



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

[BACK](#)

H IS FOR HAVING FUN



BY AIMEE C. KIMBALL, PhD
I agree with Abraham Lincoln, who said, "People are about as happy as they make up their minds to be."

I think that having fun is, in fact, a mental skill. Most people believe having fun is as easy as getting involved in something you enjoy, which is true. However, what happens when what you enjoy also becomes a source of pressure, anxiety, fatigue and pain?

Most athletes start swimming because they love being in the water and enjoy being with their friends. When they decide to turn their "hobby" into a competitive activity is when some of the "fun" can be taken away.

That is, when you now have to practice for two hours after school and you are being asked to push your physical limits, you may start to focus on the aspects of competitive swimming that you don't enjoy.

Focusing on your dislikes is what can make the fun disappear. Then, when you start to get good, develop high expectations for yourself, and feel pressure to drop time every meet or win every race, you may find even more things you don't like about a sport you used to enjoy.

If you take it to the next level and start swimming to possibly get or keep a college scholarship and your whole reason for swimming is based on the belief that you HAVE to swim well or you will lose this opportunity, then even more anxiety occurs.

Basically, the higher the level at which you compete, the more potential there is for you to find things you don't like about swimming, and thus, swimming becomes less fun.

Don't worry though, just because you are now competing doesn't mean swimming has to cease being fun. As I said before, you control your own happiness.

Here are some things you can do to make sure you can still have fun while swimming competitively:

Focus on the positive

Like anything else in life, the more you focus on what you enjoy, the happier you will be. It is easy to go to practice focusing on how much you don't want to be there, how tired you are going to be, or how much you hate when your coach yells at you. However, if you accept that all of those things are part of your reality and instead change your focus to what you are going to get out of the day, you'll find it a lot more enjoyable. So, before heading to meets or practice, remind yourself what you are looking forward to while you are there, rather than what you're dreading.

Remember the good stuff

If you are ever struggling and feel like some of the fun of the sport has been lost, pull out a picture of yourself from when you were really young. Maybe it's from the first race you ever entered or from a day where you were just with your friends practicing your cannonballs. The picture should put a smile on your face and remind you that you chose to swim because of how happy being in the water makes you.

Embrace the pressure

The pressure you feel and the anxiety you experience don't have to be detrimental. Instead of perceiving your expectations for yourself as a negative, recognize that it means you have confidence in your ability. If you didn't know you were good, you wouldn't have such high standards for yourself. Experiencing pressure just means you've created an opportunity for yourself to reach a higher level of success. That you've proven you are good enough to be in this situation should bring satisfaction rather than worry. Also, choose to view meets and difficult practices as small challenges that you are going to work through to overcome. A sense of pride should come from knowing you are working your hardest to achieve something meaningful to you.

Swim for the sake of swimming

While it's easy to get caught up in external rewards such as medals, records and scholarships, you must keep in mind these are not the reasons why you swim. First and foremost you swim because it's a sport you enjoy. The accolades are just a by-product of your hard work. We lose the fun when we think we are swimming to get something out of it. Make sure you remind yourself that you swim for enjoyment, for improvement and to be with friends. Then, by being involved in something you find inherently fun and putting forth the effort to see how good you can be at that activity, you are setting yourself up to *enjoy the process* of achieving success – not just for success itself.

Remember, having fun is up to you. No matter how hard practice is, no matter how "serious" the meet is, you can enjoy competition and all that it brings with it. It's up to you to decide that your passion for the sport and everything you love about swimming are much more important than the aspects you don't like. So next time you head to the pool, jump right in and have some fun!

Make it great!

Dr. Aimee

About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD

Dr. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training for the UPMC Center for Sports Medicine. 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. She works with athletes, coaches, and parents to help them achieve success in sport and life. For more information contact: kimballac@upmc.edu, 412-432-3777, <http://sportsmedicine.upmc.com/MentalTrainingProgram.htm>

[BACK](#)