

## WARM UP ARENA ANXIETY

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**Question:** I am a young adult amateur that considers the warm-up arena to be a death trap most weekends. I've had several bad experiences, and now find myself getting more and more nervous about the warm-up arena. Do you have any suggestions?

**Answer:** In competition there are always variables that are out of the rider's control. The condition of the warm-up arena is one of these variables. Fortunately there are a few strategies you can develop. First I will give you a few ideas on dealing with the warm-up arena, next you will find a few strategies for working through your anxiety.

1. Have a plan for your warm-up. Distract your mind from anxiety by focusing on exactly what you want to accomplish. Ride through your plan at home to make sure it works. Make your plan specific, but be flexible if your horse's needs change. A typical warm-up schedule may look something like this:

Walk on long rein	10 mins
Loosening work in trot and canter	5 to 10 mins
Test movements in canter	10 mins (including walk breaks)
Test movements in trot	10 mins (including walk breaks)
Final preparation	5 mins
	Total Time: 45 mins

Your total warm-up length will depend on the difficulty of the test, your horse's temperament, weather conditions, etc.

2. Some competitions are notorious for a lack of warm-up space. In this case consider doing an early schooling ride while the warm-up arena is quiet, followed by a second short warm-up right before your test.

3. If you end up in a very crowded arena then do a lot of up and down transitions. Riding walk-trot –walk transitions can do a lot to improve communication and suppleness while keeping you safe and controlled.

4. Claim your space. This is often easier if you have a trainer working with you. Find an area to make a 20 meter circle and hold on to it. Let others work around you. If you are unable to do this then find another rider who is “claiming their space” and work behind them. Let them “clear the track” for you.

5. Be vocal. Yell “outside” or “inside” to let others know where you are going. Most knowledgeable riders will try to pass left shoulder to left shoulder. Be vocal and let others know if you are going to do something unexpected.

6. Keep your eyes up. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by seeing all the other horses, look for the gaps between the horses.

7. Take an occasional “focus break”. While you are giving your horse a rest in the walk, scan the warm-up arena and see what is happening around you. In almost every crowded warm-up there is an “oblivious idiot”, who is inconsiderate or even dangerous. If you find yourself too close to this unfortunate soul then practice a few halts until they move away from you.

These warm-up strategies can give you a plan of attack, and at least a small sense of control. Your anxiety about the warm-up arena may feel out of your control, but in fact it is not.

Sometimes our brain can get stuck on a thought or feeling. Have you ever had a song or piece of music stuck in your mind? It plays over and over. An anxious thought can get stuck in much the same way. When you catch yourself thinking a destructive thought you can use a technique called “thought stopping”. In “thought stopping”, each time you catch yourself thinking an unwanted thought then follow these steps:

1. In your mind see a bright red stop sign
2. Shift your thoughts to the warm-up strategies you think will work the best for you.
3. See yourself working successfully in your warm-up.

It takes diligence to monitor your internal dialogue. Breaking the habit of anxiety requires attention, but it can be done. If you need additional help, consider meeting with a therapist who can help you process any past trauma. There are several techniques that are very effective. If you think these topics may be helpful, you can find more information on my web site, [seanaadamson.com](http://seanaadamson.com).