



Relieving the Pressure of Performance in Competition with Mental Toughness

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The stress of competing can build like a pressure cooker (maybe it's more like an Insta Pot these days!) and it's your job as a horse trainer to help relieve the pressure and diffuse the steam for yourself, your students, and your staff. Mental toughness positively impacts success in athletes and promotes adaptive mental health functioning and well-being, an increase in the quality of sleep, and helps lower stress levels. As an equestrian coach and trainer, there are a variety of strategies you can use

to help your students (and yourself!) deal with the pressure of competition including providing emotional support and helping them develop some mental skills so they can be mentally tough in the ring.

Emotional Support

As your students' trainer, they rely on you not only for learning the technical skills they need to succeed, but also to provide emotional support. Here are some ways you can help:

- Being available to listen and uplift your riders can help them feel more confident and less stressed.
- Building team cohesion and creating a positive team environment where athletes feel supported and valued by you and their barn buddies can help them feel more comfortable and confident in competition.
- Helping your students maintain perspective by reminding riders to focus on the

process rather than the outcome and to enjoy the experience and the growth of competing can help them cope with pressure and perform at their personal best.

- Setting unrealistic expectations for your athletes, such as expecting them to perform at an elite level before they are ready or expecting them to perfectly perform every time, can add to stress and possibly lead to a negative performance.
- Avoiding berating them for a less-than-stellar performance in competition, especially in front of others. Not only does it undermine their self-confidence and embarrass them, but the perception others get from the verbal exchange does nothing for your reputation.
- Encouraging physical and mental preparation by stressing physical and mental well-being through exercise, nutrition and self-care can help them feel better equipped to handle pressure. I am a proponent of making sure you and your students include plenty of protein in your diet.
- Helping your clients effectively manage their time when showing can help them avoid feeling overwhelmed. Create a realistic timetable for everything from grooming, braiding, tacking up to visualizing their successful time in the ring.
- Teaching stress management and relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises, mindfulness, or yoga.

For immediate relief when you find yourself in a circumstance that makes you nervous or anxious, focus on your breathing. By concentrating on taking slow, deep breaths, you take your mind off the immediate situation that makes you nervous, you bring necessary oxygen to your organs and muscles, and you slow your heart rate. This is an easy, inconspicuous, and fast-acting way to combat stress.

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Remember, these strategies are not mutually exclusive, and a combination often helps athletes perform at their personal best under pressure.

The Mental Game

Helping your athletes develop mental skills to manage the pressure of competition more effectively can include goal setting, visualization, and positive self-talk, relaxation techniques, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, anchoring and more.

- **Goal setting:** A coach can help athletes set specific, measurable, and realistic goals. This can help riders stay focused and motivated during training and competition.
- **Visualization:** Teach your riders to visualize themselves performing well in a competition. Imagination is more powerful than knowledge. To explain this concept, I tell my clients to look at me and acknowledge that I have on a red shirt and khaki trousers. Then, I tell them to close their eyes and imagine me in a green shirt, black trousers, and a black hat. Then, I ask them to open their eyes and tell me which one is real. Your mind doesn't know since it has seen both and doesn't know the difference.

To apply it to a competitive situation or even in daily training, imagine yourself giving the optimal performance. Make it a rich sensory experience. Imagine what you're wearing, how your hair is tucked into your helmet, what your horse looks like, how you feel on your horse, what you smell and what you hear. Employ all your senses. The more detailed the image, the better. Note that imagining peak performance and perfection are not the same thing.

- **Relaxation techniques:** Besides deep breathing, you can also encourage progressive muscle relaxation and meditation to help them manage stress and anxiety.

- **Self-talk:** Self-talk is that internal dialogue inside your brain, like when you tell yourself you are hungry or that you need to get a haircut soon. The danger for riders is when it takes on a negative connotation and your inner dialogue is more along the lines of “I'll never be as good as she is,” or “What do I think I'm doing riding at this level?” Practicing empowering self-talk and working on your mind-set is just as important as practicing the technical aspects of your riding.

As a coach, you can teach athletes to use positive self-talk to improve their confidence and performance by helping them focus on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. What you think is what you get so help transform negative “what-ifs” to positive ones. Change “What if I forget my test?” or “What if I knock down that rail?” or “What if I don't qualify for finals?” to “I have memorized this test and I am confident I'll remember every movement” and “My horse and I are more than capable of performing a clean round” and “I am ready and can clinch the scores I need to go to finals.”

Remember that the two most powerful words you can use are “I am.” Why? Because your subconscious will assume the identity of whatever follows.

- **Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP):** NLP seeks to make a connection between neurological processes, language, and behavioral patterns to achieve specific goals in life. The use of NLP can also allow you and your students to model themselves after other successful competitors. NLP seeks to reproduce the thoughts, beliefs and behaviors that create success, thereby reproducing success; success in communication, relationships, work, and riding.
NLP is about examining the clear paths to success and creating similar pathways to recreate that success. NLP uses several techniques to produce and reproduce excellence including modeling and anchoring, which are explained more below. You can learn more about NLP and other NLP techniques in my book, "Power to Win," available on my website, laurakinghypnosis.com, or on Amazon in hard cover or Audible format.
- **Modeling** involves imagining yourself as a rider you admire. Visualize that rider who confidently embodies skills you would like to emulate. Visualize your face and your body on that rider as she competes. Your intention is to observe another rider as if she were you.
- **Use anchoring technique** to reinforce positive self-talk. Anchoring creates a response by association. It's based on classical behavioral conditioning and involves creating a trigger that is connected to a desired response. Anchors can be just about anything: taking up the reins, seeing the ring you are about to enter, or when you mount your horse. The key is to attach the anchor to a desired emotional response. For example, when you take up the reins you immediately relax. I have found that anchoring is the tool that creates the most powerful, and lasting changes in my clients. I use it multiple times in all my personal sessions and all my MP3s, and I recommend that you get comfortable with it. For more information about how you can download my MP3s, go to laurakinghypnosis.com.
- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness techniques to help your riders focus on the present moment and not get bogged down by distractions or negative thoughts can help them improve their mental game.
- **Coping strategies:** Help your riders cope with setbacks and development to develop a growth mindset, where they view challenges and mistakes as opportunities for learning and improvement.

Mental training is a process and working on these techniques consistently with your riders in both training and competition scenarios can help them—and you—face stressful scenarios more confidently.

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Laura King is the Director and Founder of Summit Hypnosis and Wellness and is a Certified Hypnotist, NLP Practitioner, Life Coach, and Sports Performance Coach. Laura has written and published several books and workbooks, including "Power To Win" for equestrians and "Perfect Enough," a guide to help you evaluate your perceptions and experiences around vital areas of your life.

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"Once you learn some things mentally that you can apply on the field or in a profession or whatever you do, you kind of learn how to become mentally trained and use it to your advantage," he said. "It's a good tool to have. And so, as opportunities came, making plays, getting downfield... that confidence goes up." He said it's also important to stay centered and, in the moment, and to focus on your breathing.