

Five techniques to help you control competition anxiety (Sports Performance Bulletin) (Strategies for all sports)

To reach an optimum psychological state, you need to understand your own natural responses to stress and be sensitive to your bodily signals. Learning to handle the demands of competition involves learning to read your thought patterns and physical responses, and to develop the skills necessary to find your ideal arousal level. Stress management requires excellent self-awareness because, if you know yourself well, you will better understand the roots of your anxiety.

Let's outline a self-awareness technique that allows you to 'capture in a bottle' the feelings you associate with success – 'the winning feeling'.

Then, the popular 'centering' exercise which relieves tension through focusing attention to the centre of your body.

Following this, the 'five breath technique' will be described; an ideal prelude to competition for over-anxious athletes.

The penultimate exercise is 'thought-stopping' which deals with the cognitive symptoms of anxiety such as negative thoughts and images.

Finally, 'letting go' will be presented – the deepest relaxation exercise of the five and ideal for the night before competition.

1. Establishing your 'winning feeling'

Think carefully about the last time you were performing at the top of your game then list every detail you might associate with your 'winning feeling'. Pick out the eight most important aspects of this positive feeling and write them neatly into the boxes. You can use your winning feeling to help create an optimum competition mindset through consciously reproducing the desired elements.

2. Centering

The second technique is known as '**centering**' because it involves focusing attention on the centre of your body, the area just behind your navel. This is a technique that is particularly effective during sports that have breaks in the action, such as in between sets in tennis, or prior to a penalty in soccer. Centering has a calming and controlling effect, providing a simple but effective way to counteract the negative effects of anxiety:

- Stand with your feet flat on the ground, shoulder width apart, arms hanging loosely either side of your body;
- Close your eyes and breathe evenly. Notice that when you breathe in, the tension in your upper body increases, but as you breathe out, there is a calmer, sinking feeling;
- Inhale deeply from your abdomen and, as you do, be aware of the tension in your face, and your neck, and your shoulders, and your chest. As you exhale, let the tension fall away and focus on the feeling of heaviness in your stomach;
- Continue to breathe evenly, focusing all your attention internally on the area immediately behind your navel;
- Maintain your attention on that spot and breathe normally, feeling very controlled and heavy and calm;
- On each out-breath use a word that encapsulates the physical feelings and mental focus that you want, eg. 'loose', 'calm', 'focused', 'sharp', 'strong' etc.

3. The five breath technique

This anxiety control exercise can be performed while you are standing up, lying down or sitting upright. It is ideally used just before competition, or whenever you feel particularly tense.

You should inhale slowly, deeply and evenly through your nose, and exhale gently through your mouth as though flickering, but not extinguishing, the flame of a candle:

- Take a deep breath. Allow your face and neck to relax as you breathe out;
- Take a second deep breath. Allow your shoulders and arms to relax as you breathe out;
- Take a third deep breath. Allow your chest, stomach and back to relax as you breathe out;
- Take a fourth deep breath. Allow your legs and feet to relax as you breathe out;
- Take a fifth deep breath. Allow your whole body to relax as you breathe out;
- Continue to breathe deeply for as long as you need to, and each time you breathe out say the word 'relax' in your mind's ear.

4. Thought-stopping

When you experience a negative or unwanted thought (cognitive anxiety) such as ‘I just don’t want to be here today’ or ‘She beat me by five metres last time out’, picture a large red stop sign in your mind’s eye.

Hold this image for a few seconds then allow it to fade away along with the thought.

If you wish, you can follow this with a positive self-statement such as ‘I am going to hit it hard right from the off!’

Thought-stopping can be used to block an unwanted thought before it escalates or disrupts performance. The technique can help to create a sharp refocus of attention keeping you engrossed in the task at hand.

5. Letting go

You will need to lie down somewhere comfortable where you are unlikely to be disturbed.

If you wish, you can also use this exercise to aid a restful night’s sleep.

Allow your eyes to close and let your attention wander slowly over each part of your body – starting from the tips of your toes and working up to the top of your head.

As you focus on each part of the body, tense the associated muscles for a count of five and then ‘let go’.

If this does not relieve the tension in a particular body part, repeat the process as many times as you need to.

Once you have covered each body part, tense the entire body, hold for five and then ‘let go’.

You will feel tranquil and deeply relaxed.

Summary

A major problem in competition is your mind working against you rather than for you.

Accept anxiety symptoms as part and parcel of the competition experience; then, anxiety can begin to facilitate your performance.

The techniques presented herein are but a small selection from the wide range of stress management interventions. You should adapt these techniques to suit your needs.

Remember that pressure is your ally and will invariably bring out the best in you:

just as coal under pressure can produce a diamond!

**Don’t stress over things over which you have no control ..
Focus on the things over which you have control**



*The only
performance
over which
YOU
have real control
is
YOUR performance*

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