

# A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

## The Emotional Cycle of Change

By Yvonne Golding  
of equi-ability

**M**any of us who own, work, or play with horses, have high expectations of them. There's no good reason that my cob shouldn't do a basic dressage test, or my ex-racer shouldn't walk through a fly curtain, or my happy hacker shouldn't pop a course of show-jumps.

If we approach things in the right way, and our horse is physically capable, then all of the above is possible.

When we introduce new activities and experiences to our equine partners, we know that they will need us to teach them all about the new task we are asking them to take on. We plan an introduction and have bite-size steps to take us on the journey.

However, have you ever paused to consider how your own emotions alter when you approach something new? Probably not – and yet, how often do we hear the phrase “the horse is a mirror image of ourselves”?

Our emotions are inextricably linked with our horse, and how we feel impacts directly on how well placed our horse is to learn. Based on this, the better we know ourselves and are aware of our own emotional responses, the better we can support our horses in new ventures. We are less likely to block our equine partners by attributing a problem to them, when in fact it is our doing.

When humans embark on something new, there is a defined pattern of emotions that we all go through. There is an emotional journey for any change, which was identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in the 1960's. She compared levels of optimism felt over time. Almost all humans will experience this pattern, sometimes moving along the pattern quickly,

sometimes taking longer. Accepting and recognising it, is the key to success.

So, when we decide to start anything new, it is really exciting and we feel positive, although we probably don't know very much about it all yet. This is Uninformed Optimism.

Then as we start to introduce it to the horse, we realise that maybe there is more to our new venture than we realised, and our partner isn't taking to it like a duck to water. Maybe we don't quite have enough information to overcome the issues, and just at the time when our horse is not quite getting it, we realise that we are not fully prepared and it's all more complicated than we thought. Exactly when our horse most needs us to be confident, clear and positive, our own emotions take us downhill. We call this Informed Pessimism.

Here a potential downward spiral can start, where our disappointment or worry means that we are not being a good partner in helping our horse to learn. When it seems that everything goes wrong, that's the Pit of Doom. It's at this point that we may well decide

to give it all up and go back to doing what we have always done.

But even in the Pit, it is not all doom and gloom. We need to persist and get some additional support. Reach a bit more, or find someone with experience to guide us. Even just have someone tell us that we are doing everything right, and then we will overcome a couple of the small problems that have arisen. You can call this stage Hopeful Realism.

As we increase our own expertise and understanding, we gather the tools we need to deal with more of what we are facing, independently. We now reach Informed Optimism. Ultimately with this persistence, support and increased knowledge we reach our goal of Rewarding Completion.

Being aware of your emotional response means that not only are you ready for your low moments, but you can accept them more readily. You can deal with them and move through quickly, to a point where you can support your horse in their new task, just as they most need you. Ignoring it may mean that your horse gets a double-whammy of negativity:



# The Emotional Cycle of Change

a) from not getting what you asked for and b) mirroring your negative emotional response.

The Emotional Cycle of Change can be seen clearly when you have a new horse. Everything is exciting, and you feel extremely positive, but you don't really know each other. Then the relationship becomes more complex as you get to understand your new partner's character, and they get to know you. They will probably also be dealing with a new herd and different surroundings.

It is at this point that some new horse owners decide that they are not suited and send them back, but it is worth remembering that with appropriate support and guidance, you are likely to move through this patch, creating a trusting bond.

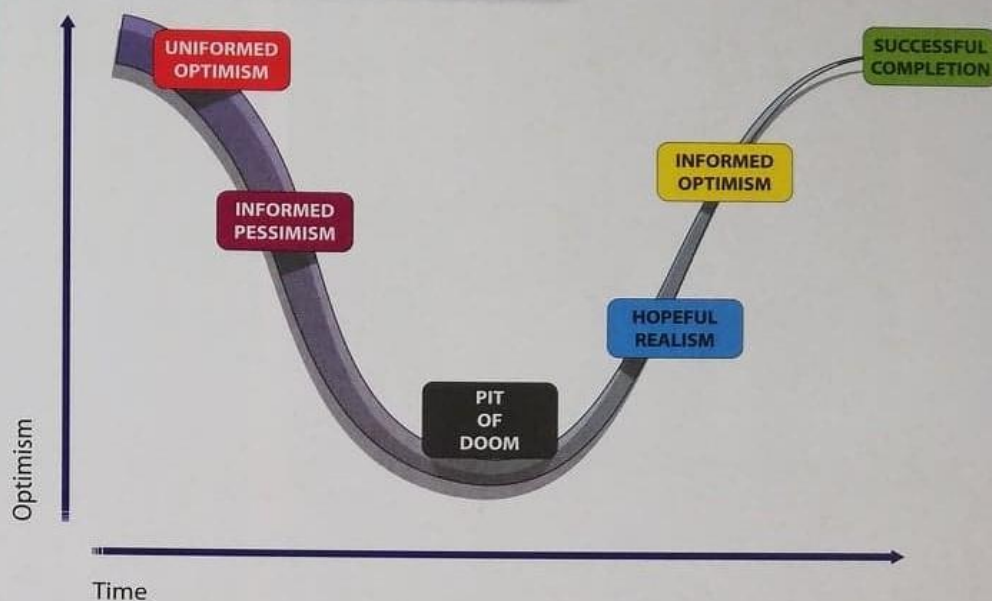
Your emotions may even roller-coaster along the cycle and that is normal too - you just need to be aware and acknowledge the changes of mood that you feel, whilst remaining as consistent with your horse as you possibly can.

Developing and improving your relationship with your horse can sometimes be an unsteady journey with good days and not so good days, even changing from one minute to the next. The support that works for you depends on the resources you have around you and the situation you are facing. It could vary from a cup of tea with a friend, to a structured course of lessons with a qualified expert in the field.

So, remember that when you embark on anything new with your horse, your own emotional highs and lows are to be expected and should be accepted. Be honest with yourself and others about the "downs" and don't be afraid to ask for help.

However, most importantly, please recognise this pattern in others and offer your support. It could be your word of recognition or understanding that creates the impetus towards success. You don't have to be an expert to help someone else, just be there for them when they need it.

Keep that mirror handy, we should have a constant eye on it, and if we ever forget, then our horse will remind us!



## THE STAGES OF THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF CHANGE

- 1 **Uninformed Optimism** – At the start everything is exciting, don't know much about it but it looks great. I'm sure we can do this.
- 2 **Informed Pessimism** – At this stage we are starting to understand that it is all a bit more complicated than we thought. Problems surface and we may hit a brick wall. Why are we even bothering to do this? Starting to doubt our capability.
- 3 **Pit of Doom** – When we get here everything is all just too difficult. I don't know what I am doing or how to make things right. We'll never get there. We might as well just stop.
- 4 **Hopeful Realism** – This is the turning point where we have overcome some problems and with the support I have, I believe that I can sort any others. A sense of achievement and possibility. I think we might just make it...fingers crossed.
- 5 **Informed Optimism** – Now our positive outlook grows and we have a fresh burst of energy. We can see our way to the finish line. Problems? What problems? Bring them on – I have the tools!
- 6 **Successful Completion** – Task or project is complete – Success!

Equi-ability is an online activity based training programme designed to help you develop a deeper and more harmonious relationship with your horse. Our approach provides expert advice and instruction which can be applied to suit your ability, expertise and riding or groundwork time, and match the capabilities and temperament of your horse. Equi-ability provides online support with graded challenges to give objective feedback, constructive advice and the ability to monitor your progress. It's everything you need to create the perfect horse and rider partnership.

www.equi-ability.co.uk  
 Facebook: Equi-ability  
 equiability1@gmail.com