

How to handle pressure and anxiety in sport



Preamble

The following psychological resource for participants and athletes, has been developed by sport psychologist Fiona McCarthy on behalf of the NSW Office of Sport, as a key initiative of the NSW Government's Future Champions strategy.

For more information on Future Champions, please visit www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development

Getting to know the author

Fiona McCarthy is a registered psychologist, specialising in sport psychology and is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists. Fiona owns and operates Mind and Body Balance, a business she established 25 years ago.

Fiona is the Hunter Academy of Sport, Sport Psychology Consultant and a New South Wales Institute of Sport, Sport Psychology Service Provider. Over the last twenty-

five years, Fiona has assisted many teams, athletes, parents and coaches in the areas of confidence, concentration, handling pressure, motivation, goal setting, time management, performance preparation and general well-being. Fiona has worked with numerous sports, assisting recreational level athletes to professional, international, Olympic and Paralympic level athletes, reach their full potential.



Background to these resources

The importance of having a mental 'tool kit' to support your learning, performance and engagement on and off the sporting field.

The following resources have been developed by Fiona McCarthy to assist athletes at all levels, in understanding the importance of having a suite of mental 'tools' at their disposal. These 'tools' are practical and multidimensional and will help athletes learn and develop the necessary mental skills they require to help them navigate their way through their sporting journey with a positive mindset and achieve success on and off the field.

It is well recognised that to reach the pinnacle within sport, an athlete needs a superior mindset consisting of strong and effective mental skills and strategies.

Importantly, mental skills are very intertwined and integrated, so it is recommended that you read about and put into regular practice, a number of these resources to strengthen the 'mental tools' in your kit bag!



How to handle pressure and anxiety in sport

It is very common for athletes/players to experience feelings of pressure and anxiety at some stage in their sporting journey.

It is good to be a little bit anxious about an upcoming performance. Anxiety is a normal emotion. However, if your nerves and worry begin to take over your thinking, actions and feelings, it may be time to develop some coping strategies.

Anxiety can make you feel tense, weak and even fatigued or frozen with fear.

Too much anxiety and worry can cause feelings of being

overwhelmed and confused. It can seem like all your thoughts are rushing in your head and causing a 'traffic jam' of your thoughts. This can prevent your ability to focus on your sport and can create some overthinking in your head.

Sometimes when this happens it is because athletes are 'feeding' their thoughts with fears. Fears can be related to 'what if' situations. For example, 'what if I don't perform well?', 'what if I fail?' A way to switch this is to 'feed' yourself

positive thoughts related to facts. For example, 'the fact is that everything will be ok, I know what I need to do. I have trained very hard for this, and I will just enjoy it and do the best I can'.

Feeding *facts* versus feeding *fear* is a very helpful way to turn your anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed to being and feeling clear, in control and calm.



Outlined below are some great practical tips to assist you in taking control of your nerves -



1. **Focus on the process**
of the upcoming performance, not on the outcome.



2. **Focus on yourself and your job**
not on someone else.



3. **Believe in yourself.**
Use positive self-talk. Make sure it is simple, specific to you and positive.



4. **Some relaxation strategies may help.**
They may include:
 - breathing techniques, e.g. *centering* (abdominal breathing), or following a breathing pattern of 'in for 4 seconds', 'hold for 2 seconds' and 'out for the count of 4'
 - mental imagery and rehearsal
 - listening to music that relaxes you
 - reading a book
 - talking with family and friends about things other than your upcoming performance.



5. **Have a realistic 'game plan'.**
Break it up into some controllable realistic pieces, just like a jigsaw puzzle. Remember one piece at a time.



We hope you liked our tips

Have FUN building your psychological skills and strategies and put them into practice in and out of sport!

Remember importantly, if you are unsure of any of these tips or require further advice, please talk to your Coach, Parent or consult a Sport Psychologist.

You might like to check out our NEW animated YouTube video, Developing your mental 'tool kit' to support you in and out of sport featured within the NSW Office of Sport's Pathways and Development webpages @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development>.

Check out more tips for Participants @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/social-and-recreational-sport-participants>

And or tips for Emerging and High-Performance Athletes @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/emerging-athletes>



**Future Champions -
Developing your
mental 'tool kit' to
support you in and out
of sport.**

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