

Don't Choke. Dealing with Performance Anxiety

How to psyche yourself up, calm yourself down and overcome performance anxiety

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Many athletes perform their best during training or practice and find that they choke during competition. If this happens to you take heart because there are some simple steps you can take to overcome such anxiety.

Choking is described as a decrease in performance due to too much perceived stress. The key word here is perceived. Keep in mind that stress lives only in your mind and in the way we interpret a situation. Ultimately, it is not the external situation that causes stress, but the way we think about that event that creates feelings of stress, anxiety and fear. For athletes who choke during competition it is important to understand that you can control the thoughts you have regarding the event. Are your thoughts of doubt, failure and a lack of confidence in your ability? If so, such negative thinking often breeds feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and tension. How do you expect to perform well given such an internal environment?

Traditional coaches and trainers may try to help the athlete understand why those thoughts and feelings develop and then try to change or modify that process with limited amounts of success. Why such thoughts arise may be of interest, but knowing the answer isn't always necessary to overcome them.

Before the event

Understand that pre-race jitters are normal and accept them. Don't fight the nervous energy you feel. Don't misinterpret it by thinking that it is fear. That adrenaline rush you feel is normal and it is part of your body's natural preparation for the competition. Notice it, but don't focus on it. Once the race starts, that feeling will subside, as it always does. Prepare both mentally and physically. Arrive at the event with plenty of time so you aren't rushed, which only increases your stress. Get a thorough warm-up. Do some easy stretching. Know the course. Dress for conditions.

Allow a few minutes to visualize yourself doing everything right. Breathe easy, close your eyes and use mental imagery to visualize yourself performing well. This positive self-talk can change your attitude. While athletes need to be flexible enough to react during the event, you should enter the event with a general strategy of how you want to race. Your strategy can be simple (maintain a steady pace or maintain a steady heart rate) or complex.

During the event

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. Force a smile. Really. 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. Perhaps that is all the time you need to relax back into your performance.

Race like you don't care about the outcome. 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. If you begin to race like you don't care about the outcome, you may relax and enjoy the event for what it is - another day in your life. Not the most important thing in your life.

After the event

Review the race and recall the things you did well. Focus on actions, thoughts and behaviours 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. Design a training program that mimics race-like conditions. Teams and clubs often do such training. If you always train alone, consider joining a group so you can do this type of simulation. Practice is most effective if you can mimic the conditions you will be faced with in competition. Coaches can also help or hinder an athlete's ability to overcome choking during competition. Coaches often inadvertently reinforce a pattern of choking when trying to encourage ("the next shot is critical"). Such talk only increases the pressure an athlete feels to perform.

Remember that choking can be dealt with if you are aware of the pattern of negative thoughts that snowball before and during competition. If you find yourself in such a downward spiral, simply acknowledge those thoughts and let them go. Focus on your breathing and play as though you are enjoying it. Chances are you will realize that you are enjoying it despite the occasional less than perfect performance.