Day 5: Focus on gratitude for your horse and the ride

Focus: Strengthening positive associations.

Name 3 things you're grateful for.

Smile once during ride.

Write a 'golden moment' after ride.

Grateful for: 1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Golden moment: _____

My mood shift: _____

Notes: _____

Day 6: Use positive self-talk during your ride

Focus: Replacing unhelpful thoughts.

Notice negative thoughts.

Swap them for constructive alternatives.

Negative thought: _____

Positive replacement: _____

Impact on ride: _____

Notes: _____

Day 7: Reflect on your progress and set a new intention

Focus: Reviewing your week.

Read your notes from Days 1-6.

Circle your biggest wins.

Identify one recurring challenge and strategy.

What was your biggest win? _____

What was your main challenge? _____

My go-to strategy is: _____

Notes: _____

Rider Self-Assessment: Emotional Regulation & Performance

Section 1 – Pre-Ride Emotional Awareness

Rate each from 0 (Not at all) to 10 (Extremely):

1. Nervousness / anxiety level: ___ / 10
2. Confidence level: ___ / 10
3. Focus / clarity: ___ / 10
4. Physical tension (shoulders, jaw, hands): ___ / 10
5. Connection with horse before mounting: ___ / 10

Pre-Ride Notes:

Section 2 – In-the-Saddle Emotional Regulation

Check all that apply during your ride:

- I matched my breathing to my horse's rhythm.
- I noticed and released tension in my body.
- I stayed focused when things didn't go as planned.
- I used positive self-talk.
- I took a pause to reset when needed.

Emotional Peaks or Challenges in the Ride:

Section 3 – Post-Ride Reflection

Answer briefly:

My overall emotional state after riding: _____

One “golden moment” from this ride: _____

One challenge I want to work on next time: _____

Did my emotions impact my horse’s performance today? How? _____

Section 4- Tigger & Pattern Awareness

Fill in for moments of strong emotion:

Trigger / Situation	My Thought	My Feeling	My Action	Helpful? (Y/N)
Horse spooked	“I’m losing control”	Fear	Pulled reins sharply	Nope

Section 5 – Emotional Regulation Skills Rating

Circle the number that best matches your ability:

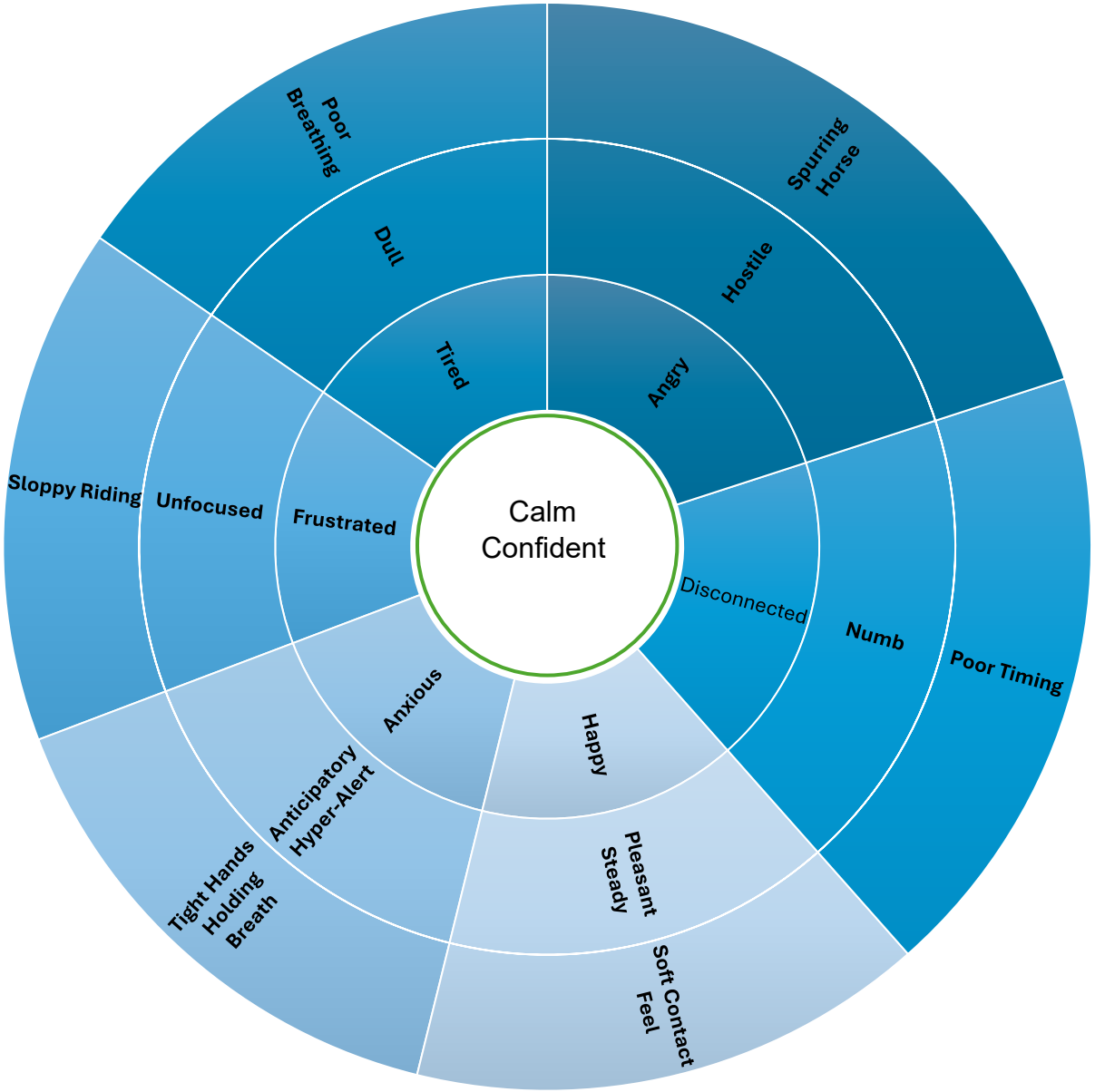
1 = Needs Work | 5 = Strong Skill

Skill	1	2	3	4	5
I can identify my emotions quickly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can calm myself before riding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can stay focused during challenges	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can reset quickly when emotions spike	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I reflect and learn from emotional experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section 6 – Rider Emotional Growth Goals

Set 1–2 emotional goals for your next week of riding:

Rider Feelings Wheel



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About the Author



Kristi Seymour, LPC, MBA, has been a licensed clinical therapist for more than 20 years, a sports performance coach, and a lifelong equestrian with over 50 years of riding experience in the show ring. She has competed in show jumping up to 1.45m and has her Bronze Medal in Dressage. Kristi is passionate about helping riders master their emotions, improve their performance and build stronger connections with their horses. She understands the challenges of rider and developed this guide and her app EquiMind to help all riders.