

about the
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“Help—I’m Nervous”

“Setting goals, imagery, and concentration are all mental skills that have been discussed in the most recent Mind Games columns. These have all been beneficial skills, and I have been using them to manage and enhance my practice and competition performance. But, when are we going to learn about nervousness? Sometimes, I get so anxious at a competition that it gets in the way of my performing well. Please help me.”

These reflections may sound familiar to many of you. Feelings of nervousness—things like sweaty palms, racing heart, jitteriness, tight muscles (somatic or bodily anxiety symptoms), doubts, worry and difficulty concentrating (cognitive anxiety symptoms)—are a common experience for many athletes, especially before and during competition. Furthermore, at times (and I want to be sure to emphasize this), this nervousness can have an adverse effect on performance. What are you to do?

Change Your Perspective (Interpretation)

When anxiety was discussed above, it was emphasized that at times, anxiety can hurt performance, but not all the time. Unfortunately, it is often the case that when an athlete experiences anxiety, or nervousness before a competition, he or she automatically thinks, “oh no, I am nervous—this isn’t good. Things are going to end badly.” Being nervous should not necessarily be an “oh no experience” as anxiety does not always hurt performance. In fact, various theories put forth to help us understand the relationship between anxiety and performance suggest that anxiety can actually help performance—up to a point. Think about it from a practical perspective. Have you not found that sometimes a little worry or jitteriness gets you primed to compete? Of course you have. For example, the increased arousal before competition can elevate your heart rate and raise your body temperature, helping prime the body’s physiological systems. So, be cautious of mentally “tagging” any nervousness you experience as detrimental and something you need to get rid of. Instead, be aware of what you are experiencing and change your per-

spective regarding anxiety and its role on performance. See anxiety as something that can help performance, but take appropriate steps to keep it in check.

Determine Optimal Anxiety Levels For You

If some anxiety seems to facilitate performance, but experience (and research) tells us too much anxiety hurts performance, what are you supposed to do? How much nervousness is right? The answer depends on you. That is, optimal anxiety tends to be individualized; some athletes perform best with low anxiety, others with moderate anxiety and still others with higher anxiety levels. Think back on past competitive experiences to begin to sort out what is best for you. Prior to your better performances, how nervous or anxious were you? What specifically were you thinking and feeling? Reflect back on poorer performances to give you a means of comparison. Most athletes will see a pattern emerge that links certain levels of nervousness to better performances. Now, think about trying to attain this identified level of anxiety as opposed to thinking “oh no” when experiencing pre-competition anxiety.

Learn, practice and implement anxiety management skills. Note that the skills to manage anxiety can be basic and easy to understand, but they are hard to implement effectively when needed most. That is why we still witness elite-level athletes tensing up and double faulting on critical points in tennis, or missing free throws and making critical errors during a basketball game. If you are more plagued by the physical (somatic) manifestations of anxiety, your pre-competition goals should focus on calming your body using such skills as stretching, moving around, so as not to get tight, light massage or deep, controlled breathing. When mental (cognitive) anxiety tends to be excessive, your goal should be to calm the mind—effective skills include using positive self-talk, focusing on process goals (as opposed to outcome goals), distracting oneself so as not to think about being worried and reminding oneself of past successes to build confidence. Another important note is that these skills must be practiced. Practice them during training sessions by setting up situations that will

elevate your anxiety and present an opportunity to practice your anxiety management skills.

Understanding Underlying Causes of Excessive Anxiety

While it is important to have skills to manage anxiety (increase or decrease as needed), it is equally important to identify the “whys” behind anxiety. Why are you more nervous today than you were before the game last week? Research indicates that the greater the importance you place on an event, the more elevated your anxiety will become. That is why you will typically feel greater anxiety before the state championship meet than you will before a seemingly meaningless inter-squad competition. Additionally, the greater the uncertainty surrounding the event, the more elevated your anxiety will

be. You are probably thinking, “of course there is uncertainty. Isn’t that the nature of competition—that there is uncertainty about who is going to win?” Yes, but you might be able to moderate this uncertainty. You need to recognize that while the outcome of an event is uncertain, is it also, to a large extent, typically out of your control. So, having a sole focus on the outcome (i.e., winning), as opposed to focusing on the things you can do to perform at your best, is probably going to increase anxiety. Therefore, to manage pre-competition anxiety, it may be beneficial to focus on the controllable aspects of performance—that is, to focus on what you need to do to perform well. For example, a tennis player preparing for a quarterfinals match would focus on good footwork, playing aggressively and hitting deep into his opponent’s backhand, instead of focusing on reaching the semifinals. This player is more focused on controlling of his own abil-

ity—moving well, being aggressive and hitting deep balls—than on who will win.

Now, do your best to keep your nerves in perspective and under control. ■

The image is a promotional graphic for the NSCA SSTA 2010 conference. It features the NSCA logo in the top left corner, followed by the large, stylized letters 'SSTA' in a yellow, 3D font. Each letter contains an action shot of an athlete: the first 'S' shows a football player in a red jersey running with the ball; the 'T' shows a baseball player in a blue jersey swinging a bat; the second 'S' shows a soccer player in a red jersey kicking a ball; and the final 'A' shows a soccer player in a red jersey jumping to head a ball. The background is a blurred cityscape at night with lights. At the bottom, the text 'Sport-Specific Training Conference' is written in a large, bold, white font, followed by 'January 8 – 9, 2010 • Hilton Orlando • Orlando, FL • www.nscalift.org/SSTC2010' in a smaller white font.

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