

How to Overcome Sports Performance Anxiety

Guided imagery, mindfulness help separate past fears from future possibilities.

By Kristi Pikiewicz Ph.D., 2013

Performance anxieties are like fire alarms. They appear to exist outside of us but, in truth, are projections of what could've, should've or would've happened to us during childhood. These recollections or fantasies are pulled into consciousness by associations between what is going on now and what we recall happened, wish could have happened, or dreaded happening long ago. Here is how to defend against these phantoms from your past so they don't influence your present.

How do you feel as you toe the starting line at a running race or face the jump ball at your rec league basketball game or wait for the opening serve at your health club tennis tournament? If you're like me and millions of other motivated, recreational athletes around the country, your instinctive effort to protect yourself from perceived threat or the expectation of threat may make you lose sight of why you're running or jumping or returning serve in the first place. You lose your focus often without even realizing it.



Both outcomes are fraught: you're as scared stiff by the possibility of success as you are by the possibility of failure. Running fast is as fear-inducing as running slowly. Or perhaps, you're frightened of losing control of your body when tired. Most importantly, you're unaware of these influences that control you. These influences include self-defeating behaviors such as inadequate or excessive warm ups, poor pacing, and inattentiveness to running form (insert your sport's equivalents here). These performance anxieties that swallow us are the modern byproducts of archaic fears of disapproval, rejection, envy, abandonment and annihilation, etc.

The key to managing these performance anxieties is to disarm the fire alarms. By controlling your emotional thermostat, you preclude the need to defend against it in self-defeating ways. Stay calm and you won't have to deploy self-defeating strategies in search of calm. In this state of focused readiness, you can know the difference between what is inside you outside you, and what has already happened versus what may occur. What are the real and the perceived, emotional risks of giving your best effort? In a state of maintained centeredness, you can know the difference. Distancing your current effort from the expectations and results of previous efforts, most often you can see the current risks as reasonable and justified.



Research shows that two effective strategies to mediate performance anxieties are meditation and guided imagery—both elements of mental rehearsal. Remembering the past creates our anxieties and imagining the future can dismantle them. Your imagination shapes your reality, so harness it to serve your needs.

Jack Nicklaus, arguably the greatest golfer who ever lived, was never the best ball striker. Still, golf immortal Bobby Jones once remarked: “He plays a game I am not familiar with.” What Jones meant was that despite the mechanics of club against ball, Nicklaus was playing an internal, mental game that trumped his opponents’ mechanics. Before he swung the club, Nicklaus visualized a positive result. Then he offered himself positive suggestions and tuned out negative thoughts. Finally, he went on automatic pilot and made a pass at the golf ball with full trust in his muscle memory.

Here’s how to approximate Nicklaus’s mental game in your sport. A few weeks before an important race or game or meet, try sitting every second day for 15-20 minutes alone in a room in a comfortable chair with your eyes closed. Sit with legs and arms uncrossed. Begin to visualize your stomach as a brightly colored balloon. Slowly and deeply breathe in and out and visualize your stomach (not your lungs!) inflating and deflating. Use your breathing as a point of concentration. When your mind inevitably wanders, patiently bring your attention back to your breathing. Notice how your anxiety level rises and falls depending on how successful you are at maintaining focus or how your mind wanders to other things including your event.

During these exercises, begin to imagine performance situations. For example, visualize yourself going through your race day ritual. Visualize every stage of your event and write a positive script in your imagination. Is it winning? Is it finishing? Is it a PR or other improvement? Is it an experience free of pain or anxiety? Observe the shifts in your anxiety level during this imagination and the variables that impact it. When self-defeating messages or images enter your mind, work to erase these images and return focus to your breathing. Within realistic reason, challenge or replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk.

For example, if you start to hear yourself saying, “I’m too tired to keep this pace,” then, you can replace this message with, “Relax and trust my training.” Experiment with a manageable number of high priority verbal/mental cues to ensure quality control of your performance technique. For example, my cues during running focus on relaxation of facial

muscles, driving my arms around a still torso and, letting my arm swing determine my leg lift and stride length.

The more you experience and gain insight into your internal obstacles to optimal performance, the greater will be your ability to contain and manage your anxieties. This will keep you from blurring boundaries between inside and outside, past and present, expectations and possibilities. Practice at home and then apply the same techniques at the starting line or even in the middle of your race.

Even if you're not destined to be Jack Nicklaus, meditative relaxation techniques and guided imagery will help you get more mileage out of your training and performance than you ever imagined. See you at the starting line!



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