

NAYC and Mental Performance

Guest Speaker: Elise Hicks



About Me

Elise Hicks

- NAYC in 2019
- GRIT team 2020 and 2021
- Still have my horse Max
- Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying) Registered with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO)
- I have a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever puppy
- I love spending my spare time at my cottage in Honey Harbour



Agenda

- North American Youth Championship
- Mental Performance
- 6 Steps for Analyzing Performance Anxiety





My Young Riders Experience!

- 2019- Montana
- Preparation in the year leading up to NAYC
 - Florida
 - School
- Took 2 horses- Max Power and Glendening Avis
- Atmosphere and Excitement!
 - Team

" Darlene Shantz



NAYC and Pressures

Pressures I felt leading up to NAYC

- Stakes of my goal
- Personal pressure
- Financial pressure
- Parental pressure

Story about how pressure can impact your performance in competition- importance of mental performance versus physical preparedness



Mental Performance

Pre-performance Anxiety

Can start 1 month, 1 week, 1 hour before entering the show ring

Intense nerves that come on approaching a competition or right before entering the ring

Can Cause:



Mind to go blank



Forget what you learned in training



Forget parts of your dressage test or jumps on course (NAYC example)



Increased heart rate and shortness of breath

Danger

Effect on the horse

Steps for Analyzing Performance Anxiety





Step 1: Detecting the anxiety

What bodily changes happen when you are anxious or nervous?

- Talk very fast and a lot
 - Or you get very quiet
- Get hives or rash on your neck/chest
- Heart rate increases rapidly
- Tightness in chest or throat
- Dry mouth
- Headache
- Sweaty or cold hands
- Butterflies in stomach, or uneasy feeling
- Trembling hands, knees and voice

My experience that was harder to detect

Step 2: Detecting the negative thoughts that are fueling your anxiety

Negative thoughts are phrases we say to ourselves out loud or internally that cause us to doubt our abilities or add pressure to ourselves before we perform

Examples:

- I'm not good enough to be here.
- Don't mess up this test. If I can't make it through this dressage test, I don't deserve to be here.
- If I have one stop on xc then I'm a failure
- Everyone is watching me- What if I mess up in front of all these people? What will they think of me?
- I'm not going to win this class, everyone here is more talented than my horse and I. There is no point.
- If I go off course/have too many rails/have stops on xc/get eliminated then I will have wasted my parents time and money. They will be so disappointed in me.
- What if I get eliminated? Then I'm a failure. I don't deserve to be here if I get eliminated.



These thoughts are giving your anxiety
POWER!

Step 2: Detecting the negative thoughts that are fueling your anxiety

Detecting the thoughts- and challenging them!

“I had one stop on xc, I’m a failure. ”

To:

“I had one stop on xc. There were 19 other jumps I rode really well. I still finished the course and the competition!”

“I’m not going to win this class, everyone here is more talented than my horse and I.”

To:

“Every athlete here is in a different point in their training. I may be behind in my training compared to some people in my class, but I’m working to get there. My horse and I are ready to be at this level.”

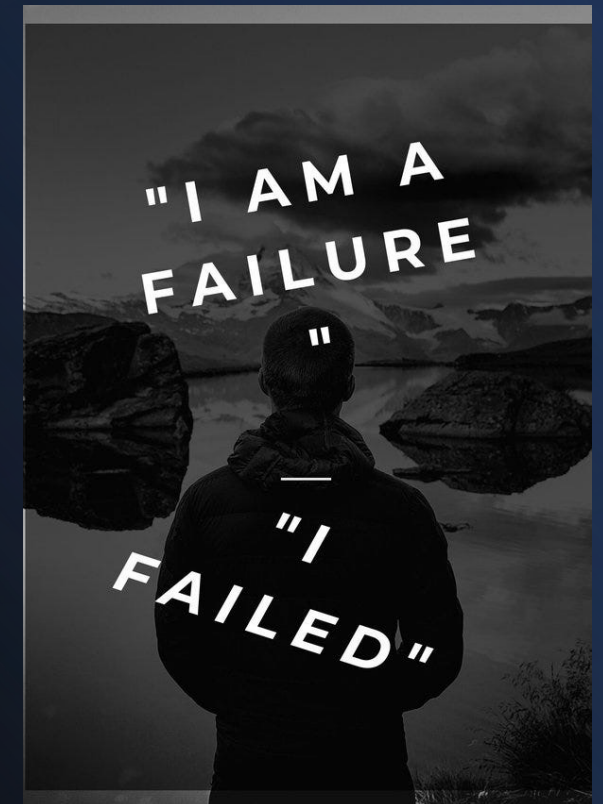


Step 3: Detecting the root cause of anxiety

Without detecting the root cause of anxiety, we will never know the deeper meaning behind it and we will never be able to challenge it and “get rid of it”

Example of the root cause:

- “What if I have a stop on xc???”
- If I have a stop on xc then it means I’m a failure and I don’t deserve to be here at this level (perfectionism, extreme pressure, validation, self-esteem)
- “Everyone is watching me- what I fall off and everyone judges me?”
- If people see me fail, then they will not like me or be proud of me (people pleasing tendencies, validation from others, perfectionism)



Step 4: Practice grounding techniques to reduce the anxiety

There are many grounding techniques and what works for you is very personal and individualized- it requires some trialing!

- Breathing Exercises (3-4-5 technique)
- Five Senses
- Listening to Music
- Positive Self-Talk
- Journaling – night before event
- Meditation- 5 min quick positive reset
- Hold ice/put hands in cold water
 - When getting ready for a phase- goal is to focus on your body rather than your internalized dialogue



Step 5: Use social support!!

The environment and team around you makes a significant difference in your mental well-being and stress levels

- Parents- we can feel pressure from parents to succeed- however, we can also receive tremendous mental support from our parents if we communicate the need
- Peers- fellow competitors or friends can help provide support for each other! Always support your rider peers- everyone has good and bad days- cheer everyone on regardless of their results!
- Coaches- coaches hold us to a high standard and teach us new skills- but ultimately just want the very best for us and want to watch us grow and achieve our goals
- Therapist- therapists can help you identify the root cause of your anxiety and develop stress management that is personalized to you

Communication is key! If you are feeling intense pressure from your social circle and it is affecting you- have a conversation to communicate your concerns or boundaries



Step 6: Put it into practice!

- Trial and Error
- Start having awareness for changes in your body preparing for shows or at the events
- Have a list of mindfulness activities you are going to start trying the days/weeks leading up to the event and during your next event
- After the event- reflect on your stress and the negative thoughts you were having- write them down!! Challenge them!
- If a mindfulness technique didn't work for you- try a new one next time!

Part of your success is determined by your ability to regulate your internal stress and anxiety!

You can have the most athletic horse and have done more training than anyone- but if you cannot regulate your stress response- it may make or break your results!



Common Mistakes with reducing anxiety



A common mistake I see in riders is trying to ignore your body's response to nerves and anxiety. "Just pretend you are not nervous" or "ignore that voice in your head making you nervous".

While this can be effective short-term to ignore your stress response and distract yourself- this anxiety and stress will continue to come up in other areas of your life because it has not been worked through. (Ex. The reason you put such pressure on yourself and the root cause)

Ex. I tried this strategy in my competition experience- however, I still became very anxious and stressed in other parts of life such as school and work. The stress response to pressure does not go away when we ignore it- we need to have awareness, address it, and develop healthier coping strategies.

Other Common Areas That Affect Performance

Perfectionism

Evaluation of self

Emotion Regulation (after a phase or competition)

Negative Mindset (focusing on the one thing that went wrong)

Individual Therapy Services

If you find yourself resonating with what we have discussed today and find yourself wanting to seek extra help to enhance your performance this season, I offer individual therapy services:

- Virtual Therapy
- Free 20-minute consultation call
- Contact:
 - 647-797-0703
 - info@meaningfullyconnectedcounselling.com
 - elise@meaningfullyconnectedcounselling.com
 - Meaningfully Connected Counselling website- can find me in the team to book
- 1hr session is \$95 with sliding scale applicable





Questions!!

Please ask any questions you may have about NAYC, my experience, performance anxiety, or my services!