

## 10 ways to combat performance anxiety in competition

Regardless of how we feel about it, anxiety is a necessary part of any competition situation. While it's necessary, as it is often our level of arousal and anxiety that gives us the needed "adrenaline rush" for competition, it does not need to get the best of us. Research suggests that one of the differences between successful athletes and those that may not be as successful is in how they experience the symptoms of anxiety—elite athletes are more likely to interpret the symptoms of anxiety as excitement and the feeling that gets them "pumped", while for less confident athletes, those same symptoms may create issues such as doubt, tension, and negative thoughts.

For most individuals, anxiety related to competition is what we call "anticipatory" anxiety—the thoughts and worries that flood us before a situation or event. Once the event, performance, or competition begins, that anxiety may disappear, or the level may drop. For others, anxiety can remain throughout the entire event, resulting in increased heart rate, loss of breath, hands shaking, tension, concentration difficulties, not being able to "shake off" mistakes, and ultimately, a decrease in performance.

There are several ways in which you can work to decrease your anxiety level in a competition situation, rather than allowing your anxiety to control you. Here are just a few of them:

- **Differentiate between "playing well" and winning:** Don't focus on the outcome. Focusing on winning increases the pressure you place on yourself and puts you in a "future" mindset. Focus, instead, on those small things that you need to do that will allow you to perform well ("I know I need to focus on bringing my knees up in the last fifty meters"... "I need to make sure that I follow through with my shot".) Focusing on the small things will contribute to the likelihood of creating the outcome you want: winning.
- **Set realistic goals to improve specific skills:** Goals should be measurable, challenging and attainable. Vague goals such as "play well" do not offer much structure or direction. Similarly, you don't want them to be too easy...you want to have to work for them, but you also want them to be within your reach.
- **Reduce uncertainty by preparing for "worst case scenarios":** one of the biggest contributors to overwhelming performance anxiety is a lack of confidence, which can happen for a number of reasons—feeling unprepared or fearing repeating a previous mistake, for example. One of the ways you can reduce uncertainty and increase the feeling of "being prepared" is to practice "worst case scenarios". Have a 'back-up' warm-up that you can do relatively quickly in the case you are ever short on time, for example...things happen...buses break down, matches run late, meets run early.

- **Use “cue” statements to refocus:** Develop a ‘cue’ statement that you can practice as a means of helping you to regain your focus. A cue statement should be short, personal, and positive. It should be a short phrase that creates a visual image of the athlete you want to be, and allows you to return your focus and concentration to the task at hand.
- **Cognitive rehearsal and visualization:** Many athletes find that visualizing themselves successfully performing or completing a certain skill contributes to an increase in confidence, and therefore a decrease in anxiety. Cognitive rehearsal and visualization can both contribute toward feeling more prepared.
- **Positive self-talk:** You may surprise yourself to realize how often the dialogue in your head becomes negative when you make a mistake. Recognize critical self-talk and the mistakes or actions that trigger negative conversations with yourself, and work to challenge those automatic negative thoughts and make them positive.
- **Breathing:** This sounds like such a simple strategy, but it is one most often overlooked. Taking a deep breath during competition (or before certain moments—at the free throw line, for example, or before the race begins) can often be used as an opportunity to refocus and re-center. In the middle of stressful situations or when anxiety runs high, there is often the tendency to resort to shallow breathing, which results in even more anxiety. Taking a deep breath may allow you a moment to use additional strategies (positive self-talk, cue statements, goal reminders) that can also decrease anxiety.
- **Prepare properly:** A significant contributing factor to performance anxiety may be the fear of being unprepared. If you feel confident in your preparation—for example, you know that you have taken practice seriously and consistently given your best effort—the result is often a significant level of confidence that you can “trust your training”.

Some degree of ‘performance anxiety’ is a necessary and helpful component of competition. However, if you can turn your worry and anxiety into positive action, you increase your chances of success.