

STUDENT ATHLETES & SPORT PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

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School is back in session and participation in sports is commonplace for many students. Along with the pressures of classes, homework and studying comes the demands on student athletes to perform not only for themselves but for the team. This pressure, at times, can trigger more anxiety for student athletes and take away the enjoyment for the love of the game.

Mental stress on game day is typically rooted in at least one of several factors. Many of these have more to do with everything surrounding the game, before and after, than the actual game itself.

What drives sport performance anxiety?

- Having an audience (particularly one that is loving and supportive): Athletes can become overly self-aware of every decision and play they make when they're on the athletic stage.
- Fear of disappointing others: Even when a parent or coach is supportive, athletes may be anxious about disappointing them.
- High expectations: Every athlete wants to do their best, but internal self-talk might create stress when they set expectations that anything less than a perfect play is failure.
- Post-game analysis: Whether it is from a coach, parent, teammate or themselves, the post-game analysis weighs on the athlete's mind.

Reduce sport performance anxiety before a competition:

- Recognize that pre-competition jitters are normal.
- Accept, rather than fight, the nervous energy that is felt
- Don't misinterpret anxiety by thinking that it is fear. That adrenaline rush that is felt is normal and it is part of the body's natural preparation for the competition.
- Notice the anxiety, but don't focus on it.
- Once the competition starts, that feeling will subside as it always does.
- Allow a few minutes to practice visualization. During this time, an athlete mentally rehearses, showing a picture perfect performance.

Reducing sport performance anxiety during a competition:

- Focus on the task at hand rather than the outcome.
- Stay present in the moment and avoid thinking too far into the event or thinking about the finish.
- If you find yourself thinking negative thoughts or negative self-talk, stop and focus only on your breathing. Focusing on your breathing rhythm will automatically pull you back into the present.
- If you are struggling with negative thoughts and can't break out of the cycle, simply force yourself to smile, even if only for a few seconds. This simple action will change your attitude in a split second.
- If you find yourself caught up in negative thoughts and find that you suddenly expect the worst it will be impossible to perform at your peak.

Reducing sport performance anxiety after a competition:

- Review the event and recall the things you did well. Focus on actions, thoughts, and behaviors that helped you perform.
- Acknowledge, but quickly dismiss things that hindered your performance. This is the same principle as avoiding an obstacle while driving - look where you want to go, not where you don't. When you focus on the pothole, you invariably hit it.
- Focusing on the negative aspects of the event will not help you improve in the future. Rather, you want to focus on the times when you 'got it right.'
- This is a form of mental rehearsal where you practice skills that will be used in the next event.

In the end, both the student athletes and their parents can use knowledge of anxiety to be a diving force rather than something to overcome. Parents can help in reducing sport performance anxiety by using language that is supportive before, during and after the competition. Be wary of only praising athletes when things go right - a good rule of thumb is to avoid adding stress, praise effort instead of the result. With a focus on effort the results will follow. Finally, parents should be sure to keep specific post-game comments positive and remember that the time to make corrections is at the next practice, not immediately after a game in the car ride home.