**Anxiety within sport**

Posted 3 years ago by [Catherine McCanny](http://believeperform.com/author/catherinemccanny/)

You would be hard pressed to find an athlete who doesn’t react in some way to imminent competition. This article focuses on the feelings of anxiety and stress that some athletes encounter before and during performance. It will explain how anxiety is defined, how different sports people react to it and also how it can be managed.

**What Is Anxiety?**

The medical definition of anxiety describes it is astate consisting of psychological and physical symptoms brought about by a sense of apprehension of a perceived threat. It also goes on to state that anxiety can differ according to the situation and the individual. Applied to the sporting arena this means that a golfer for example may experience more anxiety playing in a national tournament compared to a club competition. At the same time a club competition may draw the same nerves in another individual.

Psychologists generally differentiate between two types of anxiety. Trait anxiety relates to an aspect of personality in which nervousness is a stable personality trait in an individual.

State anxiety on the other hand refers to temporary feelings of anxiety in a particular situation. Therefore a person with an anxious personality may find many different everyday tasks stressful compared to someone who only gets nervous in extreme situations.

**Causes of Anxiety**

According to Kremer and Moran (2008) one reason why we tend to get uptight before competition could be related the pressure of being observed. Spectators of any sport are constantly evaluating the skills of the athletes they are watching and this can be extremely daunting to those who are not trained to deal effectively with this pressure. Not wanting to fail can heap more strain on a player when as they become more aware of being observed and so the stress continues to grow.

Feelings of anxiety can also be confused with fear but there is a significant difference between these two emotions. A fear or “phobia” is a negative feeling about a specific object (spiders) or experience (talking in front of a large group) however anxiety is more general and often athletes recognise that they are anxious about something but cannot put their finger on it.

**Tackling Anxiety**

For a lot of athletes anxiety can be a very unpleasant feeling with physiological symptoms including a racing heartbeat, sweaty palms and muscle tension. In fact Ray and Weise-Bjornstal (1999) outlined seven possible categories in which an athlete can experience stress including affective, cognitive and behavioural. So how can it be managed?

Sport psychologists can teach techniques one can use to control anxiety. One technique involves the athlete “labelling” these thoughts and feelings described above as a way of priming them for competition. Through the process of labelling the athlete can learn to associate those former negative thoughts and feelings with preparing to compete. For example a cyclist can learn to recognise his/her increased heart rate as a positive indication that they are well prepared for competition.

Green and Green (1977) studied Indian yoga practitioners and discovered they were able to control various physiological functions voluntarily including brain waves, body temperature and blood pressure. It was also relatively simple to teach others how to control their physiological feelings too. The study was able to demonstrate how the mind and body are linked which brings us to the next technique. Performing a simple exercise such as breathing effectively can enable an athlete to relax and prepare for competition as more oxygen gets carried in the blood which in turn facilitates the working muscle. Diaphragmatic breathing involves a muscle in the abdomen called the diaphragm. A simple way to learn this technique is to place your left hand on your abdomen and the right on your upper chest. As you breathe in your left hand should move out and your right hand should remain relatively still. This is a sign you are breathing effectively using your full lung capacity. Try to exhale for twice as long as you have inhaled. This helps to slow the heart rate and in turn aids relaxation.

By performing these simple techniques during training or when you have some free time can help to calm those nerves and also view them in a different way so that they do not interfere with your performance.

**Anxiety in sports performance**

Posted 3 years ago by [Gobinder Gill](http://believeperform.com/author/gobindergill/)

Anxiety is a concept that is widely discussed by performers and coaches. Practitioners involved in sports performance need to be aware of anxiety related symptoms. Once awareness is built it would be prudent to deal with anxiety related issues.

There are two distinct aspects of anxiety. One aspect emanates towards trait anxiety. Trait anxiety relates to innate characteristics that humans are born with. For example, having a tendency to throw up before important competition. A second form of anxiety is related to the state, which is situational specific. For example, a performer may feel anxious when free-throwing in basketball. Related to these aspects there are also two mechanisms that are identified as somatic (physical feelings) and cognitive (mental) anxiety. Performers can suffer with both types of mechanisms or predominately from one over the other.

Common symptoms of somatic anxiety include, experiencing butterflies, sweating, heavy breathing or a elevated heart rate. Common symptoms of cognitive anxiety include negative thoughts, feelings of apprehension or nervousness. Dealing with anxiety related symptoms could be difficult because what works for one performer may not work with another. Therefore, practitioners need to be flexible in their approach and utilise a range of different strategies.

To help performers overcome, or at least limit (somatic symptoms) a range of strategies can be put forward. Through experience performers could develop their own individual strategies. However, novice performers should be guided and supported.

1) Relaxation training

Relaxation training involves teaching performers a range of routines to help support the body to relax. The purpose of relaxation training is to enable performers to feel relaxed in both mind (thinking) and body (muscles). Feeling relaxed can help performers focus effectively on performance aspects. There are two forms of relaxation that performers could conduct. One form relates to practices beyond the training pitch and competition settings. This form of relaxation can relate to listening to music or participating in Yoga classes. The other form of relaxation can be within the changing room environment prior to competition. Within this environment, performers can use positive intent statements, use calming breathing techniques or listening to music.

2) Deep breathing

Deep breathing is a strategy that needs to be practised over time for it to become effective. Therefore, performers need to start focusing on their own breathing and also focus on different parts of the body. A simple, but effective routine, deep breathing simply involves inhaling (through the nose) and exhaling (out the mouth). Performers are encouraged that through deep breathing they get in tune with different parts of their body and in particular where they can feel tension.

To enable performers to overcome or at least reduce (cognitive symptoms) a range of strategies can also be put forward.

1) Goal setting

Goal setting is a simple but useful technique. Goal setting allows performers to attain purposeful direction and focus on tasks in hand. Practitioners must set process related goals and not wholly outcome goals. Goal setting must be a mechanism through which performers develop a process in order to achieve set targets.

2) Positive self-talk

Performers should practise positive self-talk on a regular basis. Positive self-talk supports the cognition within our own minds. A positive mind will be more balanced and provides a better chance of success. Thus, positive self-talk is about channelling your brain and directing that thinking to support performance.

3) Emotional control

An excellent practitioner should instruct performers to understand their own performance levels. Performers need to identify feelings during good performance and compare these to feelings following poor performance. This will enable performers to understand how they react and the way they feel during contrasting emotional states.

The key to anxiety is that practitioners need to work on ways to combat symptoms. Through combatting symptoms performers will have greater opportunities for performance improvement.

**Choking: The Case of Jana Novotna: “One of the most famous collapses in sport”**

Posted 2 weeks ago by [Helen Davis](http://believeperform.com/author/helendavis/)

In 1993, Jana Novotna played Steffi Graf in the 1993 Wimbledon women’s tennis final. Novotna was in a strong position; she led the match 6-7, 6-4, and had a game point at 4-1 in the third and final set. She was in a virtually unassailable position (Cuffe 2012). Despite this, Novotna lost the game and Graf won the final five games of the match and the Grand Slam title. In those last crucial games, Novotna double faulted on her serves and mis-hit her overheads. It has been described as one of the most famous collapses in sport (Abulleil 2015).

The Wimbledon final is undoubtedly a high-pressure situation; an event which is one of the highest profile events in tennis and could be considered a high stake situation, where performing carries implications for future opportunities and successes (De Caro et al. 2011). Lidz 1998 claims that, due to this pressure, Novotna ‘choked’ during the final set. ‘Choking’ is a metaphorical expression that describes performance decrements under pressure conditions despite an individual striving to perform well (Baumeister 1984). Gladwell (2000) argues that during the final set, Novotna began to think about what she was doing, she started to pay attention to her serves, lobs and volleys; this, he believes, is when the match started to go wrong for her. What caused this to happen? It is proposed that there are multiple routes to skill failure (De Caro, Thomas, Albert & Beilock 2011)

One reason may be due to Novotna cognitively appraising the game as a threat. She was exhibiting a negative mental approach to pressure and therefore there were no physiological improvements to enhance her performance. The Theory of Challenge and Threat States (TCTSA; Jones, Meijen, McCarthy & Sheffield 2009) is sport specific and provides us with an explanation of why athletes evaluate sporting scenarios as either a challenge or a threat; it provides a way of understanding athletes’ perceptions and experiences in competition. This theory supports the commonly held belief that some individuals will rise to the demands of competition and perform well, while some will wilt and perform poorly. The principles of challenge and threat have implications for Novotna’s performance; if Novotna’s threat appraisal of her situation produced negative emotions, these negative emotions could have caused harm to her performing (Skinner & Brewer 2004).

The notion that Novotna began to consciously pay attention to the control of her movements causing her skill breakdown can also be explained in perceptual-motor literature. Fitts and Posner (1967) proposed that an explanation of anxiety-induced conscious control lies in stages of learning. From a cognitive perspective, these stages are underpinned by different knowledge structures and methods of control. The cognitive approach is characterised by an ordered process of acquisition that sees the performer begin with overtly controlled (explicit) processes that gradually undergo structural constriction into the smooth, unconscious and covertly controlled (procedural) processes of the expert. It can be argued that Novotna, as an ‘expert’ tennis player, usually displayed the characteristics of expertise involving functioning of an automatic, effortless, implicit nature (Masters 1992). Also, at the beginning of the match Novotna’s processing of her skills were being executed procedurally outside of working memory and her movements were smoother and more coordinated, she was able to concentrate on other cues without interruption (Beilock & Carr, 2001; Fitts & Posner, 1967; Masters, 1992). In other words, Novotna was playing brilliantly and taking a commanding lead over Graf (BBC Sport 2004).

However, under pressure in the final set, Novotna experienced self-consciousness which caused her to regress back to inefficient processing of explicit information, similar to that of a novice performer, resulting in her poor performance (Baumeister, 1984; Mesagno, Harvey & Janelle, 2011). Here, conscious controls interfered with the automatic execution of her behaviour (in Novotna’s case her serve, lob and net shots) and lead her to a breakdown in skill behaviour. This ‘reinvestment’ of controlled processes may explain choking (Masters 1992). This theory of reinvestment (Masters, 1992; Masters & Maxwell 2008; Masters, Polman & Hammond 1993) proposes that relatively automated skills can be disrupted by attempts to consciously monitor and control the mechanics of movements. This would explain why Novotna, with the pressure of the Wimbledon final, began to think about how she was executing her shots and was operating her skill with her explicit knowledge of the mechanics of the skill.

To delve deeper into an explanation of Novotna’s breakdown, an analysis of performance declines in high pressure contexts can be explained by two competing groups of theories: skill focus theories (Baumeister 1984; Beilock & Carr 2001; Masters 1992) and distraction theories (Eysenck & Calvo 1992; Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos & Calvo 2007; Wine 1971). In both theoretical approaches it is assumed that anxiety has an influence on an athlete’s attention regulation (Beilock & Gray 2007). However, the specific assumptions on how one’s attention is affected diverge.

According to skill-focus theories, anxious individuals have a tendency to shift their attention inwards as one’s level of self-consciousness increases. The attentional focus can be either directed on the separate steps of proper skill execution, termed explicit monitoring (Beilock & Carr 2001) or individuals attempt to consciously regulate the specific skill execution in a step by step manner, termed conscious processing or reinvestment as previously discussed (Hardy, Mullen & Jones 1996; Masters 1992; Masters & Maxwell 2008). In the case of expert performers, such as Novotna, this attentional shift leads to a disruption of well-elaborated automatized skills which actually do not require conscious processing, which in turn can be associated with performance decrements in the respective movement execution (Beilock & Carr 2001).

In contrast, distraction theories propose that anxiety consumes limited attentional resources of an individual leaving less attentional capacity for the actual sports task at hand (Carver & Scheir 1981; Lewis & Linder 1997; Wine 1971). In line with the assumptions of Processing Efficiency Theory (PET; Eysenck & Calvo 1992) and Attentional Control Theory (ACT; Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos & Calvo 2007) it is proposed that anxious individual’s attention is shifted away from the actual task and directed towards task-irrelevant stimuli which can either be internal stimuli (e.g. worries) or external stimuli (e.g. the crowd). This attentional drift leads to impairments in the efficiency and the effectiveness of task execution.

It is difficult to come to definitive conclusions as to the reasons behind Novotna’s choking incident in 1993, as it would appear that there are multiple routes to skill failure (De Caro et al. 2011). Novotna has been very quiet on the subject of the 1993 final and has rarely spoken of the incident. She claims that it was strictly a failure of her game plan. Novotna’s stance of the match is contradictory to her reputation of choking whilst on the threshold of major singles titles. Self reporting and measuring of cognitive appraisals has received uncertainty in the literature (Peacock & Wong 1990) as individuals may wish to present themselves in ways that indicate that they can cope in stressful situations regardless of their psychological state (Wiechman, Smith, Smoll & Ptacek 2000). This may be true of Novotna, her sobs at the end of the match indicated her disappointment (BBC Sport 2004) and the choking incident is still referred to, to this day (Reason 2015).