



# ANXIETY MANAGEMENT

## Unlock the Power of Your Mind

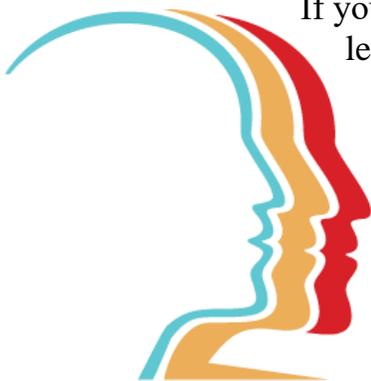
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### *Chapter VIII - ANXIETY MANAGEMENT*

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Most athletes feel anxious before and during competition. They accept performance anxiety as perfectly normal and let it sharpen their focus. This anxiety or excitement is proof that they, and you, care about performance and outcomes. Of course, too much anxiety is uncomfortable and interferes with performance.

A moderate level of anxiety or excitement is necessary for optimal performance. In sports, panic is typically an extreme form of performance anxiety. A panic response is thus an exaggerated mind-body reaction – a false alarm – that can be diffused or redirected. Our instinctive responses to panic are always counterproductive, such as fleeing, isolation ourselves, trying to hard to relax, or beating ourselves up mentally.



If you have a high level of performance anxiety, then you've learned a sequence of responses. Once you trigger the sequence, it is difficult to stop the dominoes from falling. Your priority, then, is to stop the sequence early. What you truly fear, if you are willing to admit it, is *embarrassment* that you will fail to perform in the moment and because of that must suffer the consequences of anxiety and panic.

## ANXIETY

Panic always eventually leads to the subsiding of anxiety. The cliché of a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” in sports describes a dangerous player pretending to be inept. Remember, then, that panic is a harmless experience that exists only in your

mind, and by extension in your body. Panicking is not going crazy, but rather the manifestation of fear of a terrible outcome.

Several tactics follow to help you triumph over performance anxiety so that you can fully enjoy sports and perform at your best. These tactics are not designed to eliminate intense feelings but to redirect them toward a positive outcome.

*Be well prepared.* The more prepared you are for competition the less you will fear it. Nothing helps build confidence more than knowing that you are ready for the challenge at hand. Proper preparation comes from paying close attention to feedback from coaches, studying the playbook or videos, and practicing conscientiously. Without this kind of preparation, performance anxiety is more likely to occur. Before the game/race, always remind yourself that you have honestly prepared as best as possible.

*Nerves are natural.* It's normal to be anxious, so don't concern yourself with what other athletes might be thinking or how well they seem to be doing. We often don't suspect that others are overcome with or overwhelmed by anxiety. No matter how calm your opponents may appear, they are likely experiencing the same level of anxiety – or more so – than you are.

*Ally with anxiety.* Do not attempt to rid yourself of the anxiety, instead, channel it into performing well, and talk to yourself about trying to use your anxiety instead of trying to avoid it. Tell yourself, “My body is preparing itself to perform,” and “I've done well before, and I can do it again, now.”

*Breathe evenly and deeply.* Take a series of deep breaths to calm your nerves. Good breathing reduces anxiety by clearing your mind of fog and by reducing physical tension. Simply prolonging exhalation regardless of inhalation length, promotes the relaxation response, so regulate each breath with a deep inhalation and a full exhalation.

*Get creative and use your imagination.* For instance, give the anxious feeling an imaginary form (such as a sparkler or firecracker) and then place it in an imaginary safe place or container that will protect you from it. Understand that you are bigger and more powerful than this anxious feeling.

*Stay in the here and now.* Monitor negative “futurizing” and worrisome thoughts about winning or losing. The results and outcomes can wait while you remain focused on playing each play to the best of your ability, one by one, until the final whistle.

*Stay on a positive thought channel.* Flip the switch from negative to positive self-talk when you are emotionally spiraling down. Try to talk sense to yourself (feed the good wolf,) instead of letting your fear run wild (feeding the bad wolf.) Remind yourself, “Even though I am feeling anxious and uncomfortable right now, I can still play well and reach my goals.”

*Take yourself lightly.* A competition is an opportunity to test your fitness, challenge the competition, and demonstrate how hard you’ve worked. You are not your game. Take what you are doing seriously but learn to take yourself lightly. Always remember that sport is what you do not who you are. Smile. Laugh. Have a good time. Ask yourself, “What’s the worst thing that can really happen?” If the worst does happen, ask, “What can I do to cope?”

To move forward rather than becoming overwhelmed and backing up when anxiety strikes, make use of the strategies presented so you can channel anxiety into commitment to taking the next step. Remember that FEAR means to “**F**ace **E**verything **A**nd **R**espond.” To perform at your best, let the butterflies fly in formation!



“Feed the Good Wolf”

**"It's alright to have butterflies in your stomach. Just get them to fly in formation."**

~ Rob Gilbert

