

Get in Control: Anxiety-Reducing Techniques

As mentioned in the [previous article](#) discussing what anxiety is and why it's caused, there are two types of anxiety-somatic (dealing with the physical symptoms of anxiety) and cognitive (dealing with the mental and emotional symptoms). This article will address how to gain control of your anxiety so you can regain control of your performance.

Reducing Somatic Anxiety

Since somatic anxiety has to do with the body, any technique that helps to reduce the physiological response (racing heart, tight muscles, stomach issues) falls into this category. Keep in mind that techniques that decrease physical signs of anxiety will also decrease cognitive anxiety.

Techniques for Reducing Somatic Anxiety:

1. Deep breathing-There are numerous methods for using deep breathing to reduce anxiety. Basically, if you breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth as slowly and deeply as possible you'll be in good shape. You should never feel like you're holding your breath or forcing it out. Try to imagine breathing through your heart; it can better help to decrease your heart rate. Focusing on your breathing and counting each breath as you exhale can distract your mind from worried thoughts.
2. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) - Take a few minutes each day to go through all of your muscle groups, tightening a muscle for a few seconds and then relaxing it. By doing this progressive relaxation you can recognize where you are carrying physical tension and learn to physically loosen your muscles so that you can perform your best. Physical tension leads to mental tension and vice versa.
3. Biofeedback-There are several computer programs that can help teach you how to breathe properly and to control your thinking. It can help swimmers to "see" changes related to techniques they are trying.
4. Prerace routines- By doing the same thing before each event, you will focus on what you need to do to swim well rather than the situation. Your pre-race routine should include: a) music that creates your ideal arousal/energy level, b) imagery of how you want to swim or that physically relaxes you, c) positive focus and self-talk, and d) deep breathing and PMR.

Reducing Cognitive Anxiety

Cognitive anxiety typically comes from two places: Fear of Failure or Inappropriate Focus. It's important to know that you control the way that you think. While your brain might be wired to worry, you still have the ability to logically think through these worries and refocus your mind more appropriately. It's not always as easy as people make it sound, but with practice you can create more effective mental habits.

Fear of Failure Results From:

1. Lack of confidence

2. Too much emphasis on the outcome
3. Focus on emotions related to failure rather than success
4. High self-expectations and self-imposed pressure
5. Being untapered/physically tired
6. Lack of trust in coach
7. Returning from injury or illness

Techniques for Reducing Failure-Related Anxiety

1. Don't dwell on potential outcomes prior to or during a race; just focus on racing
2. Focus on success-related emotions (how good will it feel when you win/get a good time/swim the way you trained)
3. Play the odds; you're more likely to swim well than you are to have an awful race
4. Set realistic expectations, especially when untapered or returning from injury or illness (don't expect a personal record if it's been a hard training week)
5. Work on communication with your coach; get him/her to explain their training philosophy and the physiology behind why it works.

Examples of Inappropriate Focus:

1. Uncontrollable/situational factors (competitors, event importance, parents, injury, etc...)
2. Past races/meets
3. Future thinking (What does it mean if I lose?)

Techniques for Reducing Focus-Related Anxiety

1. If you don't control it, let it go. Make a list of your worries and cross off anything that you can't directly impact. If you can control it, make a plan.
2. Simplify the race. Focus on what you need to do to swim well (quick start, strong turns, powerful kicks, etc...)
3. Focus on the task (swimming) rather than the situation (championship)
4. Focus on right now, how to make it a great race
5. Trust that if you swim like you've trained to, the outcome will take care of itself

Summary

Anxiety does not have to keep you from performing your best. You may have some physical activation (faster heart rate, quicker breathing) but you can control this. Work on reducing both the physiological signs of anxiety as well as the cognitive anxiety. Leave some time for a pre-race routine that allows you to physically and mentally relax. While it requires training, you can regain control of your body by taking control of your mind.

Up Next...

In the next in this series of articles we will present a special case related to open water swimming. Swimming in a pool is much different than swimming in water without lane lines. Therefore, being physically and mentally prepared for this unique environment is paramount to being safe and successful in this competitive situation.

