

# All eyes on you

Riding in front of an audience can be daunting for many riders, but there are ways you can overcome your nerves. **Jennie Hughes** investigates how you can ride with confidence under pressure

**F**ear of public speaking is often listed as one of the most common phobias. And riding in front of other people can provoke many of the same reactions. You are putting yourself on show and standing out to be judged on your performance.

Entering the arena for a dressage test or show jumping round, or even schooling at home with the yard gossips watching your every move, can invoke the same stomach-churning anxiety as giving a presentation to a room full of people.

The adrenaline kicks in: you feel your heart racing, your mouth goes dry, and you struggle to catch your breath. You count all the people watching you, and images of what could go wrong flash before your eyes. Suddenly the moment isn't about performing to the best of your ability, but simply surviving long enough to get out of there.

"I feel so self-conscious when people are watching me ride," says Ann Lawrence from Kent. "I panic and tense up, and I know my anxiety must be transmitting to my horse, but I feel powerless to stop it."

## The adrenaline rush

According to confidence coach and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) trainer Jo Cooper, most people will experience some kind of "performance feeling" when competing or riding in front of others, and this is perfectly natural. But Jo says it could be helping you do better.

Classical trainer and fellow NLP practitioner Emily Jane Baker agrees: "Nerves can be helpful, as they release adrenaline which gives extra energy and focus - but it must be channelled correctly. If not, nervousness can turn into anxiety."

"It is similar to stage fright in actors," she continues. "Except when horse riding there is the addition of a living animal - and the fear felt by the rider can in turn affect the horse's confidence."

While we all have our strengths and weaknesses, which the majority of us are well aware of, riding should be fun. We devote far too much time and money to our horses to allow critics to ruin our enjoyment. So why does the presence of an audience turn us into quivering wrecks?

"Just as the symptoms of anxiety tend to be slightly different for each person, the cause could be a host of different things," explains Jo. "For some riders it is a lack of self-confidence, or a feeling of not wanting to draw attention to themselves. A person may have been criticised harshly in the past, and they still hear that comment playing in their mind."



*“A comment can still be hurtful even if you don’t respect the person making it”*

“For others it may be a feeling of not wanting to let their horse down, especially if they have a talented horse, or pressure from trainers to succeed,” she adds.

**Negative distractions**

It is often easier to ride in front of strangers than people you know. Picture this scenario. You’re schooling your horse happily in the arena, when the livery yard gossips meander over to lean on the fence.

They cast disparaging glances in your direction and you hear snatches of their conversation: “Behind the vertical... unstable lower leg...” Although you are fully aware that Bitchy Brenda wouldn’t know a correct leg yield if it jumped up and bit her, paranoia and doubts creep in.

“A comment can still hurt even if you don’t respect the person making it,” says Jo.

“Often it is the way an opinion is expressed that resonates and affects confidence. Livery yard bitching is a prime example.”

The trouble comes, explains Jo, when the rider becomes detached from the situation. “The internal dialogue of anxiety takes their attention away from what they are doing,” she says.

“The mind and body are both part of the same system,” she continues. “The way you think will automatically affect your body. If you are anxious, your body will become more rigid, and your horse will pick up on the tension. The situation then spirals.”

Emily gives the example of a show jumping round. “If the rider is distracted by thoughts of being watched by others then their attention is drawn away from the horse and this is when a refusal or knock-down is more likely to happen.”

**BREATHE EASY**

Jo Cooper, a confidence coach and neuro-linguistic programming trainer, suggests the following exercises to help you relax when nerves strike.

- Before you get on your horse, start to breathe deeply and feel as though you are filling your whole body with air during every breath you take.
- Once onboard, count the horse’s strides for each of your breaths. For example, breathe in for three strides, and then out again for three strides.
- Try to visualise each breath as it is taken in and feel it going right to the base of your lungs or into the pit of your stomach.

**Build your confidence**

Actors with stage fright are traditionally advised to imagine the audience in their underwear. However, we would counsel against this visual image with certain members of the horse world! So what can you do to cope?

It’s all about mental boundaries, says Jo. “A nervous rider will feel a boundary around themselves, so they are sitting on the horse rather than ‘with’ the horse. A confident rider, in contrast, will feel the boundary around themselves and the horse, so they are working together.”

A supportive instructor can make a big difference, Jo explains. “More sensitive people will benefit from a trainer who boosts their confidence. Not in an artificial way, but by showing them what they do well and how they can improve their



Do you suffer from nerves when people watch you ride?

riding, so that they aren’t constantly focusing on the negatives.”

It is also important to remember that you are learning all the time. Videoing your training can help. If you look back on a video of you and your horse from a year ago, you are bound to see improvements.

Concentrate on your own progression rather than comparing yourself to other people at your yard or competitions.

**Coping strategies**

When you are in a stressful situation, there are various ways in which you can re-gain your focus.

“Rescue Remedy and other herbal remedies can help to calm the nerves,” says Emily. “But the quickest, most effective way of changing how you feel is altering your breathing. It instantly affects your mental, physical and emotional state.”

Jo also recommends focusing on your breathing. “When someone is nervous they tend to hold their breath and then breathe



rapidly and high in the chest,” she explains. “Just being conscious of breathing in and out will help to prevent this, as well as providing some distraction from the nerves.”

There are a number of breathing exercises you can try (see box, above left). Practise these whenever you ride, not just when you are in a situation where you might get anxious, and they will become an automatic way of helping you to calm down and control your nerves.

The important thing to remember in all this is that you are not alone with your concerns. “Each and every one of us has something that we are fearful about,” says Emily. “The key is to find a suitable method of managing these fears to help increase our performance.”

**CONTACTS**

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**BEATING STAGE FRIGHT**

**MENTAL REHEARSAL**

Prepare yourself mentally by visualising your ride, whether it is a show jumping round or a schooling session. “Imagine a perfect performance vividly in your mind,” advises Jo. “Think about what you can see, hear and feel. Include areas where you need to pay specific attention to ensure things go well.”

**CHANGE THE IMAGE**

If you have an image in your mind of what could go wrong, for example by-standers criticising your riding, work on changing this. “If it is a moving image, like a video, try playing it slowly in your mind, perhaps in black and white or in a very narrow frame. Then very quickly, play the movie backwards several times,” advises Jo.

“You need to unlock the pattern so the scary image isn’t held in your mind. If it is a photo, change the content of the image.” For example, you could imagine the yard gossips wearing silly hats and speaking in strange voices. “You can also change the qualities of the image,” continues Jo. “Shrink it in size, fade the colour, or imagine rolling it into a ball and throwing it away.”

**SING A SONG**

Think of a favourite song that makes you feel happy or makes you laugh. Singing this to yourself while riding will help you to focus and control your breathing.

**DRINK PLENTY OF WATER**

Dehydration can negatively affect your body and make you more anxious.

**THINK OF A RIDER YOU ADMIRE**

Picture one of your favourite riders competing, and performing well, in front of a big crowd. Imagine you are that rider and how it feels to ride with their style and confidence.



**IN THE SPOTLIGHT**

Horse reader Pamela Shipley has been very successful in the show-ring with her Cleveland Bay gelding Barbarian Buccaneer (‘Buck’), but she suffers from a fear of being watched and ‘ringside judged’.

“I came back to riding after a break of 23 years,” Pamela explains. “At my first local show I completely froze in the ring. I remember watching everyone give wonderful individual shows, but when it came to my turn all I could do was trot a circle with tears streaming down my face. I felt that everyone was laughing at me.”

“I contacted Jo Cooper, who helped me develop some coping strategies for when I felt

under pressure. At the next show I was barely aware of anyone watching me.

“I bought Buck last year to bring on, and we perform well at the shows where I think no one is watching. We came fourth at Lincoln County Show and I was told by a top producer that I had ridden him superbly at the Royal Show, yet at the next local show I fell apart because people who know me were watching.

“I find a lesson the day before from my instructor is invaluable, as I go into the ring remembering everything from the lesson and blank the rest out. I am determined to conquer these fears once and for all.”

