



Home / Tips & Training / *ABCs of Mental Training Archives*

[BACK](#)

## F IS FOR FEAR



BY AIMEE KIMBALL,

PhD//Special Correspondent

One of the worst four-letter words in an athletes' everyday vocabulary is "fear." It is an emotion that most athletes don't admit to, yet when experienced, is constantly influencing their behaviors. This article will focus on rational and irrational fears, how to accept them and keep them from influencing your performance.

### ***Slaying the Big Bad Wolf***

I have yet to meet an athlete who isn't afraid of something. While a fear of spiders isn't going to keep most athletes from performing their best, a fear of failure may. If you have a fear that is hindering you from performing your best, you have to examine the source of this fear.

*Common sport-related fears are:*

- Letting down/disappointing others
- Making a mistake
- Having a bad race
- Getting yelled at
- Not living up to your potential
- Getting hurt
- Not being as good as you/others thought
- Pain

If you can relate to any of these, take a deep breath, because it's OK. It's not all bad when you are afraid of something. It's how you deal with it that counts.

**First**, write down the fears that you have and determine whether or not they are realistic. If you have an unrealistic fear, it's important to remind yourself that it's not likely to happen. Be logical with yourself, "Come on. I'm being silly. My parents will not be disappointed in me if I have a bad race."

**Second**, if there is a level of honest concern (i.e., your coach will never put you in the event again if you mess up) then you have to accept this reality. Nine times out of 10, the more you focus on NOT messing up to avoid the reality, the more likely you are to mess up. If there is a realistic reason you are afraid to swim poorly, then *focus on what you need to do to swim well*, rather than what you are trying to avoid.

For example, the conversation you'd have with yourself would go something like this:

*Negative You:* The relay is counting on me. I can't have a bad race or we'll lose.

*Positive You:* Yes, the team does count on me, but I'm pretty good, so I'm more likely to swim well than to have a bad race. I just need to get a good start, have smooth turns, and really kick strong. I've done it in practice. I can do it now.

**Third**, have a routine. When athletes don't have something they do consistently, there is a greater chance that something is going to feel off or that uncertainty will creep in. By having a routine that you do before every competition — a routine that does not change depending on how your last meet went — you provide yourself with a level of comfort. That is, when you *always* put your goggles on first or you listen to "Eye of the Tiger" right before you take the block, you feel more in control of your mind and body, the experience feels more familiar, and you will be calmer—all things necessary in keeping those worries at bay.

### ***Swim Your Best Race***

When favored to win, athletes who are not mentally tough fear losing and compete that way. They are tentative and don't do their best. When expected to lose, athletes often do better because they are focusing on causing an upset or because they are more relaxed since they have nothing to lose. If you find you fit into either category, remember *who you swim should not determine how you swim*. When you swim well against good opponents, you can swim well against lesser opponents. The mindset you have when you swim your best should be the

mindset you have against every opponent.

**Swim to Win**

Fear of the unknown comes because we're thinking ahead. Stay in the moment and don't worry so much about negative outcomes. You are out there to do your best, so swim like it. If you swim to win, your focus is on swimming your best and making the most of each stroke. If you're swimming not to lose, you're thinking of swimming poorly and the "what-ifs" often get the better of you. Thoughts of losing lead to anxiety, thoughts of swimming well lead to confidence. Which mindset would you rather have?

Choose to be a warrior, not a worrier.

**Make it Great!****About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD:**

*Dr. Aimee C. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Center for Sports Medicine. She received a PhD from the University of Tennessee where she specialized in sport psychology. She is an Association of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau. As a Mental Training Consultant, Dr. Kimball has worked with professional, collegiate, high school, recreational, and youth athletes in a variety of sports, including assisting the Pittsburgh Steelers in analyzing potential draft picks and the Pittsburgh Penguins in developing their players. She has been a featured speaker at conferences across the nation and has appeared in numerous media outlets across the country. Currently, Dr. Kimball works with athletes, coaches, corporate leaders, and other performers to assist them in achieving success in sport and life. (412-432-3777; kimballac@upmc.edu)*

---

[BACK](#)