

Performance Anxiety? 3 Helpful Tips for Your Athlete

By David Benzel

You can almost hear the wheels of fun come to a screeching halt when a young athlete experiences his/her first performance anxiety. As parents and coaches, we know that the heart-pounding and stomach-churning experience of competition is not a one-time deal.

More than likely it will play out over and over again in your young athlete's life. Giving them the tools now, to successfully navigate the anxiety that comes with performing competitively, will serve them in their sports endeavors and lifelong pursuits.

Here are 3 helpful tips that are worth teaching.

1) Use Scripted Self-Talk

Long before athletes step out onto a field, a court, or into the gym, an internal dialog has taken place. In fact, we talk to ourselves so often, that most of the time what our mind tells our body probably goes unnoticed at the conscious level.

Research indicates, however, that there is great power in the words we say to ourselves. Professional athletes have used the strategy of positive self-talk for years to help them perform at top levels.

It is important to note that not all self-talk is created equal. Instructional self-talk, such as, "rotate your body with the stroke" is the best kind of statement when an athlete is in the beginning stages of learning or fine-tuning a skill.

On the other hand, if your athlete is trying to push through something that requires endurance or strength, a more motivating statement such as, "You are strong and fast," is more effective.

Try This:

- Regularly talk with your athlete about the kinds of things they are saying internally, during practice, and competition.

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- Encourage them to keep a journal of their thoughts, especially following a practice or performance.
- Help them choose positive replacements for internal talk that might be undermining success.
- Have your athlete say statements using “you” or their name, instead of “I.”
- Rehearse the scripted statements with them several days prior to a competition.

2) Focus on a Plan Rather Than an Outcome

Performance jitters are fueled by the unknown. Whether they come from having to learn a new skill or from facing a new opponent, uncharted territory is scary.

Add to this the pressure athletes feel to produce a certain end result and you have a perfect recipe for anxiety.

Equip your athlete with a preparation plan that maps out specific and measurable steps that will help them to get from point A to point B. Encourage them to focus on working through the steps of the plan rather than focusing on the outcome.

Try This:

- Sit down with your athlete and write out a plan for each day leading up to a competition.
- Include actionable steps that build confidence rather than adding more expectations; practice necessary skills.
- Celebrate completed steps of the plan.
- Avoid talking about the significance of a competition’s outcome, or what it means for the season.

3) Help Them to See a Positive Spin on Pressure

Hindsight allows us to see the good that can come from a bit of pressure. More than likely, you can recall a time in sports, work, or school, where the pressure was applied and it caused you to rise to the occasion.

Recognize that feeling pressure to perform well is healthy and normal. However, when our response to pressure is a paralyzing or distracting anxiety it loses its ability to drive and direct us. In this case, perspective is everything.

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Discuss this reality with your athlete. Help him/her to expect and accept pressure – especially before a game (meet, race etc.)

Try This:

- Talk through positive ways that pressure helps us (i.e. it increases our desire to focus and helps us to recognize that fun is not the only priority.)
- Find ways to bring calm to a high-pressure situation; for example, listening to inspiring or relaxing music prior to an event.
- Limit unnecessary stressors such as negative or intense family members.

Final Thoughts

Young athletes take their cues from the adults around them. You can have a great impact on their ability to handle pressure by teaching them these three tools:

1. Practice scripted self-talk
2. Focus on a specific and measurable plan rather than an outcome
3. Have a positive outlook on pressure

[CLICK HERE](#) to ask David Benzel a question about this topic:

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