



Minimizing Anxiety

Hi Wildcats,

In this installment of the “Mental Training” email series, we will discuss minimizing your anxiety. Call it the “yips,” the “jitters,” “nerves,” or “butterflies”, it is all the same. Anxiety is your body in panic mode. It is shortness of breath, heart pounding, sweating, mind racing, and muscles too tense to work at an optimal level. Unfortunately, none of these sensations help with performance.

So, why does our body act this way? One possible explanation is from evolution. Think back to when the first humans were walking the plains in Africa. If a lion attacks you, then having your system activate with the “fight or flight” response helps you run to safety. However, if every time we heard a noise we instantly thought “Yikes, it’s a lion” and ran, then we would never get anything accomplished. Thus, at times feeling anxious is helpful but relying on it too much would lead to underperforming. In the present sport world, being anxious about your abilities (like asking “Am I good enough?”) may help motivate you to



get out of bed for practice or encourage you to train harder. But, when it comes time to compete, anxiety more often than not decreases performance. It can lead to getting too hyped which can lead to “Choking” like a baseball player swinging too early or it can lead to an under-reaction like “Freezing up”

where the same player may not swing the bat at all.

Often, it is our thoughts and perceptions about the event that make us anxious more than the event itself. So, what types of thoughts induce anxiety? Anxiety inducing thoughts are always about some future event. Additionally, the future event is never a good thing; rather it is some type of perceived catastrophe or danger.

There are 2 types of dangers:

- 1. Danger to sense of self**
(If I fail, everyone will think I am a total failure, including me)
- 2. Danger to one’s reality**
(If I fail, then I will be removed from the team, lose my scholarship, and have to go back home)

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Challenging and Attacking Your Fears

Thinking about these dangers does NOT help. So, here are some ways to challenge and attack your fears:

1 Re-labeling

Did you know that anxiety and excitement look exactly the same? When we are excited we get short of breath, our heart pounds, and our mind races. Sound familiar? It should because it is the same way I described anxiety earlier. Thus, if you feel anxious before your next athletic event, re-label your sensations from “worry” to “excitement.” Tell yourself: “This is my body getting pumped up for the next event” or “This is my body telling me I am ready to perform.”

2 Take a deep breath

If you purposely slow down your breathing, your heart rate will also calm down. Once you feel calmer, your mind will follow. Try taking a 4-count breath. Specifically, inhale to the count of 4 “Mississippi”, hold your breath for a count of 4 “Mississippi”, and then exhale to a count of 4 “Mississippi.”

3 Feel confident

Try to recall your greatest performance. Then, replay in your mind that awesome moment. Really focus on the way your body felt during that activity. How did your muscles feel? Strong? Fast? What was your mind like? Clear? Focused? Once you feel totally confident again, try to use this feeling to “turn off” the sensations of anxiety.

4 Focus on the “Controllables”

Focus on the present, focus on the process, and focus on the positive.

These are just a few exercises to treat anxiety. If you would like to feel more confident; if you would like to discuss other techniques for anxiety; if you would like to meet and discuss other benefits of sport and clinical psychology; or if you are feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed out, frustrated, worried, sad, or lacking confidence, please contact Angie at 621-8805 or ask your athletic

trainer to schedule an appointment. I look forward to working with you.

Best Wishes,
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for Student-Athletes*

To schedule an appointment, call **621-8805, 621-3334**, or ask your athletic trainer for assistance.