



Performance psychologist and equestrian answers readers' questions.

Dear Dr. Darby,

After months of being at home, I am considering showing again, but I feel pretty stressed out and overwhelmed just thinking about it. In addition to feeling out of practice, I know I won't be going into a situation that feels at all like normal. Frankly, I'm not sure I should be showing with all that is going on in the world. Not only the health crisis, but also the civil unrest, leaves me uncertain and also makes showing seem rather unimportant.

As you can see, I feel very confused! Any advice is welcome!

—Sincerely,
M.D., Adult Amateur, San Diego

Dear M,

Thanks for reaching out. You are not alone in your feelings. We are in the middle of a very confusing, overwhelming, and frightening time. I don't have a magic answer for you, but I will do my best to address some of your concerns.

First, I want to acknowledge your feelings and affirm that there is no right or wrong way to go about reentering the show world. I believe we all have to make decisions that feel right for us, our horses, and our lives. Some riders I work with feel really eager and ready to jump back in; others feel they want to sit out the year. For each of us it's important to assess: do we feel safe enough to go back to the show ring? In terms of safety, I'm referring not only to COVID-19, but also to the civil unrest. If you feel unsafe, then I'd say you should seriously consider not competing yet. Unless you can feel comfortable, you won't be able to be fully present for your horse.

My sense is that if you are uncertain, it might be worth your while to sit out the very first horse shows and instead, see how they go for others. Perhaps you'll have the ability to accompany someone else or at least hear about your barnmates' experiences and learn what the new procedures are. In addition, it's my guess that as the shows go on, we'll all get more practiced at our new routines, and things will go more smoothly.

In terms of feeling out of practice, you are in the same boat with the rest of us! We all have to accept that it's basically a re-start to a very odd and shortened season. I would suggest that if you decide to move forward, focus on the first show as practice rather than as a final exam. Set reasonable goals for the first few days, remembering what those first shows are like in January after your winter break. This advice will be harder to take for those who have to jump right back into Junior Hunter Finals or similar big events, but I still suggest to take a compassionate approach: give it your best and have gratitude for the ability to get back in the ring.

Regarding your comment that showing feels unimportant right now: ask yourself why. Is it because you feel guilty about what you have relative to others? Is it harder to enjoy your life when there is so much inequity in the world? Are you called to spend more time and energy focusing on other aspects of your life or your community? Allow yourself some space to think about your priorities, what has meaning for you in your life, and what you want to change. Rather than feeling stuck or paralyzed, use your feeling as motivation to create an action plan. There are many ways to generate positive change, and maybe this is the time for you to jump in and make more of an impact.

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Last, but definitely not least: let's fully acknowledge the collective stress we are under right now. The world has completely changed in so many ways since a few months ago. We will adapt, we will figure out how to move forward, but we all know we're not going back to the old ways. It's going to take some time, compassion, and resilience, but as competitive equestrians, we've all got it in us to do the necessary mental and emotional work.

Darby Bonomi, PhD is a Sport and Performance Psychologist based in San Francisco. She works with equestrians in all disciplines, as well as other athletes, to achieve optimal performance in and out of the competition. She can be reached at www.darbybonomi.com.

