

Managing Anxiety for Athletes

The fall season brings not only cooler temperatures, but an exciting time in the world of sports. Football season is well under way, baseball season is moving into the post-season, and school sports have started in earnest. For athletes of any level, this is a perfect time to think about the psychological component of sports and fitness. There is an old adage that "practice makes perfect," however continual practice without attention to the mental aspects of performance can leave an athlete performing below her or his potential. Whether someone is an elite/professional athlete or a weekend workout warrior, paying some attention to mental conditioning can enhance their outcome and enjoyment of sport and exercise. Additionally, this often results in better attainment of goals, such as sport specific achievements or weight loss. Working with a psychologist is a great way to maximize an athlete's potential.

The most common problem addressed by sport psychologists is anxiety. While some individuals become anxious in social situations, such as public speaking or at parties, athletes often experience anxiety related to their performance. The mechanism for this anxiety is similar to what is seen in cases of social anxiety. When it comes to performance, a certain degree of anxiety is helpful because it arouses and prepares the individual; however, if the level of arousal becomes too great, performance is negatively impacted. For example, some worry about an athletic performance can foster an athlete honing her or his pre-competition meal, warm-up routine, etc., but an excessive amount of worry (particularly about the results of a performance) can lead to negative thoughts, expectations of failure, and self-fulfilling prophesy. Common worries for athletes include letting their team, coach, or parents down, being embarrassed in front of spectators, and losing status, playing time, or scholarship.

Who is at risk?

As one might expect, young, amateur athletes are generally more likely than athletes at an elite level to experience performance impairing anxiety. This difference is likely due to a lack of experience with performance and managing the physical arousal that goes with it. Additionally, athletes who compete in individual sports tend to have more problems with anxiety than those who are involved in team sports. This may be because being a part of a team helps to alleviate many of the pressures which foster anxiety in the first place. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest the amount of time spent actively engaged in a sport is related to anxiety. For example, in a sport like golf which allows an athlete a great deal of time to think (and often worry) between shots, there is a greater chance of anxiety interfering with performance. On the other hand, sports like hockey, soccer, and basketball, leave less opportunity for an athlete to lose focus, begin to think negatively, and worry. It is no surprise that even in these sports, aspects such as penalty kicks and free throws are where athletes struggle the most with their mental game. If a coach or parent observes a significant difference between an athlete's performance during practice and competition or notice a decrease in the athlete's interest in the sport, anxiety may be an issue and psychological interventions may be helpful. Additionally, if an athlete subjectively reports anxiety related to her or his sport performance, working with a psychologist can often have beneficial effects.

What can an athlete do to effectively manage anxiety?

Psychologists can work with athletes on a variety of strategies that will help reduce anxiety, and thus enhance performance. These include learning techniques such as visualization, relaxation, mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, and effective goal setting. Visualization exercises, such as mental imagery and mental rehearsal, involve imagining an anxiety-provoking sport situation (e.g., "the big game") and then visualizing oneself competing or

performing successfully. Relaxation, such as progressive muscle relaxation, body scans, and diaphragmatic breathing, are used in conjunction with these imaginal techniques in order for the athlete to become practiced at performing while in a calm and focused state. Cognitive restructuring focuses on identifying an athlete's automatic thoughts and altering them to be more positive and adaptive for optimal performance. This includes refocusing on past successes and adequate preparation, as well as aspects of the performance that are in the athlete's control (e.g., practice time versus crowd noise). Many people also benefit from discussing and setting goals. It is often helpful to have guidance on setting appropriately challenging, yet achievable goals, as well as choosing goals that are both short and long term in nature.

Sport Psychology

Sport psychology is designed to help athletes overcome problems, enhance their performance, and achieve their goals. Coaches and trainers typically focus on the physical components of the sport, whereas psychologists focus on an athlete's mind. This is more comprehensive way of approaching sport. While the idea "practice makes perfect" may fall short, the notion of "perfect practice makes perfect" is more likely to hold true.

To schedule an appointment or to call for more information about working with a psychologist who specializes in sport related issues: (919) 572-0000.

Sources

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