Performance Anxiety & Arousal
Swim Bike Run St. Louis, September 2006

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Performance Anxiety & Arousal
By Joe Mannion, MS

Okay, now that I have your attention, we’re talking about “performance anxiety” and “arousal” in sport!

Most athletes (and performing artists, and business people, etc.) experience a natural, transient (and for some, nearly constant) apprehension about current and future performances, whether in training or in competition (or on stage, or in the boardroom, etc.).

Performance anxiety typically manifests in our minds and in our bodies. We get “butterflies,” “knots” in our stomachs, and tension in our shoulders. Our heart rates may be elevated. Our minds sometimes race with worries and catastrophic thoughts, or we may feel insecure, doubtful, and afraid. We may have trouble sleeping the nights leading up to a competition. A number of athletes, from high school to Olympic caliber, have described a “normal” routine to me of vomiting before every competition. “Arousal” is a technical reference to our body’s level of readiness, or activation, and can range from comatose to lethargic to peppy to frenzied and many other shades in between.

In graduate school, we were taught to help athletes (and other “performers”) re-interpret their performance anxiety as a sign of readiness rather than setting it up as an “enemy.” While sitting in those classes and reflecting on my experiences in triathlon, I paled at the thought of simply “re-interpreting” competitive nerves. The symptoms just seemed too disconcerting, so I set out on a mission to eliminate mine all together, feeling I would perform better and enjoy triathlon more.

I began practicing a number of relaxation techniques on a regular basis until the “relaxation response” came more naturally. A race finally rolled around, and I was pleased with how at ease my mind and body seemed in the lead-up. When the race began, though, I couldn’t get going. I couldn’t get my head in the game, and my performance was “flat.” The idea of re-interpreting my anxiety, my tumultuous thoughts, and my seemingly over-activated body suddenly registered at a deeper level. By experimenting, I realized, although sometimes uncomfortable, those are all signals my body is pumped and ready to race.

A Volatile Relationship With Our Own Feelings

As it turns out, the problem isn’t so much our anxieties and other difficult emotions as it is our relationship with those feelings. The way we respond to performance anxiety, doubt, and restlessness is much more frequently the cause of disappointing performances than those sensations.
Most of us have heard of the “fight or flight” stress response. When we **perceive** an outside threat, our bodies sometimes mobilize a brief surge of energy (via the sympathetic nervous system) that enables us to “fight” or to “flee” a conflict. We also have an “inner” fight or flight response. When we experience difficult inner states, we often find them intolerable (or threatening) and try to fight or escape them.

When we experience pre-competitive anxiety, for example, we do things we wouldn’t normally do in training or in less stressful situations. We may think they are signs our preparation was flawed – that, maybe, even we are flawed. We don’t like those feelings so we try to subdue them by binging on food, by oversleeping or staying out late, by busying ourselves with more and more to-do’s, by getting physically ill, by drinking alcohol, and host of other self-soothing strategies. How often have we, or has someone we’ve known, been compelled to do that last “mega” workout in the days leading up to a race, instead of resting and dealing with the insecurity?

These strategies typically have their own consequences, not the least of which is confirming our fears of defect. We often behave in ways that ensure what we fear most will happen, does happen (e.g., the last mega run to ease our fears of a weak finish sabotages the rest needed for an optimal finish).

Over the years, I’ve been impressed with how accepting, encouraging, and non-judgmental the triathlon community is to its members. When I think of individual triathletes and how they think of themselves, however, words like “accepting” and “nonjudgmental” are not the first to come to mind. Although foreign to what many of us have been taught, a shift towards acceptance and nonjudgement of performance anxiety (and other difficult emotions) can be healthier and actually bring about the changes we so desire.

**Reconciling Our Relationship With Performance Anxiety**

When we are highly invested in any endeavor, whether training for triathlon or losing weight, it’s natural to feel apprehension and concern. We sometimes perceive these feelings and thoughts, these sensations, to be concrete threats to our abilities, though. We get caught up in an inner battle to subdue or escape (fight or flee) them **rather than performing**.

A deceptively easy alternative is learning to **mindfully** be with these difficulties without having to do anything about them, **keeping our attention on our performance**. In fact, sport psychology studies have found mixed and somewhat disappointing results trying to do much else with performance anxiety (Gardner & Moore, 2004).

Mental skills respond to training like physical skills, and the ability to tolerate difficult feelings (i.e., allow them to exist without getting caught in a battle to repress or change
them), while staying focused on our performance, is a skill that can be practiced and cultivated. I recommend trying some form of meditation that emphasizes acceptance. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment, and meditation is a focused practice of mindfulness. In fact, meditation (or mindfulness) is one of the hottest growing areas of research in medicine and psychology and has received increasing media attention recently.

The paradoxical benefit of this disposition towards acceptance and tolerance is a presence of mind that is less distracted by otherwise destabilizing feelings and circumstances. In other words, at the very least, performance anxiety does not have to hurt our actual performance. Try the exercise in Table 1 for an experience of mindfulness.

Sport specific reading is sparse at this point, but, in general, I recommend The Relaxation Response (Benson, 2000), Journey of Awakening: A Meditator’s Guidebook (Dass, 1990), and Saying Yes To Life, Even The Hard Parts (Bayda, 2005). See the full references below and try Amazon.com.

Like many sport psychology insights, mindfulness, and its lessons on tolerating difficulty while maintaining focus, can be applied in almost any area of life. Mindfulness can help enhance public speaking, test taking, dancing, auditioning, doing business, and, yes, even that “other” activity you thought this article might discuss. Practicing in other areas will also help develop and reinforce your skills. If you find this practice, or exercises like the one presented are not helping, don’t despair. I believe we can all use a little therapy, and conflicts that are especially difficult to surmount alone typically resolve much easier with a therapist.

Learning to accept where we are can help us reach our goals and make the journey a lot more enjoyable.

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Table 1. A simple “mindfulness” exercise with powerful benefits:

1. Find a relatively quiet space.

2. Sit in a chair with legs uncrossed, hands resting on your thighs.

3. Close your eyes and, as best you can, begin to assume a nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment.

4. Bring your attention to your breath and notice the sensation of the air flowing in and out, the chest and stomach expanding and collapsing.

5. After settling into the breath, expand your awareness to include your body (e.g., pressure against the skin, sounds, temperature, the heart beating).

6. After you settle into the breath and body, expand your awareness to include your thoughts and feelings.

7. Just continue to be observant (not analytical) and acceptant (not trying to change anything). The key is learning tolerance, thereby becoming less agitated by, or fearful of, emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

8. After finishing, try to practice this awareness a few times during the rest of your day (especially in training sessions or the domain of your particular performance).

If you feel overwhelmed at any time, open your eyes and take a break. If you feel comfortable, return to the exercise when you are ready.

Test it out. Try this for 10 minutes a day for a week and see what benefits begin to emerge in your daily life. Remember, like a new physical exercise, benefits accrue over time.

Tips:

What works for one person may or may not work for another. The key is to experiment with methods long enough to find what works for you… like trying a new swim stroke or recovery drink.

If you observe a lot of judgmental chatter in your mind, rather than judge yourself for judging yourself, accept that we all have these voices… it’s chatter (not law) and often inaccurate. Learning to tolerate these judgments will help loosen their grip and quiet them down.

Try using a soft radio alarm so you don’t have to keep checking a clock.
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