



Sport • Psych news



Stress & Mental Toughness

Hi Wildcats,

The many rigors of being a student-athlete can cause even the most well organized person to feel stressed out. Many people know when they are stressed, but most aren't fully aware of the dangers associated with it. Research has found that stress is a contributing factor in many ailments including such minor ones as colds and back pain, and even serious ones like Alzheimer's disease, heart attacks, muscle atrophy, and bone weakness. While stress is certainly not the only cause of these and other ailments, it has been found to make people more susceptible to them.

As a student-athlete who faces long hours in school and stressful competitive situations, it is important to be aware of your stress and have a way to deal with it. This includes basic stress management such as finding times to relax, engaging in social events, getting enough sleep, avoiding unnecessary confrontation, and exercising. Another effective way to reduce stress is confronting your fears. Physically, your body is designed to manage stress in 3 minute chunks of time. If you are constantly anxious – before, during, and after an athletic event – you will tire quickly which will harm your performance. It is good to have a moderate level of arousal when performing, but if you are overly anxious it becomes a distraction. Once you confront your fears and manage your stress, then your arousal state will be optimal and you will perform at your best.

Mental toughness is an excellent strategy for dealing with stress and pressure. Being mentally tough makes it easier for you to avoid being rattled, keeps you in a positive state of mind, and helps you perform at your peak. Here are some tips for staying mentally tough.

Use pre-game routines

Developing a pre-performance routine can be a very effective way to calm your nerves. Humans are creatures of habits. We find it stress relieving to follow routines. For example, have you ever noticed how people tend to sit in the same areas in class even though they are not assigned to those seats? Or, have you ever noticed that most people eat the same thing for breakfast every morning? Getting your mind and body ready by repeating the same pre-performance routine can help reduce your stress and increase your feelings of confidence. When developing a pre-performance routine, try listening to the same music before your event or eating the same meal the night before. Please know that pre-game routines are NOT superstitions. Though they may look the same, superstitions are believing in the "magic" of the ritual whereas pre-game routines are about the preparation you engage in to get your mind and body ready to perform.



ARIZONA



Let things go

In order to be mentally tough, you must be able to let go of negative past performances. You have the power to decide to let things go. If you dwell too much on the past, stress will distract you from your current performance. By making the decision to let go, and reinforcing it with self-talk such as “Move Forward” or “Next Play,” you can minimize the negative impact. Every time negativity sets in, you may need to repeat the self-talk with determination. Similarly, you have more going on in your life than just your sport. Sometimes, it is difficult to focus only on the task at hand. In other words, it is important to focus on practice when at practice and class when in class. If you are thinking about class while at practice, your performance is going to suffer. Likewise, if you are thinking about practice while in class, your academics will suffer. Thus, prior to practice, say to yourself, “Let it go, it can wait til after practice.”



Zone-think

A major cause of athletes choking is over-thinking. Because of the way the human brain works, when you have trained your ability to an elite level, your brain begins to perform on “auto-pilot.” That is, what you have practiced becomes a process that your brain performs nearly automatically. In a game, choking occurs when you slow down your thoughts, over-think, and begin to analyze your automated actions. By slowing down the thought process you are going off “auto-pilot” and are susceptible to choking. In high-pressure situations, you face an increased risk of going off “auto-pilot.” There is a method to combat over-thinking. Research found that if you focus on a single zone-word that describes your action, you are less likely to choke than if you focus on the multiple details of your performance. For example, if you were taking a penalty kick, you would want to focus on a zone-word like “placement” rather than many words such as “I need to watch my placement, power, speed, and bend.” The extra words distract you from remaining on “auto-pilot.”

Create standards

Create standards of play and hold yourself to them. They will help you remain mentally strong. Being able to play to your standard every time you compete is important for your mental strength; otherwise you risk playing down to the level of inferior competition. Furthermore, as you continue to improve and appropriately raise your standards, you will begin to hold yourself to a higher level, which will help drive you to be the best you can be.

Stress is almost always present in your life whether or not you are aware of it. Stress management, confronting fears, and being mentally tough will help you combat the effects of stress.

If you would like some training on mental toughness or just want to talk about issues that are stressing you out, set up an appointment by contacting our medical assistant at 621-8805 or asking your ATC. I will be happy to work with you.

Best Wishes,
Scott Goldman, Ph.D.

*Sport and Clinical Psychologist
for Student-Athletes*