

# How to Overcome Your Nerves on Meet Day

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Each week, in my coaching practice, I have conversations with swimmers who are very talented, skilled, and more than physically capable of performing exceptionally and producing success, yet struggle to do so. It's not because they're out of shape, have bad technique, or use a poor race strategy. It's because, when they step behind the block, they get so nervous that they totally freeze up, and that frozen state prevents all of their talent, skill, and physical capabilities from being utilized to their fullest. It's purely a mental thing.

If this story sounds somewhat familiar, and if you're a swimmer that struggles with overcoming your nerves on meet day, then today's your day. With this article, I'm going to share with you 3 concepts you can use to help you, not just cope with nerves, but completely overcome them so that all of your talent, skill, and physical capabilities can be utilized to their maximum when you go to race. Let's take a look.

## 1) Do not be afraid to fail.

I'm a huge fan of Shaun White. He's the most decorated Olympic Snowboarder of all-time with 3 Gold Medals. He has his own video game. He's a pretty rad dude. In an interview, he was once asked "How do you handle losing?" He said the following:

**"One of the things that I love about myself and that I think has allowed me to succeed is that I feel like I can never lose. I show up, and if I win, that's great and I'm motivated to win again. But, if I lose, it's almost even better because I get driven, and I know where I need to be now. I think the best scenario for me is that, if I do everything that I can and I still lose, then I'm content with that."**

The overwhelming majority of the time, nerves in competition has its roots in a fear of failure. We know this because, if you had access to some kind of magical power where you could peer into the future and see with absolute certainty that you were guaranteed to win all of your races and get new PB's, would you feel nervous going into the meet? Of course not. Why? Because you have certainty of the outcome. You KNOW things are going to go well for you. However, unfortunately, you can never know with certainty what's going to happen. And so because of that, you do what human beings naturally do whenever they find themselves in an uncertain situation – you focus on all the potentially negative outcomes.

While you can never create certainty of the outcome, you can create the same psychological effect that certainty of the outcome produces by simply choosing to not fear bad outcomes. When you strip away failure's ability to create fear, and when you see it instead as something that can provide you with wonderful benefits for improvement, then like Shaun, you can go into any meet feeling like you can't lose. When that happens, the feelings of pressure, stress, tension, and nervousness failure would normally make you feel disappear.

Every time you go to compete, your objective, psychologically, shouldn't be to win a certain medal or get a certain time. Those things are simply a by-product of how you swim. Your objective should be to have a great mindset and to swim as close to the best version of yourself that you possibly can. You never focus on the results you want. You focus on the process that creates the results you want.

## **2) Simplify the occasion.**

Too often, there's this idea in swimming that nerves are an inevitable part of the sport that every swimmer just has to accept and that swimming without being nervous is impossible. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Take Abby Weitzeil for example, a USA National Team swimmer and 2x Olympic medalist from Rio in 2016. With the Olympics in Rio being her first appearance at an Olympic Games, surely she was a nervous wreck, right?

Not at all.

In an interview she once gave where she talked about her experience in Rio, she said the following:

**“My first ever Olympic race was an Olympic final. It was pretty crazy. But, I didn't let that affect me as much. I wasn't nervous at all.”**

Notice what she said there. She said her first ever Olympic race was an Olympic final. But, more importantly, she said **“I didn't let that affect me as much.”** In other words, she didn't let the occasion get to her. She understood that she was doing the same swimming she'd done a million times before. She simplified the occasion. She also won a Gold medal.

Whenever you go to swim in competition, no matter how prestigious the meet is and no matter how high the stakes are, you're going to be swimming in a pool that's the same size pool you've swam in many times before. It's going to be 25/50 up and 25/50 back, nothing unfamiliar. And in that pool, you're going to be doing events you've done many times before. Again, nothing unfamiliar. You know how to start off a block. You know how to kick underwater. You know how to execute a stroke, and you know how to turn off a wall. You have all of the physical tools, skills, and ability necessary to go out there and swim really well.

When you simplify the occasion, break it down, and think rationally without overly indulging in emotion, you realize that it's still just swimming. It's the same sport you do every day in your

home pool. You realize there's nothing unfamiliar, weird, or strange about what you're about to do, and you remind yourself that you know exactly what to do and how to do it. As a consequence, you feel much more at ease, the nerves melt away, and it's far, far easier to go out there and execute without the risk of freezing up.

### **3) You have to have a proper pre-race ritual.**

Personally, I don't think swimmers do this enough. Many swimmers get into the marshaling area or go behind the block without any kind of normalized, practiced pre-race routine or ritual that's actually effective at properly helping them to physically and mentally prepare to swim. They just do whatever they happen to feel like doing at that time or whatever comes to their mind in that moment.

I have a pre-race ritual that I give to all of my swimmers. It's specifically designed to help swimmers feel more relaxed, feel more confident, feel strong, and overcome potential nerves. It's the same pre-race ritual I give to all my NCAA D1 and International-level swimmers. It consists of the following:

**Step #1: Movement** – If you like to do a bunch of movements, stretches, and physical cues before you race, do these first and get them out of the way.

**Step #2: High Power Posture** – [Scientific research has shown that standing in high power posture for 2 minutes increases testosterone by about 20% and lowers cortisol/stress levels by about 25%.](#) Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, your hands on your hips, your chest out, and your head up. Remain in this stance until you climb onto the block.

**Step #3: Deep Controlled Breathing** – Breathe in slowly for 5 seconds through your nose, then slowly exhale for 5 seconds through your mouth. Do this 2-3 times. Deep controlled breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and triggers a relaxation response in the body.

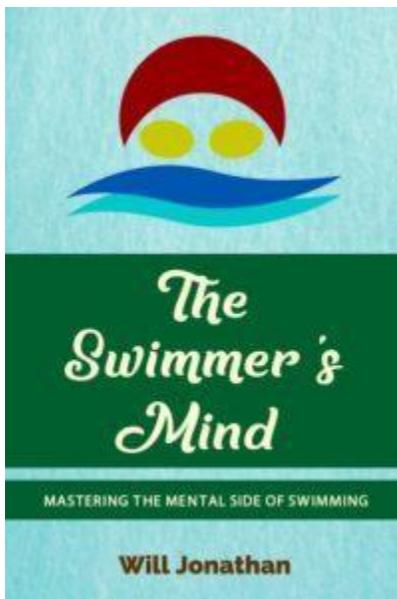
**Step 4: Confidence Affirmation** – Recite a confidence affirmation to yourself, something along the lines of the following: **“I trust in myself and my ability. I know that I can do great things in the water. I fear nothing and no one. Any challenges and obstacles I face during my race, I will rise to them and overcome them. I trust in myself and my ability. I know that I can do great things in the water.”** A confident inner-dialogue helps to breed feelings of confidence and belief and put you into a confident frame of mind.

If you utilize these 3 concepts, nerves will be far easier to overcome and you'll give yourself the best chance possible of swimming your best on any given day. Get to it!

**About Will Jonathan**



Will Jonathan is the owner of Green Rhythm Swimming, a professional mental coaching service for competitive swimmers and swim programs. His past and present clients include age-group national champions, Junior & Senior-level International swimmers, NCAA D1 Nationally Ranked Swim Programs, and Olympians. For more information, head to [www.greenrhythmswimming.com](http://www.greenrhythmswimming.com).



He is also the author of the book “The Swimmer’s Mind – Mastering The Mental Side Of Swimming”. It contains 320 pages of the same strategies and methodologies he uses when working with his individual clients and NCAA D1 Nationally-Ranked Swim Programs which have produced proven results and success at the Age-Group, National, NCAA, and International level. Readers will learn how to master the core aspects of the mental side of swimming such as how to develop long-term confidence, how to create a strong racing mindset, how to overcome limiting beliefs, and much more. You can pick up a copy today at his [website](http://www.greenrhythmswimming.com), at [Amazon](http://Amazon.com), and at [Barnes & Nobles](http://BarnesandNobles.com) online and at stores nationwide