



USING SELF-REGULATION TO MANAGE HIGH-PRESSURE SITUATIONS

Being able to perform well under pressure is a requirement to be a great athlete or performer. However, it is something many people have to learn and develop over time. We all react to pressure in different ways and often our ability to cope with pressure can vary greatly from day to day. Pressure can lead to several physical feelings such as stomach butterflies, sweaty palms, tense muscles, nausea, restlessness and hyperactivity (or, for some, lethargy). These symptoms are all part of what is called the 'stress response' – otherwise known as fight or flight.

AN EVOLVED RESPONSE

This stress response is designed to help us. It evolved to make sure we respond quickly to dangers to our survival. Joseph LeDoux, neuroscientist and author of "The Emotional Brain" described this evolutionary point neatly...

"...early on (perhaps since dinosaurs ruled the earth, or even before) evolution hit upon a way of wiring the brain to produce responses that are likely to keep the organism alive in dangerous situations. The solution was so effective that it has not been messed with much...evolution seems to have gone with an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' rule when it comes to the fear system of the brain."

The challenge we face now, however, is that our brains are not designed for 21st century living. As a result, this stress response can get triggered by comparatively minor challenges. That is, our brains were designed to help us avoid predators, but now our innate skew towards negativity is not effective for us in the modern world where we are much less likely to face real danger.

OPTIMAL PERFORMANCE

This is not to say that all stress is bad. Far from it. The stress response can be helpful for optimal performance. It allows for oxygen to rapidly get delivered to muscles and the brain – allowing us to perform physically well and make key decisions. The problem is these processes have been designed to help us in critical, short periods of time – when we are dealing with an immediate threat. In modern society, many of us spend far too long in a stressed state than is good for us. Whether that is in response to upcoming competitions, concerns about training or managing sport commitments with academic demands. Over long periods of time, this can have serious consequences for our health and too much stress can negatively impact our performance.

The key is learning how to change and control the way you feel – something called self-regulation – so that you are not in a constant state of stress. Being able to manage emotions can be key in ensuring the stress response does not start to become unhelpful. Negative side effects of stress for sport performance can include muscle tension, anxiety, attention being focused on task irrelevant things and it is also related to choking under pressure.

BELOW WE LOOK AT THREE TIPS FOR SELF-REGULATION, DESIGNED TO HELP YOU RELAX AND GROUND YOU TO THE PRESENT MOMENT.

1. **Progressive muscle relaxation:** this technique can be used to manage stress and decrease muscle tension. It involves tensing and relaxing large muscle groups starting from the top of your body and working your way down. Tense each muscle group (face, hands, arms, shoulders, buttocks, thighs, feet) for 10 seconds and then relax it for 10 seconds before moving onto the next muscle group. Practice this daily for a week and notice any improvement in your ability to self-regulate. The idea is to relax the body to facilitate a more relaxed mind. It shows what an absence of tension feels like and that muscle tension can be reduced when given the appropriate focus. Notice whether your mind and body become calmer. Using this technique, you can become better at recognising more quickly when unwanted tension in your body is building up and release it quickly.
2. **Controlled breathing:** for this technique breathe in for a count of four. Hold your breath for a count of four, exhale for a count of four and pause for a count of four. Repeat this at least five times. This strategy helps lower stress levels, calm the nervous system and helps take your mind away from distracting thoughts by focusing on the counting.
3. **5, 4, 3, 2 1 technique:** this technique is designed to help ground you to the present moment. look around and notice 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.

These strategies can be particularly useful to use as part of a performance routine ahead of performances and between performances (e.g. during breaks in play). As with all skills, these strategies take time to learn and master. But once they are mastered, they can be extremely helpful in managing high-pressure situations. Developing the right resources and coping strategies for self-regulation can support your ability to perform under pressure.