

Horses don't have stage fright—but their riders do

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(Phys.org)—It is well known that horses show symptoms of stress when ridden but relatively little attention has been paid to the effects on their riders. This is surprising, as equestrian sports rely on the close cooperation between the animals and their riders. How does the horse-rider team cope with the stress involved in competing in an equestrian event?

The issue has now been studied by Mareike von Lewinski in the group of Christine Aurich at the University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna (Vetmeduni Vienna), together with colleagues at the Vetmeduni Vienna and at the Ecole Nationale d'Equitation in Saumur, France. The scientists measured the changes in various stress-related parameters, such as the level of [stress hormones](#) in [saliva](#) and the regularity of the pulse, in [horses](#) and their riders when the animals were ridden in a particular show programme. The measurements were taken both when the presentation was completed in front of about a thousand spectators and when the riders practised beforehand without any spectators. The results were compared to assess how the riders and their mounts responded to the presence of the audience.

In line with previous experiments, the researchers could observe symptoms of stress – higher cortisol concentrations in the saliva and more irregular heartbeats – both in horses and in their riders during the study. Furthermore, the riders showed significantly higher levels of stress when an audience was present, confirming what was suspected: participation in equestrian events is associated with stage fright, even in experienced riders. There are many reasons why riders might be more stressed when performing in front of an audience than when they are practising for an event – as Aurich says, "they are only human, after all." In contrast, the horses appeared not to be affected by the presence of spectators: their reaction to the course was essentially independent of whether an audience was present or not. In other words, the horses and their riders respond differently to the challenges posed by performing for spectators, with the horses not suffering from the increased levels of stress shown by their riders.

The results imply that the riders do not communicate their heightened anxiety to the animals. The lack of transfer of emotions between rider and horse was completely unexpected. Aurich concedes that "we started with the assumption that the rider's stress would affect his horse but this

does not seem to be the case. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that we were working with experienced horses and highly skilled riders: our findings cannot be generalized to inexperienced [riders](#), who might be less able to prevent their horses from being stressed by the situation."

Provided by University of Veterinary Medicine -- Vienna

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