

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

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If you are a dressage competitor you are probably familiar with the tingling nerves and fluttering butterflies that can accompany a competitive performance. In the best of circumstances the body produces a hormonal and chemical cocktail that can allow you to achieve a state of energy, enjoyment and flow. However sometimes we can get too excited. This excessive tension can have a devastating effect on performance, leaving the rider feeling weak, uncoordinated and forgetful. Performance anxiety is a complex subject that can have an effect from dressage competition, to school exams, or even between the bed sheets!

There are two types of performance anxiety. The first type is mental fear, or the fear of performing badly. The second type is physical fear, or the fear of physical injury. If you have physical fear due to a past trauma or injury, I strongly suggest you seek help from a patient riding instructor, or even a psychotherapist.

If your performance anxiety is mental more than physical, there are many helpful techniques. There are two basic approaches to working with performance anxiety. The first approach is to learn to decrease your anxiety. The second approach is to accept that anxiety, or intensity, is a part of competition, and develop ways to use that intensity to your advantage.

DECREASING ANXIETY

- Create a Relaxation Reflex: Take a single deep, cleansing breath. Smile inwardly and intentionally relax at least one set of muscles. Repeat this many times each day. Your body will start to learn to relax with a single deep breath. This can be used any time while you are riding.
- If you have the time then find more extensive relaxation training. Yoga, meditation, and biofeedback can all provide powerful training to deal with anxiety.
- Exercise before you ride. I had one client who would go for a three mile run before each competition.
- Prepare, prepare, prepare. The more competent and prepared you feel, the less nervous you will feel.
- Use images. Imagine the butterflies in your stomach flying in formation. Use any image that works for you.

PERFORMING WELL DESPITE ANXIETY

- Develop toughness by staying physically fit and practicing your mental focus long before competition day. We will discuss this more in the upcoming article on focus and concentration.
- Focus on those things that are under your control. The judge's opinion of your performance is not under your control, nor are your competitors. Stay in the moment or precious points can be lost due to distraction.

- Practice performing under pressure. Have a friend watch you ride a test. Go to competitions regularly. Practice visualizing while you exercise (more on this later), so that your brain learns to keep functioning even when under stress.
- Be gentle with yourself. We all make mistakes. I remember coming out of a test where I'd gone off course. "God I'm an idiot!" I exclaimed, "I am so stupid!" A dear friend of mine who was standing nearby spun around and glared at me. "Stop that" she said, "you're talking badly about my friend!"

These are just a few ideas about a very complex topic. Remember, if you have any specific concerns you would like me to address in this article you can contact me at seanaadamson.com.