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Anxiety within Sport

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You would be hard pressed to find an athlete who doesn't react in some way to imminent competition. This article focuses on the feelings of anxiety and stress that some athletes encounter before and during performance. It will explain how anxiety is defined, how different sports people react to it and also how it can be managed.

What Is Anxiety?

The medical definition of anxiety describes it as a state consisting of psychological and physical symptoms brought about by a sense of apprehension of a perceived threat. It also goes on to state that anxiety can differ according to the situation and the individual. Applied to the sporting arena this means that a golfer for example may experience more anxiety playing in a national tournament compared to a club competition. At the same time a club competition may draw the same nerves in another individual.

Psychologists generally differentiate between two types of anxiety. Trait anxiety relates to an aspect of personality in which nervousness is a stable personality trait in an individual.

State anxiety on the other hand refers to temporary feelings of anxiety in a particular situation. Therefore a person with an anxious personality may find many different everyday tasks stressful compared to someone who only gets nervous in extreme situations.

Causes of Anxiety

According to Kremer and Moran (2008) one reason why we tend to get uptight before competition could be related to the pressure of being observed. Spectators of any sport are constantly evaluating the skills of the athletes they are watching and this can be extremely daunting to those who are not trained to deal effectively with this pressure. Not wanting to fail

ABOUT CATHERINE MCCANNY



I have always been interested in sport and as a child I played a wide range of sports including tennis, netball, basketball and football and golf. I am now a single handicap golfer and I helped my club win the mixed foursomes All Ireland title in 2011. I have a BSc in Psychology from the University of Ulster and an MA in Sport and Exercise Psychology from Waterford I.T. Through playing golf competitively I have experienced the thoughts and emotions that can go through a players mind when they compete. Promoting a strong mental attitude enables athletes to get the best out of their performance whatever their sport. I have experience in working with both hockey and rugby teams as well as amateur golfers.

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can heap more strain on a player when as they become more aware of being observed and so the stress continues to grow.

Feelings of anxiety can also be confused with fear but there is a significant difference between these two emotions. A fear or “phobia” is a negative feeling about a specific object (spiders) or experience (talking in front of a large group) however anxiety is more general and often athletes

recognise that they are anxious about something but cannot put their finger on it.

Tackling Anxiety

For a lot of athletes anxiety can be a very unpleasant feeling with physiological symptoms including a racing heartbeat, sweaty palms and muscle tension. In fact Ray and Weise-Bjornstal (1999) outlined seven possible categories in which an athlete can experience stress including affective, cognitive and behavioural. So how can it be managed?

Sport psychologists can teach techniques one can use to control anxiety. One technique involves the athlete “labelling” these thoughts and feelings described above as a way of priming them for competition. Through the process of labelling the athlete can learn to associate those former negative thoughts and feelings with preparing to compete. For example a cyclist can learn to recognise his/her increased heart rate as a positive indication that they are well prepared for competition.

Green and Green (1977) studied Indian yoga practitioners and discovered they were able to control various physiological functions voluntarily including brain waves, body temperature and blood pressure. It was also relatively simple to teach others how to control their physiological feelings too. The study was able to demonstrate how the mind and body are linked which brings us to the next technique. Performing a simple exercise such as breathing effectively can enable an athlete to relax and prepare for competition as more oxygen gets carried in the blood which in turn facilitates the working muscle. Diaphragmatic breathing involves a muscle in the abdomen called the diaphragm. A simple way to learn this technique is to place your left hand on your abdomen and the right on your upper chest. As you breathe in your left hand should move out and your right hand should remain relatively still. This is a sign you are breathing effectively using your full lung capacity. Try to exhale for twice as long as you have inhaled. This helps to slow the heart rate and in turn aids relaxation.

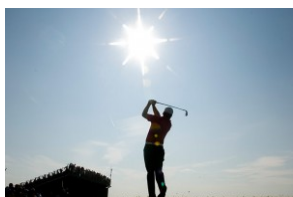
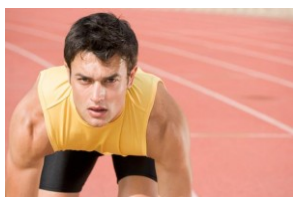
By performing these simple techniques during training or when you have some free time can help to calm those nerves and also view them in a different way so that they do not interfere with your performance.

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