



VOLLEYBALLBC

## TIPS FOR COACHES

# PERFORMANCE ANXIETY IN COMPETITION

### What is Stress & Performance Anxiety?

Stress is the subjective interpretation of an event by a person. In order to perceive something to be stressful the athlete must:

- Perceive an event as threatening (to their physical, mental, or emotional well being) and,
- Perceive that they do not have the resources to cope with the event.

Some stress is useful. According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, an optimal level of stress (arousal) is needed in order to reach peak performance. However, too little stress can lead to under-activation of the athlete (boredom, disinterest), whereas an overwhelming amount of stress can lead to performance anxiety and “distress”. Distress or unmanageable levels of stress lead to higher risks of physical and mental injury and illness. Regardless of whether the stressors are real or imaginary, athletes' reactions are similar.

Many athletes who perform well during training or practice may still suffer from performance anxiety on game day. Performance anxiety in sports, sometimes otherwise known as “choking” is described as a decrease in athletic performance due to too much perceived stress. Mental stress on gameday is typically rooted in at least one of several factors (see list on right). Many of these have more to do with everything surrounding the game, before and after, than the actual game itself.



**Having an audience** (particularly one that is loving and supportive): Athletes can become overly self-aware of every play they make when they're on the athletic stage.

**Fear of disappointing others:** Even when a parent or coach is supportive, athletes may be anxious about disappointing them.

**High expectations:** Every athlete wants to do their best, but internal self-talk may create stress when they set expectations that anything less than perfect is failure.

**Post-game analysis:** Whether it is from a coach, parent, teammate, or themselves, the post-game analysis weighs on an athlete's mindset.

**Recovering from an injury:** After an athlete gets hurt, it can take a long time to restore their confidence.



Performance anxiety is often a result of the way the athletes interpret the situation. It is rarely the external situation that causes stress, but rather the way the athlete's self-talk describes the situation that creates feelings of stress, anxiety and fear.

For athletes who choke during competition it is important to they understand the thoughts they have regarding an event can be modified, adjusted or controlled with the right mental practice.

## Tips for Supporting Athletes

- **Focus on the task at hand.** Some athletes allow outside problems/distractions to affect their performance. Crowd noise, opponents and hovering parents often cause tremendous stress for an athlete. During the competition, an athlete's focus needs to be on the responsibilities in the moment, and not outside distractions. Come up with a plan to handle distractions.
- **Consider the language you use before, during, and after games.** Be wary of only praising athletes when things go right – a good rule of thumb is to praise effort instead of the result. As a coach, it can help to avoid instruction that adds extra pressure to a game situation (e.g., “we have to score right now!”).
- Studies have shown that we stay out of our heads more when performing actions we might describe as “muscle memory.” At practice, **having athletes do many repetitions** of the movements they will be expected to do on gameday is a good way to ensure they become second nature.
- **Simulate game-type pressure in practice** by playing music or recorded crowd noise, having parents stay to watch, or adding in other elements that will get athletes used to performing under stress. It's important to make sure athletes are familiar with and confident in the strategies that are going to be used on gameday.
- **Set expectations for competition that are process-oriented.** This gives players tangible things to focus on that they can control in a game. The more in-control your athlete feels, the calmer they will be. To reduce anxiety, focus on processes like positive self-talk, game day tactics or strategies, techniques, imagery and visualization, getting better, and having a learning mentality. When athletes focus on learning those things and perfecting them out of the love of the game, there's always a successful outcome regardless of how an athlete plays.
- **Help your athletes create rituals.** To calm their nerves and focus on the process rather than outcome, encourage your athletes to come up with their own rituals and stick to them on game day. For younger athletes, helping them write a mantra or practice visualization might work best.
- **After the competition, review performance and recall the things athletes did well.** Focus on any actions, thoughts and behaviors that helped them perform. Acknowledge things that hindered performance but look where you want to go, not where you don't. If you focus on the negative aspects, you will continue to do the same things over again. Focus on the times when players get it right.
- **Enjoy volleyball!** Don't place too much emphasis on winning and losing - the primary reason most athletes play is because they enjoy the game. While there is a time and a place for an emphasis on winning and losing, most athletes need to appreciate the experience and friendships made rather than the win-loss record.

Sources

[www.truesport.org](http://www.truesport.org)

[www.expandthereach.ca](http://www.expandthereach.ca)



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