

Visualise your way to success



Expert
Charlie Unwin
Rider
Dianne Martini

What you're thinking has a huge impact on your physical state. If your thoughts are negative your body language will be negative too and horses, as we all know, are very good on picking up on our body language. Your thoughts also have an impact on the nervous system and particularly your heart rate, which in turn has been shown to have a huge effect on your ability to think effectively under pressure.

"Horses appreciate a consistent leader and nerves brought on by negative thoughts affect your ability to perform as an effective leader," says Charlie.

Dianne admits that she's prone to flooding her mind with negative thoughts when competing. To ensure Dianne's mind is filled with only positives Charlie suggests she visualise both her dressage test and show jumping round going exactly to plan.

"You can override negative thoughts with more powerful imagery of things going well," he says. "Imagery has a far more powerful effect on the brain because it's closer to the real experience.

"When you're show jumping this may mean that you need to walk the course twice," he explains. "The first time,

walk the course logically, thinking about which fence comes next. The second time, walk the course while visualising what riding it is going to feel like. When you think about riding over a skinny, for example, picture how it will feel rather than giving yourself lots of technical information to remember.

"When you do this your imagination pulls together hundreds of bits of information that together form everything you have to do to get over the fence successfully, including the technicalities of where your hands will be, what your legs will be doing and such like. If you were to just think about the technicalities you'd only be able to focus on one or two points at a time.

"Visualisation makes use of the subconscious part of your brain, which can process 300 to 400 bits of information at any one time. In contrast, the conscious part of the brain can only process two or three bits of information at any one time," explains Charlie.

"Also, if you've already visualised riding the course, when you enter the ring your brain will be so well prepared that it'll feel like it's jumping round the course for the second time. This means things are less likely to go wrong and, if they do, you'll be able to respond better.

"For some people visualisation comes quite naturally while for others who are more analytical it takes a bit of practice."



Dianne visualises how she'll ride Mo to the skinny

Dianne says

"I imagined riding each step of my dressage test before I entered the warm-up arena and think it did put me in a more positive mindset. Although Mo tripped as she turned up the centre line, for the first time I didn't let it faze me and was pleased with how the rest of the test went.

"As Charlie suggested, I walked the show jumping course twice, the first time concentrating on which order to jump the fences and the second time picturing in my mind's eye how I would have to ride to make Mo go clear.

"Visualising riding the course really paid off when I had a sticky moment at fence two - a skinny. Having a clear plan in my mind helped me react in a positive way. I felt Mo start to back off but almost before I'd thought about the correction needed, I'd already done it and we were over the fence. A clear round was the perfect finish to the day."

Override negative thoughts with imagery of things going well

Discover the power of a smile



Expert
Debbie Percy
Rider
Kathy Hibbins

Just like eating chocolate, smiling releases endorphins (happy hormones) in the brain that will eat up stress, nervousness and anxiety hormones.

"Smile at your horse, smile at your fellow competitors, smile about that bap you're going to have once you've finished - just keep smiling," says Debbie.

"This tactic also works because humans can't feel two opposing emotions at once. So if you want to feel happy and relaxed, all you have to do is

smile and think about being happy, and you will be.

"If you look at how the top riders behave at an event they'll be smiling, chatting and laughing because to them it's just another day at the office," she says. "Ironically, amateur riders tend to be a lot more serious because for them competition day is often the pinnacle of a month or more's work.

"The top riders get nervous too - they're just as prone to falling and having accidents as any other rider - but they've had a lot more practice at coping with their nerves. Learn to copy how the pros behave on competition day and you'll be amazed at the effect a smiley attitude can have."



Kathy keeps the mood light as she prepares for her dressage test.

Kathy says

"I'm ridiculously nervous when competing so spending the day smiling was great. I don't know whether the endorphins released were strong enough to outweigh my anxieties as I forgot my first test, but the strategy did remind me that the point is to enjoy myself."