

Stop Taking It Out on Everyone Else!

Dear Janet,

When I go to horse shows, I tend to get very emotional and snappy toward whoever is around me, even when that person is helping (such as my boyfriend, who's come along with me to groom and help with my horse). When I'm in the ring, I'm fine, totally focused—but outside the ring I'm screaming at my horse and/or boyfriend, blaming them for everything from a smudge on my boots to classes that run late! Once I get out of my class, no matter if I've done well or not, I am always more relaxed. Then I feel terribly guilty about being mean.

What can I do to keep myself more relaxed before my classes and consequently make life easier for my horse, my boy-friend, and me?

Roz



Roz, there's a lot you can do to make life easier for all concerned—but it has nothing to do with getting yourself to feel more relaxed before your classes. It has to do with holding yourself responsible for pulling the punch.

Wanting to *feel* better before you make yourself *act* better is only human nature, but the truth is that it's also an indulgence most relationships can't afford. No one should ever be asked by a loved one to wait for courteous treatment while that loved one tries to figure out how to feel less nervous or less angry or less anxious or less depressed.

You—or anybody else—may not be able to help feeling lousy from time to time, but you sure can help yourself not take it out on the people around you. Our families, our communities, and our societies become stripped of civility the moment we make accountability for our actions contingent upon how we are feeling. Doing so lets any one of us excuse ourselves for throw-

ing a tantrum, being malicious, or being plain old miserable company by claiming that we were having a "bad day."

If you find yourself feeling nervous before your class, Roz, remember, so do most people. Feeling that way does not make you more entitled than anyone else to lash out at the friends, officials, or fellow competitors who are trying to help you. *You must take steps to stop yourself from indulging your temper.* If you don't, you'll become only one more nervous rider who's conveniently defined herself as a diva.

Here are some ideas to steer you in a different (and more becoming) direction:

■ Learn to recognize the signs of your anxiety—before everyone else does.

You must become an expert at picking up on the first signs that you're becoming anxious. Think: Does anxiety come as something you feel physiologically (e.g., "butterflies," dry mouth, shakes), or as a way you start thinking

about things (e.g., very negatively or catastrophically), or as a way you start acting (e.g., impatient, short-tempered)? Don't spend time blaming yourself for how you feel. That can too easily distract you from what you *need* to do: hold yourself responsible for what you choose to do with how you feel.

I believe that people *choose* to let themselves lose their tempers—or, instead, to hold themselves in check despite the impulse to cut loose. They *choose* to speak harshly and get sarcastic—or to assume that the other person is probably doing the best he or she can under stressful circumstances. They *choose* to say, "Oh I couldn't help it, I was just really upset"—or to say, "I'm sorry. I let fly and I shouldn't have, and I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

■ Select one or two strategies you can be prepared to put into effect before you find yourself bubbling over.

Examples? Taking a two-minute private walk to cool down; repeating a personal motto about patience; or simply telling your helpers up front that you are feeling very nervous—an effective, forthright way to defuse some of the tension.

Another helpful thing you can do: Use those occasions as opportunities to get in a little batting practice at feeling uptight but still acting sportsmanlike. That is *anyone's* first job at a horse show.

And finally . . .

■ Learn to apologize graciously and generously—a monumentally important but neglected social skill.

For stubborn people like myself, who don't like having to say we're sorry (but will when we mess up), the prospect of having to apologize in the future is often a good enough prompt to get us to do the right thing in the first place. Maybe it can be for you, too. ■