



WELLBEING SERIES

COMPETITION NERVES

ANDREA OAKES TACKLES NERVES IN PART THREE OF OUR WELLBEING SERIES. WE ALL SUFFER FROM THEM IN LIFE BUT HOW CAN WE STOP A FEW BUTTERFLIES BECOMING A BARRIER TO SUCCESS?

Nerves can affect us in funny ways. Some riders experience a jittery, restless sensation in the run-up to a big competition. Others panic in the warm-up, as the reins slip through their sweaty fingers and their legs turn to jelly. Even the coolest of customers can become frustrated when they fail to produce the performance under pressure that they know they're capable of.

According to rider psychology coach Helen Rennie, of Rezone Coaching, competition nerves are natural, necessary and can even be beneficial. Putting a positive spin on the situation is something we can all learn to do,

she insists, rather than letting 'performance anxiety' make a misery of riding in front of other people.

"The competition environment is set up to test you, so it's only natural that stress levels will rise," explains Helen. "Everyone needs a different level of stress to ride and perform at their best, ideally just enough to focus on the job and stay in the moment. The problem is that this can quickly get out of control and have negative effects on both body and mind."

So what turns a few harmless butterflies in the stomach into a performance-inhibiting problem?

"When stress levels tip into overload, our 'fight or flight' response becomes active," says Helen. "If neither reaction is an option, the brain shuts down or freezes – leaving us over-anxious, agitated or annoyed. The part of the brain that enables us to ride at our best can no longer work properly and it becomes harder to access memory, so forgetting the test is a common problem. The horse can sense this, too, which can make him more tense and spooky."

Competition nerves can suppress the appetite, yet going hungry can further impede brain function. Helen likens the human brain to an iPhone: capable, but heavy on battery use.

"Scientific studies have revealed that certain tasks are more difficult if you haven't eaten properly," she says. "Riding is a sport that requires great mental skill, involving lots of subtleties and nuances, so the brain is doing a lot. Blood sugar levels can soon drop if it's

not fuelled up properly, accelerating anxiety or leaving you in a 'yawny' state."

Then there are the 'what ifs' that can invade thoughts and add to the general confusion.

"A brain is a bit like Google, in that it picks out key words in a search term to give you what you ask for," Helen explains. "If you ask it for something you don't want, by thinking about one of the many 'what ifs' associated with a risk sport like riding, it will give you precisely that."

If this sequence of events sounds all too familiar, some serious re-programming is required. But how feasible is it to become calmer and more focused in a competition environment?

"Turning things around will be a challenge as we're not wired up to find change particularly easy," says Helen. "Yet studies show that the brain remains adaptable into very old age. It will be tough, but it is possible!"

"Diet is the first place to go to fix things," she says. "Eggs are perfect brain fuel, packed with proteins and nutrients along with the amino acid tryptophan, but there are alternatives if eggs aren't appealing. A Trek bar is a great source of protein and contains the right balance of glucose, so try to eat one an hour before you get on board to warm up."

Being correctly fuelled creates a better frame of mind and should solve many issues. In addition, however, a toolbox of nerve-busting techniques will come in handy.

"Some riders have the motivation to read books on the subject and listen to online talks to pick up tips, but it is difficult to build

self-belief alone," says Helen. "Restructuring your thinking takes effort, so you may find it easier to have a few one-to-one sessions with a qualified sport psychology coach.

"One of the key things to managing nerves is noticing when your stress levels begin to rise, which can happen a few days before the show or when travelling to it," adds Helen. "The earlier you catch the nerves, the easier they are to deal with. Keep a diary of pre-show stress levels, awarding points out of 10 for how you feel at various stages in the build-up, then check in with yourself again during the competition.

"If you find yourself becoming anxious, breathe in for a count of four and out for seven to send a relaxation signal to your brain," she adds. "Take positive action before things start to slide to regain control of the situation. If your horse is being spooky, for example, do more transitions and circles to get his attention. Stop things right there and ask yourself what you can do differently."

Goal-setting can bolster confidence, as long as aims are achievable. Helen points out: "Becoming fixated on scores or placings – things that are out of your control – can make you feel tense, so instead set a realistic goal such as relaxation. And instead of worrying about a scenario, ask yourself how you can better manage the risk. OK, the worst could happen, but so could the reverse. Flip the situation and get back some power, focusing on what you need to do to ride at your best.

"Creating new habits requires repetition," she adds. "Most people give up too soon and go straight back to square one, but keep going and you will reap the rewards." ■

BAD MEMORIES

"Riding was no longer any fun," admits Christine Luscombe, who was mortified at having to do the 'walk of shame' from an arena when her Welsh section D mare Louada Festival misbehaved at a Petplan Equine Area Festival. "I had become so nervous and I'd lost confidence in everything. I was too scared to hack out alone and my anxiety spoiled every show."

In a last-ditch attempt to overcome her problems, Christine arranged some sessions with Rezone Coaching – an experience she describes as 'life changing'.

"Helen talked me through my Petplan nightmare so that I could rid myself of the memories," she says. "I learned how to take control of my thoughts, using breathing techniques and positive mantras. When bad thoughts creep in, this gives you the ability to send them on their way.

"Without panicking about the performance aspect, competing became more about enjoyment again. The results are coming, however, almost as a by-product. We managed an Area Festival top-10 placing and moved up a level, also achieving a plus-70% freestyle score."



KEVIN SPARROW

