

From Bombproof to Chicken

My horse used to be calm and quiet, but now he spooks at everything!

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Q: I am a very timid adult rider. Last year I bought a bombproof trail horse. At first he was extremely brave and quiet. But over time he started spooking. Now he'll refuse to go past anything that looks a little bit odd. My friends tell me to push him forward, but I'm scared of what he might do because I've been dumped before. I'm afraid to ride by myself or away from home. Why did my horse change? How can I make him brave again?

A: As you've come to realize, a horse depends on its rider for leadership and direction. Since your timid approach to riding prevents you from assuming that role, your horse has lost his own courage. Over time, your horse has begun to think, "Wait a second. If she's scared, maybe I should be worried, too."

From your horse's viewpoint, there's a big payoff for this behavior. He gets to stay home or, if he does venture out, it's only with his buddies. On top of that, your reluctance to take your friends' advice and push him forward past scary objects—for fear he'll buck, bolt or spin around—only reinforces his behavior. If he balks at going past something remotely suspicious you do nothing. Now he's in control of the ride, not you.

It's time for your horse to have some schooling sessions with a confident, forward-thinking rider. Beware of someone whose technique is nothing more than beating your horse down the trail. Instead, enlist the services of a professional who understands your dilemma and is willing to work with both you and your horse. Since your horse was "bombproof" when you bought him, he should return to his former self with a short series of good rides. Yet that's not enough to fix this problem. You have to also undergo some training, preferably on a trusty school horse. This is your opportunity to master using your seat and aids to communicate effectively with your horse. Eventually your instructor will put you back on your horse and teach you as a team. When your horse balks, he or she will be there, giving you tips on how to ride like the leader you need to be.

--Cindy Hale

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