

5 Ways to Combat Competitive Stress

By April Clay, Registered Psychologist

1. Play pretend:

Don't you miss this from childhood? Here is your once chance to delude yourself for a good cause. You can use the power of your imagination to help put yourself at ease.



You can imagine you are one of your favorite top athletes. How would they stand, walk, conduct themselves among others? Corey, a young hockey player, regularly pretends he is Wayne Gretzky for his big games. He imagines he is the seasoned athlete with many wins under his belt, and he knows exactly what to do. Corey says it helps him to stay focused and make a concrete plan. It also gives him a “script” to follow that he has put together from watching how Gretzky conducts himself. The result is that he has less time to focus on feelings of nervousness or doubt. When they do arise, he reminds himself that even the great one might have similar feelings, but surely he would acknowledge and then put them aside to focus on his game.

2. Brain re-boot:

When we're stressed, many of the body's functions naturally speed up to meet the challenge. It's part of a built-in safety mechanism called the flight or fight response. This alarm response can come in handy when faced with a charging tiger but not so much with the competitive environment. It's hard to think when your body is vibrating so hard your knees are knocking.

The re-boot strategy involves assisting your body to drop it down a few notches. The first step is to stop, literally, in your tracks. Take a deep breath that feels like it is reaching the tips of your toes, and then slowly let it out. For the next few minutes, simply slow everything down. Walk slowly, talk slowly, and think slowly. Then tell yourself where to put your focus, give yourself direction.

The more you practice this strategy, the more effective it will be when you really need it. Watch for opportunities in your training to try it out and experience the results. Think of this kind of re-boot as similar to the kind you give your computer at times. You do this when your computer has become overloaded and freezes. Perhaps because it has too many windows open and not enough energy to deal with all the tasks. Sound familiar? It is analogous to what happens to the brain under stress. Too many thoughts to track and execute. The brain re-boot can help you clear the decks and then decide what it is that is

important for you to be focused on, and as well renew your energy to accomplish what you have chosen.

3. Choose a neutral focus:

First, let's define what constitutes a "hot focus". Simply, it is a place you put your mind that turns on the heat and makes you feel uncomfortable. It varies from person to person, but generally involves a focus on scary thoughts or sensations in your body. It's kind of like staying tuned in to your very own horror channel.

Fortunately, you can change channels if you practice. The channel you want to be watching should involve something non-anxiety provoking. For example, if you are like many other athletes, perhaps you attend too much to who is watching. You scan the warm-up area looking for fellow competitors and imagine what they are thinking about you. Pretty soon you have concocted an entire story about how and what they think. And you lose track of your focus, and you begin to make mistakes. But instead of fixing them you just add to your story about how these other athletes are judging you. Not especially helpful is it?

Jordan, an amateur rider who has long battled the tendency to be tuned into this anxiety channel now employs this strategy:

"I notice I am noticing other riders and starting to worry about what they may be thinking. And then I say to myself something like 'hmm, interesting. But look that beautiful tree, how nice it is. I wonder what kind it is.' In general, I just choose something really mundane but happy and I keep talking to myself about it in my head. I find it really works for me, as eventually I just forget about the people there. They become like props in a play and what I am focusing on comes to the forefront."

4. Assume a physically confident position:

As anyone well knows, our body language tends to change when we're stressed. If, while feeling in the grip of anxiety, someone were to suddenly hold a mirror up to you chances are you could spot the difference. A worried look, slumped shoulders, uncertain gestures or even rapid movement.

One way to help yourself is to change what's in that mirror. Either you literally check in with a real mirror, and re-set your facial expression and your posture or you imagine a mirror in your mind and do the same. Fortunately, the body has memories to draw on of different positions. There are associations built up in your mind that relate body to mood.

So if you're not feeling confident, use your body to help get you there. Changing your body's position can help you get in touch with other aspects of your confident self. Smile and stretch your spine and watch your mood lighten. Sit deep in the tack with a firm weight in your heels and notice how your brain starts to move off in a different direction.

5. Change "what ifs" to "what is".

The content of our inner dialogue changes with performance anxiety. Often it veers off

into what I like to refer to as what-if land. What if I lose my focus? What if I forget what I'm supposed to do? What if I screw up again?

It's just your mind's way of trying to prepare you for what lies ahead, or what might lie ahead. The problem is, when too much of this kind of chatter goes on for too long your anxiety can escalate into panic. In fact, your body can begin responding as if all those what-ifs are already happening.

When you do notice this line of thinking beginning to pick up speed, apply the remedy of "what is". This phrase can help bring you back to there here and now. To asking yourself what is happening and what action needs to be taken. Action has a nice way of easing anxiety almost instantly as it moves you from the realm of uncertainty into what can be done. Remember that you only have power to act within the present moment (what is) and keep bringing your mind back to this focus.

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