

Ready, steady HACK

Whether the very thought of a hack puts you in a panic, or going for fast rides seems beyond your capabilities, sports psychologist, Debbie Percy can help. Let her convince you that you can do anything!

Hacking is as much a part of the horse and rider partnership as strawberries are at Wimbledon. Let's be honest, we all love it – the freedom, the space, the sense of man and beast being one. Hacking, there is nothing like it! Except, of course, when the thought of a hack leaves you trembling because your horse likes to demonstrate his near-perfect ability to turn about face and head for home faster than Red Rum.

Everyone can be confident on a hack. It's a question of putting our minds to work. Remember the saying 'there isn't anything we can't do, if we put our minds to it'? Well, confident hacking is just one of those things. Put your mind to it, and you and your horse can be confident and safe.

Guide to safe hacking

Read on to find out how to have a confident hack. Not every option will suit every rider, so the real trick is to try them out – maybe all of them, maybe just one or two – and wait and see what happens. The key is to start and to practise...

H&R's top tip...

Avoid hacking out with people who have nervous or excitable horses. This won't help you at all.

1 Saying no

As children, one of the first words we learn to say is 'no'. As we grow older and get buried beneath the pressure of other people's expectations, we often find this simple word hard to say. We find ourselves agreeing to join others on a hack or say yes to a canter when we don't feel ready.

Your body may give you a signal that you aren't ready – clammy hands, dry throat or butterflies in your tummy. Listen to your body, and if it doesn't feel right, don't do it! Say no. Explain why if you want to, but be clear that your mind won't be changed.



Say no if you don't want to canter

2 Belts and braces

Good preparation is important if you want to be safe and confident on your hack. This helps to remove any potential – and avoidable – stresses. We often worry that we forgot our mobile phone or it's got a flat battery. Or maybe we forgot to put on a neck strap, or came out without

our rubber reins or martingale – all of these are potential stress points. If you mount up or ride out and hear a voice in your head saying, 'I should have put the martingale on' or 'If I had shortened my stirrups, we could canter', these are voices you need to pay attention to – address them now if you can. Stop and shorten your stirrups

or better still, turn back for home and put your horse's martingale on. Next time, remember to do them as you are getting ready to go. Our instinct (the voice in our head or the feeling in our stomach) is there to help protect us and keep us safe, so it's really important that you don't ignore it. Think ahead and be ready to enjoy your hack by being prepared!



3 Mind over matter

Visualisation is common in many sporting disciplines. Athletes speak of improved technical skills or reduced nerves due to visualisation, and it can work for you, too.

Children use their imagination freely and even though we may no longer be children, we can freely use ours, too. To visualise, conjure up a picture in your mind. For instance, when asked to think of our front door, most of us will see it clearly – its colour, shape, where the letter box is, etc. This is simple visualisation.

Using this technique can influence how you feel about hacking out. Let's assume you want to enjoy hacking more, so you create a picture in your mind of yourself looking relaxed and happy, doing the things you want to be doing and enjoying them – cantering, or popping over a small fence, for example. Include strong pictures of yourself laughing, smiling and planning another hack out.

The key to successful visualisation is to have fun and use positive senses. Make the colours vivid, the sounds crisp and the feelings real, then practise! Repeat the picture in your head days before your hack and days after it. Practice helps the mind accept this new picture as a valid memory to combat more negative ones.



4 Expect the unexpected

Having practised visualising your confident hack, now you need to visualise a confident hack that includes a reality check. Horses can be unpredictable and so despite our riding skills, preparation and powers of positive imagination, he may still spook at that bin bag in the ditch, so include a bin-bag spook in your visualisation.

Take the time to see yourself going down the bridleway, smiling, relaxed and in control. Along the way, throw in a challenge – that family of ducks on the puddle ahead of you, the traffic cone in the hedgerow, or the wood pigeon that flies out in front of you. In your mind's eye, see yourself handling each of these confidently. See yourself remaining calm, with hands low and relaxed. And just as important, see how calm and quiet your horse is, too.



Horses can be unpredictable, but it doesn't mean anything bad will happen

H&R's top tip...
Singing to yourself can help you to relax. Give your choice of song some thought, and pick one that makes you feel relaxed and calm, maybe with a strong beat that keeps your horse in a nice rhythm.

How does visualisation work?

It works by creating a muscle memory in your body so your body knows how to be in a certain situation. When that wood pigeon does fly out in front of you, in your mind you have already experienced what to do, and so your body reacts instinctively and will do whatever you have trained it to do in your visualisation.

But what do you do if your horse tends to spook, you lose a stirrup and panic? How can visualisation help? The following routine helped a client to re-train herself to better handle this exact concern. Sitting quietly, before she rode out she would see herself having a happy, enjoyable hack. She then created the stirrup incident and saw herself doing the following...

- The incident occurs
- She looks up ahead and her

- eyes feel soft and relaxed
- She sits up tall on both her seat bones
- She hears herself saying calmly, 'Breathe' and 'Relax'
- She exhales
- She thinks about the next downward transition

H&R's top tip...

If your horse is a bit fresh, lunge him for a short while before hacking, to take the edge off him.

- She sees her horse walk on quietly, her stirrup returns to her foot, and then she continues happily on her ride, smiling all the way!

This routine was eventually shortened to just key words: Soft, Bones, Relax, Down, Smile!

This gave this nervous hacker some very memorable triggers to focus upon whenever she thought about hacking, whether she was at home, at work or even in the shower – and whilst hacking.

Goal setting

If you have a particular goal to achieve out hacking, maybe the courage to canter, then spend time during the days before you go out, visualising yourself doing the very thing you want to do. Play over and over in your mind strong images of you enjoying the canter, see yourself ask for the canter and it happen, see yourself smile, and focus on asking for the trot at the end and calmly getting it. The more you see what you want, the more you'll expect to get it (see 'Memories matter').

When visualising, it is important to make up a routine that works for you and focus on what you DO want and NOT on what you DON'T want – be sure to keep it simple.

In general, while out hacking, if you start to worry about your horse spooking at an object close by, try to do the following five actions...

- 1 Always look beyond the object NOT at it
- 2 Keep your mind busy by thinking useful thoughts such as 'relax, breath, smile'
- 3 Keep your hands and arms down and low
- 4 Talk. Say a nursery rhyme out loud or talk to your friend to keep you breathing
- 5 Using your imagination, see yourself passing by safely and without difficulty, smiling and calm.

Memories matter

We spend a lot of time recalling and remembering events, people, names, faces and experiences. The stronger the memory, the more noticeable its impact on our feelings and body. We can literally recreate how it felt, tasted and smelt. We can feel the clammy palms or tightness in our chest – our memories can make us smile, laugh, be tearful or feel afraid or angry.

Memories can improve our chances of a confident hack, if we choose which ones we pay attention to. Our minds use the law of attraction, which means you get back what you put out. Focus on when your horse has made you afraid or anxious and you're more likely to find yourself in situations that re-create those emotions.

Let's put this into practice. For a few minutes, stop reading this article and write down at least five short answers to this question (answer it honestly and without censorship). "When I'm out hacking, I expect"

Depending on your prior hacking experiences, you'll probably 'see' some of those experiences on your list. If your hacks often copy the expectations on your list, it is because you are expecting them to happen. If you believe your horse will spook at a plastic bag then if you see one, you'll hear yourself say, 'He'll never go past that'. You'll brace and get set for the spook. Your tension tells your horse that he should be worried, he'll oblige

Add a reality check into your safe hack, and see yourself coping with a difficult situation



When visualising, focus on what you do want and not on what you don't want – and keep it simple



Ready, steady hack

and you'll say, 'I knew it' or get cross!

Tip number one: Memories matter teaches us to select the good memories – moments where you were relaxed, your horse was calm and you had fun. Create this memory over and over again.

Tip number two: Memories matter teaches us to work with the positive memories in detail by replaying them often – the sunlight, the air, the rhythm of the canter, for example.

We can break old habits and form new ones quickly through visualisation. It is safe, doesn't need expert tuition and can be done almost anywhere.

Confident hacking really is within everyone's grasp if you make positive choices. You can choose to hang on to the painful, scary memories of a bad hack, re-live them and literally re-live them out hacking, or you can choose new memories of safe, fun, confident hacks. Make these a reality and confident hacking can be yours.

For more information

To book a coaching session with Debbie Percy, contact her on ☎ 0771 325 2104 or email: info@jigsawequine.com



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