



# Grief in the Saddle: Navigating Loss in the Life of a Professional Horse Trainer

*Laura King CHT, NLP, Life & Performance Coach*

Riding instructors wear so many hats they can sometimes feel like a multi-headed character straight Every rider knows that not every ride ends with a perfectly square halt, a fault-free

finish or a blue ribbon. Some days, the horse spooks. The distance is off. A flapping tarp or a loose dog steals your horse's focus. These are the everyday frustrations we learn to shake off.

But then there are moments when the setback cuts deeper—when it's not just the ride that goes off course, but the rider's heart. That's when we meet something far harder to sit: grief.

Grief isn't limited to the death of a family member or dear friend, though that is often its most recognizable form. For equestrians and trainers—whose lives revolve around deeply personal bonds with horses, clients, animals and an ever-shifting community—grief comes in many forms. The sudden loss of a treasured horse, a long-time student moving away, a barn closing or the unfulfilled dreams of a carefully planned show season can hit like an unexpected buck in the middle of a collected canter.

It may even creep in through something seemingly removed from the ring, like the political landscape or global news. We're human first, and even the most stoic trainer can feel grief in the breakdown of values or the chaos of a world that seems out of control. Whatever the source, grief arrives eventually—for all of us. The question is not *if*, but *how* we ride through it.

## The Many Faces of Grief

You don't need to be in mourning to feel grief. It can show up when a beloved client moves on, when a loyal working student gives up riding, or when your heart horse crosses the rainbow bridge. You might even grieve an earlier version of yourself—the one who believed the barn would always feel like home or the one who once rode fearlessly at dawn.

In the horse world, we're taught to toughen up, to sit deep in the saddle no matter what's thrown at us. But grief? It demands the opposite. It asks us to soften. To yield. To sit still.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are familiar trail markers, but they're not a linear path. You might gallop through one, then suddenly find yourself walking back to another. That's OK. Grief doesn't ride a clean course; it bucks, bolts and sometimes refuses the jump altogether.

asks for stillness. And in that stillness, it begins to loosen its grip.

Resisting grief—trying to power through or distract yourself—only delays the healing. Think of it like working against your horse's natural movement. You get farther, and with less injury, when you move with it.

## Building a Grief Toolbox

While grief must be felt, there are ways to support yourself along the way. Here are some tools anyone can add to their tack trunk of emotional resilience:

### 1. Hypnosis and Meditation

Just like we use mental visualization and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) before we go in the ring, hypnosis helps the mind settle and refocus. You can learn more about NLP in many of my articles and my books, including this past article in the 2022 Aria winter issue [www.laurakinghypnosis.com/let-me-help-you-boost-your-emotional-intelligence-to-uncover-your-and-your-students-best-aria-article-winter-2022](http://www.laurakinghypnosis.com/let-me-help-you-boost-your-emotional-intelligence-to-uncover-your-and-your-students-best-aria-article-winter-2022). In addition, listening to a calming voice guide you through breathing and release can help quiet the anxiety that often accompanies grief. I'm offering you a free MP3, titled "Grieving & Loss," to help you find your way through the pain at <https://www.laurakinghypnosis.com/product/grievingloss/>. Listening to it morning and evening can be grounding while offering a kind of daily turnout for your soul.

### 2. Journaling

Writing down your thoughts is like long lining your mind. You can work out what's tangled, find the rhythm of your emotions, and give voice to things you might not want to say out loud. Write letters to what you've lost—a horse, a client, a partner—and let it out without judgment.

### 3. Creative Rituals

Create a small ritual for remembrance. Maybe it's braiding a ribbon into your horse's mane, placing a cherished photo in the tack room, or

## Holding the Reins Loosely: Allowing the Grief to Move

The most important thing you can do, whether you're mourning a person, a horse or the life you thought you'd have, is to allow yourself to *feel*. Sit with your emotions the way you'd sit with a young horse who's trembling in the crosssties. You don't rush it. You don't scold. You offer space. You breathe.

It can feel counterintuitive for those of us who are always doing—feeding, riding, teaching, mucking, planning. But grief doesn't respond to busywork. It

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planting something near the barn. These gestures don't need to be grand; they just need to feel personal and sincere.

#### 4. Forgiveness

Grief often brings guilt. Maybe you weren't there when your horse had colic. Maybe you said the wrong thing at the wrong time. Maybe you just feel you could have done more. You must remember you did your best with the information and capacity you had in that moment. Forgiveness takes time, balance and intention.

#### 5. Environmental Shifts

Sometimes, the barn or home becomes a museum of memories. It's okay to change the scenery. Box up keepsakes. Put up a new photo. Rearranging your physical space helps your emotional energy flow forward. Keep one memento if it comforts you—but don't feel obligated to keep everything in plain sight. You're not erasing the past; you're making room for the present.

#### Decision-Making While Grieving

It's important to be aware that grief clouds judgment. Avoid big decisions, especially late in the day when cortisol levels are high and patience is low. If you *must* make a decision (such as rehoming a horse, closing a barn or moving a client), do it in the morning and surround yourself with support. Your future self will thank you.

#### The Ride Forward

Even though the physical presence of what or who you lost is gone, the relationship isn't. That horse who taught you everything, that student who made you laugh every lesson, that colleague who always knew the right thing to say—they live on in the muscles they helped you build, the memories you carry, the way you show up for the next ride.

This journey through grief is about completing that emotional relationship. It's not about forgetting; it's about unhooking from the pain without losing the love.



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## From Grief to Growth

There is wisdom in every loss, even if we can't see it right away. What has this grief taught you? Are you more patient? More present? Has it changed how you relate to your horses? Your clients? Your family? Yourself?

Let it teach you. Let it shape you, but not harden you.

As trainers, you're not just sculptors of movement. You are keepers of dreams, stewards of strength, and sometimes — quietly — you are healers too. By honoring our own grief, we show others how to do the same. And in the process, we can deepen our humanity and horsemanship.

## Permission to Live

Perhaps the most powerful reminder is this: *you are still alive*. You still get to watch the sun rise through the morning mist in the arena. You still get to feel the breath of a horse against your cheek. You still get to ride.

Life is not only a gift—it's *your* gift. Accept it. Cherish it. Live it.

Give yourself permission to feel joy again. Not because you're forgetting who or what you lost—but because you're honoring them with a life well-lived. Let grief ride beside you sometimes, but don't let it hold the reins forever.

## Final Thought

You spend your lives training horses to trust.

To walk into scary corners. To stretch and carry themselves with grace. You owe yourself the same compassion. Grief is just another training challenge—one that requires patience and presence.

May you ride through it with courage.

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Image of hay bales in a barn.



### About the author:

**Laura King** is the Director and Founder of Summit Hypnosis and Wellness and is a Certified Hypnotist, NLP Practitioner, Life Coach, and Sports Performance Coach. Laura has written and published several books and workbooks, including "Power To Win" for equestrians and "Perfect Enough," a guide to help you evaluate your perceptions and experiences around vital areas of your life.