

# BUTTERFLIES – HELP OR HINDRANCE?

## HELPFUL SKILLS TO QUELL YOUR COMPETITION NERVES...

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**Finally, the moment you have been waiting for all winter has arrived! You're so excited to be at the show! Your class is called, you send your horse forward into the ring and then... your breakfast threatens to destroy your carefully manicured appearance. You wish the ground would open up and swallow you before you pass out and your horse has suddenly transformed into a different animal than the one you have been carefully schooling all winter. Quietly you wonder to yourself "are we having fun yet?"**

Nervousness is one of the unseen perils which can ruin your show-ring experience. It is by no means restricted to new or novice competitors - it's just some of those more experienced riders among us have often learned coping strategies which help them overcome the problem and have us believing they are never affected by nerves.

Riders new to competition in any form are bound to be nervous and anxious. What generally happens is they tighten the reins, sit more stiffly, take their legs off and then wonder why on earth their horse goes

completely differently to how he has at home all week. Even worse, often it is the hapless horse that gets the blame for not going correctly. And so begins a needless downward spiral - there is nowhere else to go in this situation - the horse becomes more confused, the rider tries hard and becomes frustrated, a recipe for a disastrous day out.

While, in the main, this condition is psychological it has some physical symptoms also. These are the ones that create all the problems for our horse, as suddenly he is getting mixed messages from a rider he thought he trusted and was familiar with. Muscle tension and stiffness make your equitation position almost impossible to achieve and all of this is communicated directly to your horse who, unfortunately for your desired performance, will "mirror" your tension and stiffness.

Much worse are the other physical symptoms associated with anxiety - stomach disturbances. The toilets are usually miles away; there is no one to hold the horse and who can undo trousers with gloves on!

When a rider is overwhelmed by nerves, he or she is actually suffering from anxiety. While I won't go so far as to call it performance anxiety, it

is actually a variety of this very condition. We need to understand why this happens - often it all makes little sense until you think about what most of us would really like as an outcome to our outing - high self worth, which is directly related in your mind to how well you do at the show that day. Add in an unconscious desire not to make a mistake which will cause embarrassment in front of those you are desperate to impress. Most people have a fair idea that they are being scrutinised from the ringside as well as by the judge and this only serves to place more pressure on that sometimes fragile self esteem.

Let's admit it; we all want to get wins and placings whenever possible and, failing this, we want our horse to perform well.

Remember that the show ring can be very foreign, especially to your young horse. He is probably used to being exercised and schooled at home on his own and suddenly he is forced into a crowd and expected not to react. Many people cannot cope with that added stress being put on themselves so, I guess, for some horses it is just the same.

Also on show day, it is near impossible not to be a little pushed for time and rushing to complete tasks which are usually done in a more leisurely manner. Your young, green or sensitive horse will notice this and horses, being as perceptive as they are, it will affect him. It is never easy to remain calm and balanced when you are due in the ring and little things conspire to unravel you.

These traits are not always confined to riders and horses - just like junior sports teams on the playing field, many parents unwittingly place huge pressures on their children. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the show ring unfortunately with some parents having spent unlimited funds on outfits, ponies and everything that goes with them to hopefully secure that coveted red ribbon!

If we can go some way towards helping riders (and supporters) control their competitive emotions, we may be able to reduce the incidences of poor sportsmanship seen more and more often these days and improve conditions for the horse. How much more enjoyable would our show days become?

However, even the best competition riders will admit to a few butterflies or a touch of performance anxiety. A small amount of anxiety can actually be beneficial in assisting us to 'rise to the occasion' and this is something we certainly need to be able to do in order to stand out from the crowd. It isn't about being nervous or not nervous; it is about directing the nervous energy in the right direction so our performance isn't hopelessly impaired.

So how can we help ourselves overcome these problems? Self-help is possible - not always easy, but possible. Simple common sense, believe it or not, does go a long way towards solving these types of problems before they become insurmountable.

First and foremost, make sure you have done your homework before you go to a show. Educate your horse to the level you require for the stage he is at. If he is ridden, make sure you are able to confidently cope if he gets a little overwhelmed by his surroundings. Remember, if you are the cool, calm, collected one, you will give him confidence and he will follow your lead - likewise it is a little silly to expect a led horse to be the same creature out in public that he is at home. He requires handling and educating in a similar way in order not to embarrass you at his first and subsequent outings.

During the week leading up to the show and, especially on the day before, do as much preparation and loading of the float/truck as you can. Don't leave everything to the last minute. Always have a checklist of what you will need on the day and check through it after you have packed to ensure nothing is left at home. During the week, check whatever vehicles you will use to ensure correct tyre pressure, oil, water etc. Getting a horse ready for a show isn't a five-minute job.

Allow plenty of time to prepare at the show. When you least expect it, expect it. This goes for flat tyres on the way, forgotten gear and any other things that could possibly go wrong at a show. If you have plenty of time up your sleeve, you will be less likely to convey your sense of panic to your horse and those around you.

Teach yourself to relax. Use the tried and true deep breathing, think of how things go so well at home and visualise what you are trying to achieve here today.

Reduce your expectations. Remember there are good days and bad days for everyone. While you personally may be mortified at your performance, other people have their own worries and concerns and are possibly not hanging on your every move. If you don't expect too much from your horse

(especially if he is young and green), you are less likely to be disappointed.

Surround yourself with positive people - I find this is the best way to have a great day and when you are happy you will be relaxed.

The power of positive thinking can go a long way toward winning those elusive ribbons. But bear in mind that we are all different. Some people can overcome their anxiety by doing things, getting the horse ready and working through a familiar preparation routine. Some need to go away on their own, zone out and visualise their workout. Yet others are seemingly unaffected by nerves and have the rest of us envious!

Identifying that your show-ring nerves could be interfering with your horse show experience is the first step. Then, see which technique works best for you as an individual (trial and error might be needed). Don't be afraid to try different things if you think they will help - remember it is about giving you and your horse a more enjoyable experience.

Most importantly, go out with the aim of having a good day. This sport, like any, is supposed to be enjoyable. Put all the negative emotion and unreasonable pressures to one side, relax and have fun. Once perfected, these skills are beneficial to all areas of life, not just riding. Relaxing is something we all need to work at in this day and age!



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