

Reducing Performance Anxiety in Athletes

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Anxiety and its causes mean many different things to different people. For some, a fear of heights, or nervousness in public speaking may provoke anxiety, whereas for others the worry of an upcoming deadline, or apprehension in trying out a new skill may be the cause. The impact of these kinds of stressors can produce a multitude of reactions such as behavioural changes (i.e. sleep disturbances), altered cognitive function (i.e. lack of concentration, negative thinking), physiological changes (i.e. high blood pressure, increased heart rate, shallow breathing), and various emotional states (i.e. depression, anxiety, irritability). Not surprisingly, with the influence of social media, we are seeing younger generations with higher stress levels than the average population.

When talking specifically about anxiety in sports – we are more focused on a temporary state of anxiety called Performance Anxiety. This specific type of anxiety can lead to a decrease in athletic performance if the athlete has too much *perceived* stress. Perceived being the operative word here. What one perceives to be stressful depends on their environment, genetics and previous life events, and, as a result perceived stress differs from one individual to the next. For example, quite often we see athletes get nervous about “who is watching” them, whereas other athletes don’t take any notice and it is one less stressor.

It is important to point out here that some performance anxiety is not only ‘good’, but also necessary. We are all familiar with the effects of boredom or complacency on performance as well. Therefore, the aim is not to abolish performance anxiety, but to determine the right amount for optimal performance. This, in turn, can lead to achieving an Ideal Performance State (IPS) when competing. This state is characterized as; an absence of fear, narrow focus on the activity itself, sense of effortlessness, no overanalyzing, sense of personal control and a distortion of space and time. Although the concept of getting to an IPS seems simple, the ability to get there can be evasive. So how can you help?

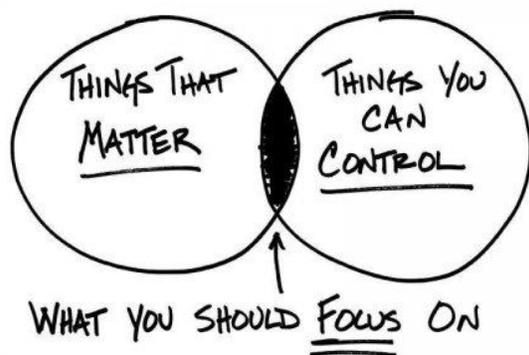


First and foremost, it is important to recognize that major differences cannot be made the day of the competition. We all know Rome wasn’t built in a day. Well, mental skills (like most physical skills) aren’t developed in a day either! With this said, coaches can consider incorporating the following suggestions into their training plans;

1. Improve awareness – gain a better understanding of your own stressors as well as those of your athletes. Learn whether the athlete

performs better with higher or lower levels of stress.

2. Create a culture – incorporate some basic mental skills such as breathing techniques and meditation into everyday training. Empower athletes to push themselves. Teach gratitude.
3. Taper feedback – athletes are less able to “digest” competence-based feedback as a competition draws closer; therefore it is important to adjust what type of feedback we give them and when. For example, one might give 70% competence and 30% confidence feedback 3 months before a competition and taper it to 30% competence and 70% confidence by three days before a competition.
4. Contact your local Mental Performance Consultant- Coaches already wear so many different hats – it can be extremely difficult to also take on the various mental performance needs of athletes. That is why Mental Performance Consultants exist! Consider one as support staff and reduce anxiety for both coaches and athletes.



BEHAVIOR GAP

When trying to help athletes reduce their nerves or anxiety in actual competition settings, some of the following may be useful.

1. Get them to BREATHE– In through the nose, out through the mouth, and engaging the diaphragm. This helps slow the heart rate down, and can elicit the relaxation response, allowing our brain to work more effectively.
2. Focus on the controllables- Whether it is execution of a specific skill they have been working on, a race plan, or having a personal best performance; try and bring things back to what is within the athlete’s control.
3. Use visualization – try breaking it down to specific situations or one event at a time. Focus should be on the execution of a skill or play. Visualization can also be used to go over a ‘back up’ plan when encountering difficult circumstances.
4. Keep information short and simple – When experiencing anxiety, our brain doesn’t take in as much information as we normally do. Try keeping information as basic as possible; what went well, what needs to improve, and how to improve it.

Finally, it is important to remember that the skills needed to reduce performance anxiety should be treated like any physical skills. They require practice, they should never be done for the first time at a competition, and each athlete should have their own individualized plan based on their specific needs and strengths.