MAKING PRACTICE COUNT

Seven steps to self-control, from a famous sports psyche consultant, to help you compete more effectively.

By Ken Ravizza, PhD

- You enter the dressage ring to start your test, and the line to X seems as clearly marked as a straight stretch of the Yellow Brick Road. You’re aware of the elastic connection between your hands and your horse’s mouth, of your easy balance on his back, and of your slow and rhythmic breathing. You’re focused on the task at hand, and you feel relaxed and confident; you’re smiling when you halt and salute.
- You canter out of a corner to the top of a line and keeping your horse balanced seems easy: When his rhythm changes, you change, fluidly making adjustments to maintain his frame—and as a result, you ride right down to the correct spot every time.
- You’re galloping cross-country, but you don’t feel hurried or out of control. You sense each separate hoofbeat of your horse’s stride and the drive he has from behind; when you see that the approach you had planned to the next fence is a muddy, hoof-pocked track, you angle him to avoid the slick footing without missing a beat.
o any of these scenarios describe the way you felt during your last competition—or even during part of it? Chances are that you have experienced the focused, relaxed, I-can-handle-anything state of mind that marks a successful ride. But chances also are that you’ve had far more bad rides than good ones: You’ve entered the ring with your heart pounding and your mouth dry; not only could you not feel contact with your horse’s mouth, you could barely feel your fingertips. Your horse pulled, fell onto his forehand, or dropped a shoulder, and then the spiral to disaster began: You made a stab at correcting him, but you were so tense that your aids were rough and upset him. He made another mistake, and you knew the game was over. You continued around the ring, cursing yourself for being incompetent and wishing you were back at the trailer. Your muscles got tighter, your vision got blurry—and then you went off course.

If you’ve had days like that, then you’ve had days when you’ve fallen victim to your anxiety—and have become your own worst enemy. Even if your class didn’t end in obvious disaster, you’ve probably left the ring more than once wishing you’d been able to stay more in control—so that you could put out the same quality of performance in the show ring that you’d produced again and again at home.

Well, the fact is that you probably were reproducing your practice-ring performance in the show ring—but in competition, the greater pressure you felt magnified your problems. Think about your schooling sessions: Things go wrong and you lose control over yourself and your horse even at home, don’t you? At home, however, you probably deal with the tough spots by pulling up, starting over, or packing it in for the day; the judge isn’t there, so you don’t have to “ride through” the problem. By not continuing, you avoid the pressure that trying to go on would put on you. The effects of that avoidance carry right over into competition, because even if you’ve mastered the technical aspects of performance (your position, your aids, your horse’s responses), you haven’t taught yourself to handle pressure.

But you can. Stress manifests itself in very specific physical, behavioral, and cognitive ways; once you’re aware of what stress does to your body, behavior, and thoughts, you can pick up
on the signals quickly and start to control the stress before it takes control of you.

I'm not saying that you'll be able to eliminate the feelings associated with stress. Whenever you're in a high-pressure situation, you're going to feel it; the excitement and tension are part of the game. But by using the methods I teach to Olympic-level dressage and jumper riders, as well as other elite athletes, you can turn debilitating nervousness into positive action: the kind of action that pulls you through when the competition is tough—that hones your ability to focus and frees you so that you can get on with the job at hand, no matter what disaster happened two days, two hours, or two minutes before you entered the arena.

The backbone of my program is a sequence of steps that I call the "seven R's"—responsibility, recognize, release, regroup, refocus, ready, and respond: a series of mental and physical "exercises" that, as you follow them, help you to make the transition from victim to master of your feelings. You can use these steps to work through a difficulty with one maneuver, or to change your attitude and approach to your training as a whole.

Just like the other "steps" you take when riding—the sequence of rein, weight, and leg aids you use to ask for a canter departure, for example—the seven R's have to be practiced until they become second nature. If you'll remember how difficult it was to learn how to pick up the correct lead, make a decent circle, or post smoothly, you'll realize that becoming comfortable with the steps to self-control won't happen overnight. You'll have to go slowly at first, taking one "step" at a time and working on it until you achieve its effect; and every time you ride, you'll have to practice your mental skills, just as you practice your physical skills, in order to refine them.

But don't worry—I'll give you the tools to make adopting the seven R's a challenge, not a chore. And I'll show you how to structure your practice sessions so that you derive the maximum benefit from them, making each hour you spend schooling an opportunity for successfully implementing the seven R's—and for gaining the confidence that will carry over into the show ring.

THE SEVEN R'S

Your first step to stress-management success is the first R: responsibility. You must accept that you are responsible for your performance—not your horse, your trainer, or the condition of the ring. Blaming external fac-

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tors for your problems doesn’t allow you to handle them; if you decide that you’re in charge, you can change what’s happening.

Once you’ve accepted responsibility for your performance, your next step is to recognize. You have to be aware of the fact that things aren’t going right (you’re stressed); and you have to determine just how stress manifests itself in your body, so that you can begin to alter its influence.

Realizing that things are off track is easy; you know when you aren’t getting the message across to your horse. You may feel angry, frustrated, or hopeless—but how do those feelings translate into the way you behave?

Stress produces a fight-or-flight reaction. Any time you perceive a threat to your well-being, whether physical or psychological, your body releases adrenalin. Your heart and respiration rates increase, your blood pressure goes up, and your body temperature rises, so that you begin to sweat. Your mouth becomes dry and the muscles in your jaw, neck, shoulders, and lower back tighten, diverting blood from your digestive tract and extremities to maintain the contraction. The redistribution of blood causes your hands and feet to feel heavy, sweaty, and numb; your stomach may feel upset, and you may have diarrhea, constipation, nausea, or dry heaves.

Behaviorally, stress causes one of two basic reactions: Either you become anxious and jumpy (you can’t sit still, you giggle incessantly, or you feel panicked and magnify the slightest twinge into physical debilitation) or you become depressed (you feel sleepy and worn out; you don’t have the energy to tighten your horse’s girth, let alone jump a course).

Compounding the physical and behavioral manifestations are the mental symptoms of stress. The more pressured you feel, the less effective your recall process is. You may have difficulty remembering the next part of the pattern—or forget to take off your warm-up draw reins before entering the ring.

Along with memory loss comes judgmental thinking. Instead of concentrating on finding a way to turn things around, you experience self-doubts and focus on criticizing yourself—and your horse.

Exactly how stress affects you depends on your physiological and psychological makeup; how much stress is too much also depends on your individual character. Some stress is good for you; it’s what helps you focus your concentration. But there comes a point where the negative effects of stress outweigh the benefits.

Determining what that point is requires a bit of detective work and reflection. The next time you ride, pay attention to the way you feel as things start to go wrong. Do your shoulder muscles knot up, and do you start to clench your jaw? Maybe your vision blurs, you feel hot, and your legs seem weak; or you start mentally chanting a long list of your perceived shortcomings and failures. Once you pinpoint

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feel as miserable as you did when you were slouching? It’s hard to keep thinking you’re no good at anything when your body is positioned to reflect a positive, let’s-do-it attitude.

With your chest open and your mind cleared of negative thoughts, you can refocus. Use this time to decide what element of your strategy or technique you can change to improve your performance; ask yourself, “What is my task at this moment?” Narrowing the time to right now is essential, because you want to ask yourself to accomplish something very specific—and very basic. As you refocus, you shouldn’t tell yourself “I’ve got to ride better,” or “I’ve got to win this class,” or even “I’ve got to finish this circle in balance.” You should instead say “I have to increase pace,” or “I have to keep my fingers closed to contain my horse’s energy.” Give yourself something positive and task-relevant to do—and something within your reach of accomplishment. That way, when you pull it off, you’ll be able to pat yourself on the back for making things work—and feed yourself some of that self-confidence that comes from acknowledging the little successes.

Now that you’ve given yourself a task to accomplish, you’re ready. At this point, you should stop analyzing and allow yourself to become focused; you should feel yourself breathing regularly and smoothly. (Chances are that if you can’t control your breathing, you can’t control your horse.)

The final step is to respond. You’ve set yourself up so that you can function to the best of your ability, and now is the time to do that. You’ve taught yourself how to ask for a bend, maintain a lead, or regulate pace; trust that training—the “BST” (blood, sweat, and tears)—to kick in for you and make the maneuver work.

When you start incorporating the seven R’s into your training program, take time to work through them slowly and completely. For example, say you’ve been trying to maintain your horse’s position in the leg-yield, but he becomes increasingly resistant and you become increasingly discouraged or upset. Stop, walk over to the side of the ring, and think about how you feel; recognize how the tension is manifesting itself.

Now release it: Tighten and relax your muscles, growl—do whatever helps clear the air. Pull up your sternum—regroup—and allow yourself to refocus. What can you do to facilitate your horse’s response to your aids? Break the movement down into steps, and try the first one; maybe you have to reposition your leg behind the girth, or balance your weight evenly between your seat bones, or close the fingers on your outside hand.

Once you’ve decided what to do, you’re ready. Feel yourself breathing, and then respond. Stop thinking and start doing—and see what happens. You may not get a perfect response from your horse, but you’ll be in a state of mind where making a better response happen is a possibility—not an odd chance. Try to maintain that positive attitude for just two minutes; if things fall apart, you can always go back to the seven R’s.

IMPROVING YOUR SELF-CONTROL

As you become more familiar with working through the seven R’s, you’ll be able to respond more quickly to stressful situations and to turn around a poor performance without necessarily having to pull up for a minute. That type of efficiency in regaining control of yourself is what you want to aim for—because in competition, you’re not going to be able to stop what you’re doing to regroup; you’ll have to get back on track in the midst of action.

Practicing the seven R’s whenever things go wrong (or when you’re feeling unhappy with your training progress and want to give yourself a “lift”) will gradually increase your speed and overall ability to deal with stress, but you can improve your progress by incorporating two other elements into your training program: relaxation and mental imagery.

First, let’s look at relaxation. Teaching yourself to relax has several benefits. One of the most obvious results is that you untie all the muscular knots that you’ve put into your system as a result of stress—the rigidity that your horse picks up on and responds to by tensing himself. Your blood pressure drops, your heart and respiration rates decrease, and blood flow to the extremities and digestive system increases. When you’re relaxed, you can rechan-
"After a while, the routine you establish will cue your body to begin the tension-releasing process."

Relaxation also improves your ability to concentrate. When you teach yourself to maintain a relaxed state, you have to learn to focus in on yourself despite external distractions. Doing so increases your self-confidence: You didn’t jump to attention when the telephone rang, so you know you don’t have to jump out of your skin when a spectator on the rail opens an umbrella just as your horse passes by. In addition, as you become relaxed, you’ll be setting the stage for using the other stress-management tool: effective mental imagery.

To teach yourself how to relax, start by lying down in a quiet, darkened area. Methodically tense and release the muscles in each part of your body, starting with the same muscle group each time you work on your relaxation. Concentrate on developing a warm, calm feeling; when your body feels relaxed, focus on your breathing. Take a deep, slow breath; hold it; then release slowly and smoothly. Inhale again, trying to establish a rhythm in your breathing. Spend about two minutes on the breathing exercise; your initial relaxation sessions should last a total of about twenty minutes.

After a while, becoming relaxed should take less time. The routine you establish of lying down, working through the muscle groups, and then focusing on breathing will cue your body to begin the tension-releasing process. When you find yourself able to relax in about ten minutes, move on to the next stage: training yourself to relax while you’re sitting. After all, it’s unlikely that you’ll have time during competition to lie down—and you want eventually to be able to ask yourself to relax while you’re on your horse.
“Once you can consistently relax, you’re ready to work on mental imagery.”

When you can relax in an upright posture, ask a helper to add distractions, so that you can practice maintaining your relaxation even when there’s a lot of activity going on around you, as there will be during competition. Your helper can jingle keys, talk, jump up and down. . . . If just the thought of a voice over a loudspeaker makes your heart start to pound, you can tape show-ring noises and have your helper play the tape during your relaxation time, so that you learn how to focus even when you’re surrounded by competition sounds.

At this point, you’re ready to start asking yourself to relax while you’re on horseback. You may not be able to relax completely when you’re riding, but making the attempt will help reduce a good deal of the tension you may feel.

Once you can consistently relax, you’re ready to work on mental imagery. Using mental imagery requires you to run a “film” of yourself in your mind: You see yourself performing or feel the performance. Because your brain processes information from reality and from your imagination in a similar manner, you can use visualization to solve problems and practice the seven R’s; to prepare for anticipated difficulties (increasing your confidence in your ability to deal with adversity); to increase your overall ability to concentrate; and to give yourself mental “riding” time when injury or bad weather keeps you from schooling your horse.

There are two types of visualization: external imagery and internal imagery. When you use external imagery, you see yourself as if someone had videotaped your performance; when you use internal imagery, you look out your own eyes, sensing the reins between your fingers, your horse’s sides against your legs, and the impact his hooves make striking the ground. Each type of imagery allows you to approach problems from a slightly different perspective: You can use external imagery to see flaws in your performance; you can use internal imagery to feel them.

Which type of imagery you use is up to you. Internal imagery is more intense and therefore usually more effective, but external imagery is great for helping you correct your mistakes.

You can use external and internal imagery in one of two ways. Either you
can use it to see or feel yourself performing perfectly (what's called mastery imagery), or you can use it to see or feel yourself solving problems (copying imagery).

Copying imagery is the type you should employ most often; it gives you the chance to work through difficulties using the seven R's. You effectively anticipate and then deal with every imaginable pitfall, so that if you do encounter such problems in your training or competition, you won’t be surprised; you will have a preset plan of action to help you through. Because copying imagery focuses attention on problems, however, it shouldn’t be used within four days before a competition. During that period, building your confidence—not analyzing your ability—is most helpful.

Use mastery imagery to build self-confidence. Seeing yourself do well makes you believe that doing well is possible. And you can use mastery imagery to give yourself a dry run through new movements: If you can picture yourself riding through a flying lead change, you’ll have put the sequence of aids together mentally before you give it a try. Notice, too, at what point in your "videotape" the picture becomes out of focus. If you can’t visualize a certain part of a maneuver, chances are that’s the spot where you’ll have trouble as you ride through it—and where you should focus attention during training.

Practice each type of visualization as often as you can; the more time you devote to it, the better your concentration will become. And you’ll improve your motor skills as well. When you picture yourself performing, you actually send signals to your muscle cells, stimulating them and “programming” your motor memory. For that reason, riding in your mind on days when you can’t get on your horse helps keep your training on track. You improve your mental discipline—and you keep your psychomotor responses tuned.

STRUCTURING PRACTICE
To make your practice sessions as useful as possible, you should incorporate relaxation and imagery and run through your seven R’s as often as necessary, employing the mental-discipline skills that will improve your show-ring performance. But making practice count also means setting up your sessions so that you can transfer your training habits to competition day—and therefore transfer the calm, focused attitude you develop while you’re schooling.

The best way to equalize competition and practice is to establish a definite routine. Every time you get on your horse, you want to approach him from the same perspective—a relaxed, focused state of body and mind. By keeping your pre-ride actions the same, you establish the habit of starting out balanced and in control.

For example, you might want to schedule in five minutes when you arrive at the barn to stretch your muscles a little bit and give yourself time to relax. At this point, you start to let go of the tensions of the day—the problems with your job or family or the drive on the highway that would interfere with your concentration as you ride. (I like to remind riders that they need to treat themselves as well as they treat their horses. You give your horse time to get in gear for work; give yourself time to become centered and balanced.)

Then you prepare your horse for the session. You take him out of his stall, you groom him, and as you work on him you remind yourself to breathe, trying to increase your balance and focus. Your body starts connecting your actions—the motions of your grooming routine—with the process of calming down, so that those motions become triggers for relaxation.

If you keep your pre-ride routine the same, you can carry it over to show days and use it to help you keep calm. You can groom your horse in the same way you groom him at home, for example, using the currycomb first on the left side behind his ear, then moving down his neck to his shoulder and bar-
PUTTING PRACTICE TO WORK: SHOW DAY

You've put in constructive hours day after day in the practice ring; now you're ready to repeat the focused performance you achieved there in the show ring. You've taught yourself how to run through the seven R's quickly, so that you don't miss a beat; you've learned how to relax and ride through difficulties in your mind; and you've gotten into the habit of preparing for each ride in the same way, and for making each ride count by establishing specific goals.

Still, you'll know you aren't at home when you get to the show. You'll encounter problems there that just don't pop up in the ring behind your barn, and the excitement of performing for an audience will increase stress and tension to levels you may not have had to deal with before. How can you be sure you don't lose your self-control?

Well, for one thing, keeping yourself in balance has become a habit for you. You have hours of good riding behind you, and that's a firm base for dealing with show-day nerves. Just as you keep your heels down automatically because you've done countless drills to establish that position, the mental drills you performed at home will help carry you through the rough times. Your pre-ride routines will be there, too, encouraging your body to relax despite the new surroundings.

There are, however, a few extra steps you can take to help counteract the stress of competition. First, you can eliminate some stress-producing elements from your environment. For example, you may lose your focus when your boy friend is watching you ride; you're more concerned with impressing him than with really working with your horse, and you don't need to hand him that extra difficulty on show day. Ask him not to lean on the rail and talk to you as you go by—or maybe even ask him not to come to the show.

Try to foresee other problems and handle them in the same way. If you're worried that the horse you left back at the trailer is going to put his foot in his hay net while you're in the ring, you aren't going to be concentrating fully on the task at hand. Take down his hay net before you go—or arrange to have a friend watch him.

Second, prepare yourself as much as possible for potentially overwhelming experiences. If you need three hours to pull yourself together before you ride, don't leave late for the show grounds, so that you have to rush frantically to tack up your horse before racing to make your class. (As I've mentioned, it's important to maintain a routine in order to focus your concentration gradually.) Prepare everything the night before: Have your trailer hitched and ready to go; have your clothes laid out; set your alarm. Make sure you know the route to the grounds, and make sure you know how to fix a flat tire or have someone with you who can. Try to leave as little to chance as possible, so that you greatly reduce your chances for becoming upset. Once you arrive at the show, attend to your horse and then set out on foot to look over the warm-up area and ring. Follow the path you'll ride to the warm-up; walk around the ring and notice the slope of the land, the condition of the footing, and how busy the area is.

Leave the warm-up as you would when mounted and walk over to the ring. As you walk around it, make yourself notice that there's still dirt underneath your feet and a railing of some sort to the sides: The ring is a ring, and you've ridden in a ring before. There may be electronic timers and bleachers and a judge's stand that you don't have at home, but you won't be riding in the bleachers—you'll be riding around the ring.

As you walk around the ring, pick a focal point—a tree, a flag pole, or a post—and tell yourself to use that focal point to remind you to lift your sternum, take a breath, and remember all the hours of hard work you have behind you and the dues you've paid. When you're waiting to enter the ring before competition (a time when you're likely to feel the most tension), you can look at that focal point and it will act as a trigger to remind you that you have what it takes; you're OK.

Once you've looked over the arena, go back to the stables or your trailer and begin your pre-ride preparations. If you feel the need to, spend some extra time becoming relaxed and running through some mastery imagery to give you confidence.

Get your horse ready. Take him out and groom him just as you do at home, using the same tools and the same effort.

When you head out for the warm-up, make sure you've set yourself a very specific goal. Realize that the warm-up is just that: a warm-up. You don't have to win your warm-up or prove anything—you simply have a job to do (warming up). If problems occur, run through the seven R's and solve them as best you can. If you don't solve the problems to your satisfaction, run through the seven R's as you wrap up your warm-up to release the negative feelings.

As you prepare to enter the ring, remind yourself of what you want to accomplish in this ride. Look at your focal point, and take a minute to deepen your concentration. Take a deep breath, open your chest, and step into the ring. You've put in the right kind of miles; trust yourself, trust your training, free it up—and go in there and do it.

The editors thank Ken Ravizza, Ph.D., for his help in the preparation of this article. Ken is a sport psychology consultant who works with a number of professional and collegiate athletes, helping them to maximize performance through stress management and coping strategies. Teams he works with include the California Angels. He has also assisted the 1984 and 1988 women's Olympic field hockey teams. In 1988 he joined sports psychologist Bob Rotella in working with US Olympic equestrian athletes. A resident of Redondo Beach, California, Ken teaches workshops and lectures around the country. His tapes on relaxation techniques are available by writing to him at the Physical Education Department, Cal State Fullerton, Fullerton, CA 92634.