

OUR EXPERT PANEL



JENNIFER TAYLOR

Jennifer is a qualified physiotherapist and treats elite human athletes – including riders – as well as horses. She has a BSc (Hons) in

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JUSTINE HARRISON

Justine is a certified equine behaviourist who applies the science of behaviour and learning to help owners solve a wide range of

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Overcoming anxiety

Q I've had some time off from riding due to a fall which left me with a nasty injury. I'm now quite nervous and I'm worried my anxiety is affecting my horse. Can horses sense if their rider is scared and if so, how can I learn to stay calm?

Name and address withheld

JUSTINE SAYS Research has shown that horses can be affected by humans' anxiety. If a rider is nervous, the horse may pick up on this and become anxious themselves.

When a rider feels nervous, their breathing will be faster and shallower, their heart rate will increase and muscles will tense. They may be more reactive and jumpy than usual, and move differently than when they are relaxed.

For example, riders often tense up and lean forward, holding their legs tighter

against the horse's side, which may be seen as an instruction to 'go'. The horse is being encouraged to speed up, which in turn may increase the rider's anxiety.

Build your confidence by going at your own pace and doing only what you feel comfortable with. Be prepared for what you are going to do with your horse – plan your rides, stay safe, always have calm company (both equine and human) and don't do something new until you feel more confident.

Visualisation is a really useful technique used by athletes to improve performance. Create a picture in your mind of your perfect ride, in as much detail as you can – visualise what you will wear and where you will go, and most importantly how relaxed you and your horse are and how much you're enjoying it!

Repeat the image in your mind for short sessions every day, before and after you ride. This will help to break your old nervous habits and create more positive ones.

Other tips to improve your confidence are:-

- Stay calm – think relaxed and positive.
- Breathe deeply and talk or sing slowly to your horse, which can help calm your nerves.
- Always hack out in calm, sensible company until you and your horse are confident.
- Tell your riding buddy in advance if you don't want to trot or canter.
- Don't feel pressured by others who think you should be progressing faster.
- Keep your hands low and reins soft.
- Make sure your horse can stop, turn, walk, trot and canter in a safe area, both alone or with other horses. Practise in either a field or arena before considering hacking out.
- Don't hack out with people who have spooky or excitable horses

Breathe and enjoy the ride!

If you feel nervous, it can make your horse anxious, too



Ride out with a friend on a sensible horse to boost your confidence

JEN SAYS Performance anxiety is experienced by many riders pre-competition. For some, the butterflies they feel in their stomach or the feel of their heart pounding in their chest makes them feel alert, energised and ready.

For others, anxiety signals a problem – they feel unable to breathe, their muscles tighten and they struggle to focus. Most of us are somewhere in between, depending on the situation and environment.

Anxiety in any sport can have a big impact on performance, however it is even more critical in equestrian disciplines where the rider's physical and mental state will have a huge influence upon the horse.

Physical signs of stress can include an increased heart and breathing rate, muscle tension, sweating and even trembling.

Cognitive symptoms can include fear, poor concentration, loss of confidence and defeatist self talk.

Evidence has shown that in these situations, athletes focus on technique orientated goals (for example, keeping heels down) rather than their overall achievement goal (having a secure and effective leg position), which can cause a significant decrease in performance.

All the above signs and symptoms can have a big effect on your posture, position,

precision of aids and ability to keep the horse calm during the activity.

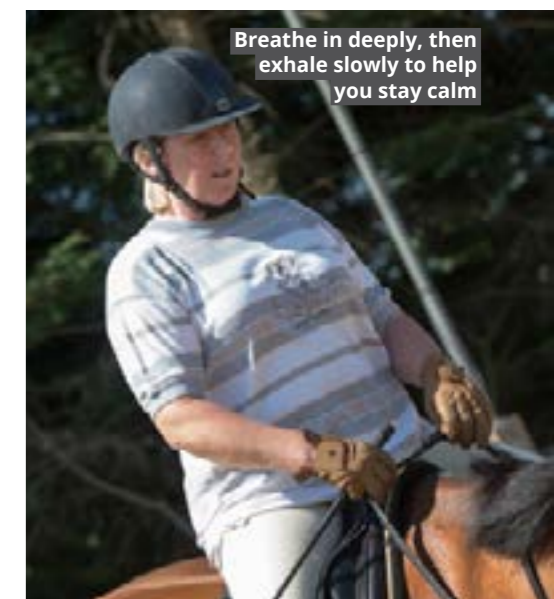
For some people, once they experience these feelings and associate them with a poor result, it is hard not to dwell on them, and so begins a vicious circle.

Steps to try and help reduce this performance anxiety include:-

- Focus on the outcome, not the mechanics. For example, imagine giving the correct aid rather than focusing on a specific muscle action or movement.
- Block out any negative feelings – distract yourself by thinking of something positive, or by singing a song.
- Visualise yourself successfully performing, like you do when training at home.
- Think of positive goals not negative ones, such as having a clear round rather than not wanting to knock any poles down
- Have graded exposure to different situations so you can learn to manage your anxiety in less stressful situations. So, ride mock dressage tests at the yard, or use a bell when starting to jump.
- Try taking a few deep abdominal breaths (so your stomach expands as you breathe in), then as you inhale shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and slowly lower them down.

● Try tightening and then relaxing your grip, to help release tension. As well as doing this with your hands, you can move your legs forward and back, or up and down.

Overall, you have to accept that some nerves are a part of any sport. However, by trying some of the techniques listed here, you can turn things around and use your nerves to have a positive impact on your riding and competition performance. ■



Breathe in deeply, then exhale slowly to help you stay calm