

Chapter 1

Anxiety: A Force to Be Reckoned With

No pressure, no diamonds.

Mary Case

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Jane had been showing for almost a year in competition obedience with her Springer Spaniel, Goldie. Jane signed up for basic obedience classes and Goldie proved to be eager and smart; she loved the training. Jane was hooked after the first few lessons and knew she wanted to become a competitive handler. As the first show approached, Jane was hit with a case of nerves such as she'd never experienced before. She was in a panic, and Goldie, picking up on Jane's anxiety, vomited in the ring during a heeling pattern. And it was downhill from then on. No matter how much she and Goldie trained, each show became one mortifying experience after another. And Goldie, once so keen, now had her own case of canine jitters.

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a normal and important facet of being human. However, anxiety has negative connotations. Many people spend time and money trying to eradicate it. Certainly, it is an ever-present and necessary component in the competitive dog show arena. We need that tension to be able to succeed and reach our personal best. Anxiety must be present to have the spark and vitality in competition, but we need to channel it into a great performance.

When anxiety becomes severe, debilitating and chronic, it breaks down the handler's ability to transfer her training from class to the competition ring. It can limit or block any chance for success. And the pressure is intense! Handlers are "on stage." Handlers are seen, compared, evaluated and scored. They depend on their canine partner to come through in tricky and tough ring situations. From Agility to Obedience to Breed, Flyball, Rally-O and Freestyle, competing can be very intimidating.

FEAR VS. ANXIETY

We often use the words *fear* and *anxiety* interchangeably, but they have two different definitions. Fear is something specific and describable. For example, you get out of your car and turn to see a truck hurtling toward you at 60 miles an hour. The fear of being hit, hurt or killed can be explained in specific terms. You react by trying to jump out of the way. Anxiety, on the other hand, is non-specific and intangible in nature. For example, you get out of your car at a competition site, and when you see the building where the show is, you recall the last time when your handling was miserable, you panicked in the ring and your dog did not qualify. You become anxious, convinced that this scenario will repeat itself, but you can only imagine what might occur. Not being able to prepare for the unexpected makes our feelings of dread very difficult to cope with. Throughout the book, we will be using *fear* and *anxiety* in place of each other, because many handlers do.

RING NERVES

Ring nerves affect handlers in various ways. Many have given up competing, even though they love working with their dogs. Others still show, but are unable to achieve high scores and titles. Some may be getting the scores, but do so without enjoyment. New handlers are often fearful to begin competing.

Let's look at Jane again. Jane is actually a composite of three handlers who had either stopped competing or who were contemplating quitting before they entered the Ring Nerve Program. These handlers now compete in a variety of

dog sports. We'll follow Jane from chapter to chapter, charting her progress from nervous wreck to confident competitor.

Pre-show

The following is an example of Jane's preshow anxiety and how it leads to ring nerves. Anticipatory anxiety is often worse than the actual experience because imagination can run amok. For example, the moment Jane thinks about competing, two things occur: She remembers her last appalling performance, and in the same instance begins to worry about what *might* happen in the future, weeks or months before she will even step into the ring.

Entering the Show

Jane decides to enter a show and immediately feels some trepidation. She's experienced anxiety in past trials. Chronically low scores and NQs plagued her in the past. Jane relives humiliating past show experiences in her mind as if they were taking place now.

At the same time, she worries that history will repeat itself, and the "what ifs" begin:

*What if Goldie throws up again?
What if I feel like throwing up when I'm in the ring?
What if people I know are there and I mess up?
What if my nerves are ruining my dog?*

As these thoughts and worries continue, her nerves build inexorably toward the day of the show. Jane will be a nervous wreck, taking another hit to her already low self-esteem and feeling incapable of ever winning.

Anticipating the Show

This increased anxiety permeates every aspect of Jane's life up to the day of competition and manifests in a variety of symptoms:

- Difficulty sleeping and/or having nightmares
- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Chronic headaches and stomach upsets
- Feeling tired and irritable weeks before a show
- Inability to concentrate
- Training sessions fraught with anxiety

Training Woes

In dog training classes, Jane compares herself to other handlers and their dogs. These crushing negative mental tapes are playing all the time now:

*I'll never be successful in the ring.
I always fail.
Goldie can't measure up.*

Why am I doing this?

As the show date approaches, Jane questions why she pursues competing, because it's just too painful. Her symptoms have intensified, creating terrible stress for Goldie. Jane thinks she'll have to give up competition, which she is passionate about, because the anxiety is killing her.

The Night Before

The night before the show, Jane's symptoms spike. She has stomach problems and a persistent headache. She can't eat, is irritable and feels tense. She's never been to the show site, and that's making her even more anxious. Jane rechecks the directions and map compulsively. Her stress increases.

Packing for the show is an enormous physical strain. Jane has been bingeing on junk food over the last week and her clothes feel tight. She can't find anything to wear and thinks she looks fat and ugly.

Jane goes to bed early, but can't fall asleep. She mentally replays the last show with all the embarrassment she felt about her performance, unable to shut these thoughts off. Since she has to rise early for a long drive, Jane worries that she'll be competing on no sleep, so she watches the clock off and on most of the night. Jane manages to doze for a few hours and wakes with a sense of dread.

Going to the Show

Jane's stomach is a mess; she can't eat but drinks her usual two cups of coffee to wake up. In the car, Jane's negative thoughts are running at full speed. She puts on music to relax but it doesn't help. On the way she makes frequent stops at fast-food restaurants to use the bathroom.

The Show

As anxiety mounts to the day of the competition, its physical and mental symptoms become very difficult to control. Jane's ring nerves have intensified to such a degree that she has a feeling of impending doom, knowing another disaster is about to happen.

Entering the Show Site

Jane's stomach knots as she pulls into the parking lot. She tenses her body to push away the fear and grips the steering wheel to gain some control before she exits the car.

As she enters the building, the noise and commotion hit her. Her stomach churns and she feels nauseous, but she gets her number and begins to set up. Jane contemplates scratching and leaving, but that will only make her feel worse, so she grits her teeth and stays.

Pre-Ring Jitters

Jane checks out the rings and judges, but just watching the other competitors only heightens her anxiety. She looks at the running order, sees that it's almost time and begins warming up Goldie. Goldie is inattentive, and Jane's apprehension increases even more, reinforcing what she already believes: they don't have a chance and will NQ as usual. In the on-deck position, Jane finds it difficult to breathe. Her legs tremble and her heart pounds. She feels out of control and at any moment may lose it.

The Ring

When the judge asks if she is ready, Jane's nerves send her into a panic attack. She seizes up and can't concentrate. She has difficulty hearing and understanding the judge's commands. Jane emotionally shuts down to cope with the panic, disconnecting from the event and from Goldie. Jane fulfills her prophecy—they NQ.

The Result

Jane is heartbroken and can't see a way out. Her fears have eroded her self-confidence and belief in her abilities. This is her last show. She stops competing, but continues to check out listings for a "Show and Go" or something equally nonthreatening. But there is no safe event, because even just thinking about going into a ring starts her panic. It's at this point, feeling isolated from the sport she loves and depressed about her situation, that Jane takes the first steps to turn herself around to get back into competition.

Summary of Jane's Experience

Jane's case is typical of severe ring nerves. Readers may see some of their own experiences in her story. Competing is difficult. It takes time, patience and discipline. Unless handlers can cope with performance anxiety, ring nerves will block their road to success.

A Handler's Tale

Ruth attended a Ring Nerve Seminar because severe body tension was causing her and her sighthound difficulties in Obedience. Though the dog was incredible in practice, as soon as he entered the ring he would turn from her and begin to sniff the ground, and Ruth found it almost impossible to get his attention for the rest of their event. Needless to say, Ruth was terribly disappointed in their scores. She asked a friend to watch their performance during the next show. The friend reported that as soon as the judge asked if the handler was ready, the blood drained from Ruth's face and it became very tense and stiff. Her mouth turned down and her eyes bulged.

The friend stated that Ruth's face looked like a death mask. No wonder her poor dog turned away and refused to engage!

Ring nerves also have a powerful impact on your canine partner. The dog observes the handler's physical, mental and emotional state. If a handler is cheerful and excited in training sessions, most dogs think: *Wow! This is great! I love it! Let's keep doing it!* But when show time comes, if instead of that wonderful smile the handler flashed in training class, a grimace covers her face, the dog thinks: *Whoa! What's the matter with her? If things look this bad, I'm out of here!*

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?

Anxiety affects every aspect of our mind and body. To get the most out of this book's exercises and techniques, you need to understand how it works. You'll need to know a little about the nervous system and why you just can't "think" them away. Understanding and accepting performance anxiety is a major step in combating it.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

The nervous system is the body's complex organizer. It controls every aspect of living from movement of limbs, organ function and breathing, to thinking, emotions and reactions to our environment. It is divided into the *central nervous system*, which consists of the spinal cord and the brain, and the *peripheral nervous system*, which is found outside of the brain and spinal cord and consists of two major divisions: the *somatic nervous system*, which sends sensory information to the central nervous system, and the *autonomic nervous system*, which automatically performs basic human functions (such as muscle action of the

heart) without conscious thought. The autonomic nervous system is influenced by emotions; for example, anxiety about competing can get your heart racing. This system is divided into three parts, two of which, the *sympathetic* and *parasympathetic*, we will examine a little later in this chapter. A closer look at these two systems will give us a greater understanding of how ring nerves function.

The Central Nervous System

The central nervous system is divided into the *brain*, which is located in the brain cavity, and the *spinal cord*, located in the vertebral cavity. It is home to over 100 billion neurons (nerve cells) that carry information throughout the body by receiving and transmitting electrical impulses. Let's look at these two divisions.

The Spinal Cord

The spinal cord, made up of nerve tissue, is protected by the vertebrae of the spinal column. It is the major pathway for information between the brain and peripheral nervous system. Messages in the brain are transmitted by spinal nerves to muscles and joints, which affects movement, and to glands that secrete hormones, including epinephrine and norepinephrine, which may elicit the "fight or flight" response.

The Brain

The extraordinarily complex human brain weighs approximately two pounds and has the enormous task of communicating to and controlling every organ and bodily operation. It communicates and controls the human body through hormones and electrical impulses that run down the spinal column.

This human supercomputer consists of:

- *The brain stem (reptilian brain)*, where our "fight or flight" survival response is found, controls automatic functions such as breathing, heart rate, blood pressure and functioning of internal organs for digestion, urination, etc.
- *The cerebellum* has two hemispheres. It is located behind the brain stem and controls and regulates movement, posture and balance.
- *The cerebrum*, the largest part of the brain, controls our higher functions, including thought, logic, language, voluntary movement and perception. It is divided into two hemispheres: the creative right side and the logical left side. The cerebrum also contains the *limbic system*, whose main function is the control of emotions with another of its sections, the *hippocampus*, governing memory.

The Peripheral Nervous System

The peripheral nervous system, linked to the central nervous system by cranial and spinal nerves, has two branches.

- The somatic nervous system carries sensory information to the brain and spinal cord via neurons that are contained in blood and lymph vessels, internal organs and sense organs, as well as muscles, tendons and the skin. The information these neurons carry communicate to the brain what is going on internally, as well as what's happening in the external surroundings, so it can prepare an appropriate response.
- The autonomic nervous system operates unconsciously and controls and regulates involuntary body systems and organs, such as heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, by sending out hormones and electrical impulses. If you walk into a show site where you previously experienced an anxiety attack and begin to have the same feelings as before, the sensory information will signal a threat and then the autonomic nervous system will trigger its defense, the fight or flight response. This system is divided into two complimentary branches.

The Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system regulates body systems and organs by sending out hormones and electrical impulses. For example, it can rev up or slow down breathing depending on the body's need. This system is divided into two branches:

- The *sympathetic nervous system* is responsible for readying the body to meet dangerous or threatening situations, which is known as the fight or flight response.
- The *parasympathetic nervous system* is activated when the danger is over and returns the body to its normal resting condition to wait for the next threat.

THE FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE

Now that you've read about how the nervous system functions, you can see that all its parts are interrelated, so when ring nerves strike, its effects are felt both mentally and physically. What follows is an explanation of the body's reaction during the fight or flight response, and then we'll see what happens when fight or flight is activated at a competition.

When a real or perceived threat occurs the brain immediately sends messages to the sympathetic nervous system, triggering major bodily changes to prepare for fight or flight:

- Heart rate and blood pressure increase to pump more blood into the brain, muscles and organs to meet the threat.
- Blood flow decreases to extremities, the hands and feet, which are not as important for survival.
- Breathing becomes rapid to obtain more oxygen.
- Muscles tense, preparing for action.
- Adrenaline and other stress hormones are released into the bloodstream.
- The liver sends stored sugar into the bloodstream to meet increased need for energy.
- Pupils dilate to let in more light to heighten awareness of surroundings.
- The body sweats to cool itself for the heat of battle or escape.
- Saliva production is reduced to suspend digestion, and “dry mouth” occurs.
- Emptying of bowel and bladder takes place to clean the body for action.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT AT A COMPETITION

Let's look at what happens when you're at a show and ring nerves strike:

- You interpret stepping into the competition ring as perilous.
- Your brain gets this message and charges up all systems to meet the danger.
- Your heart starts pounding rapidly.
- Hands and feet may feel cold and clammy.
- Rapid, shallow chest breathing begins, which may lead to hyperventilation.
- Your entire body is extremely tense and stiff, making you feel awkward and off balance.
- You're slammed with an adrenaline rush when stress chemicals are released into the bloodstream.
- You become hyperaware of surroundings and noise.
- A “cold sweat” may occur.
- You may get “cottonmouth.”
- While waiting around you make frequent trips to the bathroom.

Conquering Ring Nerves



Uh-oh, I feel panicky.



Are we going to NQ again?



Now, you're not going to pay attention?!

If you don't scratch and still decide to enter the show in spite of anxiety, your mind and body will be affected: your logic, reasoning, memory and perception will not function properly. So it's no wonder that you can't remember the course, hear or understand the calls, connect with your dog or even recall what happened when you're done.

Finally, the danger is over and you're on the way home, and the parasympathetic nervous system is activated to return the body to its normal, nonaroused, resting condition. But if you experience ring nerves as a constant threat because of another impending competition, then your body will never fully return to a relaxed state. Stress levels will drop to some degree after a competition, but if thinking about this show, past shows or future shows trigger anxiety, then the whole cycle repeats itself without leaving home. This is ring nerves in its chronic form.

WHY ME?

Most people who suffer from anxiety in some form question why it's happening to them. These handlers often vent their frustrations in ring nerve seminars and e-mail messages. They believe that no one else in their training class suffers the way they do or is so blocked and they want to desperately understand. "Why me?" they lament.

14 Conquering Ring Nerves

To them, ring nerves are illogical and inexplicable, as are their feelings of dread and doom about entering a dog show. They know that going into the ring is not dangerous. If they NQ, nothing is really going to happen to them. No one is perfect in the ring! Though the symptoms seem absurd, the anguish and pain is real. There is no one theory on severe anxiety and its causes. There's no one definitive reason for anxiety to surface. Anxiety operates on many levels. The following are only a few of the possible reasons:

- Hereditarily predisposed to anxiety disorders
- Learned anxiety from parents
- Childhood factors: critical/rigid/overprotective/neglectful parents
- Traumatic experiences
- Medical conditions

Later, in the Chapter 6, *The Confidence Game*, we'll expand on the causes of anxiety.

RING NERVE CHECKLIST

The following exercise is helpful to begin the process of combating ring nerves. It helps you take a long, hard look at what happens to you and your dog during competition.

1. Read the following list and check off all that apply to you.
2. When you're finished, read what you've written and try to evoke a feeling of anxiety.
3. Rate your symptoms on the Ring Nerve Anxiety Scale below.
4. We'll be using this information in a later chapter, so keep it at hand.
5. Relax for a few minutes.

Ring Nerve Symptoms

Do you experience any of the following prior to competition, during competition, or in between shows? Check off all that apply and include any other symptoms.

Physical Symptoms

- Rapid heartbeat
- Dry mouth
- Shaky limbs
- Tension in the head, neck and shoulders
- Headache
- Tight facial muscles
- Nausea, diarrhea, vomiting
- Tightening in the throat
- Shallow breathing, hyperventilation
- Trembling

Mental and Emotional Symptoms

- Loss of concentration
- Feeling faint
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling out of control
- Feeling tearful
- Feeling helpless
- Feeling anger
- Feeling shame
- Feeling terrified of the ring
- Panic attacks

Other: _____

Competition Problems

Do any of the following take place during training or while you're in the ring? Check off all that apply and include other experiences.

- Disconnect from your dog
- Fear that your dog will make a mistake and NQ
- Getting angry at your dog for a poor showing
- Fear of being negatively evaluated
- Training well, but showing badly
- Obsessing about past performances
- Experiencing anxiety during training sessions
- Negatively comparing yourself to other handlers
- Fearing the judge
- Stop showing

Other: _____

RING NERVE ANXIETY SCALE

- 10 _____ Panic city!!!
- 9 _____ How do I get off this runaway train?!
- 8 _____ No place to run, no place to hide
- 7 _____ They're he-e-ere!
- 6 _____ Not feeling so hot
- 5 _____ Feel the build
- 4 _____ Uh-Oh!
- 3 _____ First twinges
- 2 _____ So far so good
- 1 _____ Feelin' cool
- 0 _____ No ring nerves in sight

Does your dog do any of the following during training or competition?

- Avoid looking at you during competition
- Shut down in training sessions
- Shut down in the ring
- Lag or respond to signals too slowly
- Get frantic and out of control
- React to your ring nerves
- NQ often
- Not want to compete

Other: _____

SAMPLE CHECKLIST

Following is an example of one handler's checklist.

Ring Nerve Symptoms

Do you experience any of the following prior to competition, during competition, or in between shows? Check off all that apply and include any other symptoms.

Physical Symptoms

- Rapid heartbeat
- Dry mouth
- Shaky limbs
- Tension in the head, neck and shoulders
- Headache
- Tight facial muscles
- Nausea, diarrhea, vomiting

- Tightening in the throat
- Shallow breathing; Hyperventilation
- Trembling

Mental and Emotional Symptoms

- Loss of concentration
- Feeling faint
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling out of control
- Feeling tearful
- Feeling helpless
- Feeling anger
- Feeling terrified of the ring
- Panic attacks

Other: *Panic hits the night before a show. Changed training schools and have no support group now to go to shows with, which adds to anxiety. I'd rate all of the above on the Ring Nerve Anxiety Scale as 7 to 10.*

Competition Problems

Do any of the following take place during training or while you're in the ring? Check off all that apply and include other experiences.

- Disconnect from your dog
- Fear that your dog will make a mistake and NQ
- Getting angry at your dog for a poor showing
- Fear of being negatively evaluated
- Training well, but showing badly
- Obsessing about past performances
- Experiencing anxiety during training sessions
- Negatively comparing yourself to other handlers
- Fearing the judge
- Stop showing

Other: *Everything in this list is between 6 to 9.*

Does your dog do any of the following during training or competition?

- Avoid looking at you during competition
- Shut down in training sessions
- Shut down in the ring
- Lag or respond to signals too slowly
- Get frantic and out of control
- React to your ring nerves
- NQ often
- Not want to compete

Other: *None of these are during training, all during competing, although not in Agility, probably because I don't do Agility as seriously as Competition Obedience. During Obedience my anxiety level is between 8 and 10.*

Ring nerves in its chronic state can lead to exhaustion, a host of mental and emotional symptoms, such as depression, feelings of worthlessness and helplessness and even physical ailments like hypertension. If these occur, giving up competing may seem like the only way out. It's not!

THE PROCESS OF CONQUERING RING NERVES

Your way to overcome ring nerves will require determination, discipline and practice. It won't be easy, because changing anxiety-ridden responses is difficult to do. The road to competing at your peak will be filled with many obstacles and setbacks. You may take two steps forward and one step back. But remember, you'll be moving ahead and getting closer to being a successful handler.

It is possible to stop ring nerves, connect with your dog, keep the necessary tension that competition requires, learn to concentrate and be emotionally open to your event. Your journey to freedom from the anxiety that blocks success begins with this book.

FURTHER READING

Martin M. Anthony, et al. *The Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven Techniques for Overcoming Your Fears*. New Harbinger Publishing, 2000.

David Barlow. *Anxiety and Its Disorders: The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic* (2nd edition). Guilford Press; 2001.

Lucinda Bassett. *From Panic to Power: Proven Techniques to Calm Your Anxieties, Conquer Your Fears, and Put You in Control of Your Life*. Quill, 2001.

Edmund J. Bourne. *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook* (3rd edition). New Harbinger Publishing, 2000.

Jonathan R. T. Davidson. *The Anxiety Book: Developing Strength in the Face of Fear* Henry Dreher, Riverhead Books, 2003.

Signe A. Dayhoff. *Diagonally-Parked in a Parallel Universe: Working Through Social Anxiety Effectiveness*. Plus Publications, 2000.

Janet I. Decker. *Hypnosis for Stress Reduction* (audio CD). Hypnotherapy Services, 2001.

RESOURCE LIST

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Anxiety Disorders,
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America, <http://www.adaa.org>

The Anxiety Panic Internet Resource, <http://www.algy.com/anxiety/anxiety.html>

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General; Chapter 4, Anxiety Disorders,
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/chapter4/sec2.html>

Dealing with Depression or Anxiety Disorders, <http://www.mentalhealth.com/fr20.htm>

Panic Disorder, Panic Attacks and General Anxiety—What You Should Do,
<http://www.geocities.com/spiroll2>

Anxieties.Com: A free Internet self-help site, <http://www.anxieties.com>

Anxiety and Depression Resource Organization since 1984, <http://www.freedomfromfear.com>