

Sports Performance Enhancement

I want athletes to have fun playing their sport and excel at their play. No matter what the sport – tennis, golf, hockey, soccer, wrestling, football, swimming, fencing, or horseback riding – I can teach athletes to teach themselves to decrease their stress, to stay focused, and to play at a consistently higher level.

Don't get me wrong: a certain level of stress can promote excellence and can push a person to try harder, to focus better, and to have more fun. But when people push past their "good stress" threshold, it can lead to second-guessing, misjudgments, and poorer performance. Then, it's the enemy of excellence.

Need examples? Players make bad shots, or bad plays, and cannot get them out of their minds. Players practice-practice-practice, and still cannot "get it right." They lose focus and give up. Many people tell athletes "Relax, relax, you're too tense." Other people suggest that athletes "try harder," especially when they are in a slump. I don't agree with either of those pieces of advice. To play well, athletes need to play with a certain amount of intensity. By that, I mean they need to be in their "zone of optimal performance." But everybody's "zone" is different. For example, on a scale of 0 to 10, where zero means a person is so relaxed that the tennis racket falls out of his/her hand and 10 means he/she is wound up so tight that he/she can barely swing the racket, some players' "zones" will be 5, while other players will be tearing up the court at 3 or 7.

How do I help athletes find their "zone?" First, if appropriate, I meet with the athlete's parents to discover what they think their child's challenge is. Second, I meet with the athlete to discover what he/she thinks it is. Third, in a clinical hypnosis session, I teach the athlete the technique of self-hypnosis. Finally, I make suggestions. Suggestions are basically homework assignments in the form of an individualized program designed to help athletes think about and visualize their game challenge in different ways. We utilize self-hypnosis and mental imagery to help create an experience in the athletes' minds that empower and enable the athletes to do things they previously were not aware they could do.* Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Joe DiMaggio are well-known for their use of self-hypnosis.

Self-hypnosis is like any other athletic skill in several ways:

- It must be practiced;
- The more you practice, the better you get at it;
- The more you practice, the easier it gets; and
- The more you practice, the faster you get at it.**

Athletes are great candidates for clinical hypnosis because they are so motivated. Typically, there is improvement after only two or three visits. Moreover there's a huge spillover into other areas because the results from self-hypnosis show athletes that they have the ability to gain control over other life challenges. This raises self-esteem and awareness, builds confidence, and gives a sense of mastery and hope.

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Sports Performance Enhancement

Strategies for effective management by coaches and/or athletes

By Jeffrey E. Lazarus, MD

*Anxiety is future oriented and driven by the ongoing question, "What if...?" In sports, athletes succumb to anxiety if they overestimate the risks they face, and underestimate their own resources.**

Strategies for Managing Sports Performance Anxiety

Anxiety or Energy Management

When anxiety negatively impacts performance, athletes can employ general calming exercises. These can include (a) deep breathing (b) imagery or visualization, and (c) cognitive techniques (actively stopping negative thinking, and refocusing on something positive).

Stay in the present

Athletes should practice staying in the moment and focusing on the task at hand. They should avoid speculating about winning or losing. It is this speculation that results in anxiety.



Photograph by Robert Newb

Goal Setting

Athletes experiencing anxiety about their performance in a specific area can benefit from setting concrete goals, then letting go of their anxiety and focusing on these goals. The establishment of a goal-setting program often includes: a concrete plan for skill development, identifying target dates for attaining goals, identifying goal achievement strategies, and providing regular goal evaluation.

Imagery, Visualization, Mental Practice

In a relaxed environment, athletes can benefit greatly from visualizing themselves successfully performing their sport. They can also visualize themselves feeling stressed during a game, and then successfully discarding the anxiety using physical techniques (such as shaking off the anxiety with their hand, or throwing it away like a ball). Neuroscience shows that the same parts of the brain are utilized when visualizing one's self playing a sport as when actually playing that sport. This is a very effective technique.

Self-talk

Confidence is one of the single greatest indicators of an athlete's performance. Confidence can be improved by actively stopping negative self-talk and redirecting towards positive self-talk. Athletes can learn to identify negative or irrelevant thoughts, dismiss them, and alternately create positive thoughts.

Professional Assistance

Athletes who struggle greatly from Sports Performance Anxiety can benefit from practicing the above mentioned techniques in a medical setting utilizing clinical hypnosis. Under hypnosis, the mind is much more open to the power of suggestion, the alleviation of anxiety, and positive thinking.

*Michael Yapko, PhD

**From Karen Olness, MD, and Daniel P. Kohen, MD, *Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy with Children*



Photograph by Richard Elzey

Jeffrey E. Lazarus, MD, is a Menlo Park physician who specializes in the treatment of Sports Performance Enhancement utilizing clinical hypnosis.

After completing his pediatric residency at Stanford University Medical Center.

Dr. Lazarus practiced general pediatrics in Cleveland for nearly 30 years, where he was also an Associate

Clinical Professor at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital. Dr. Lazarus has obtained special training in clinical hypnosis to address issues not effectively treated by traditional medicine. He is one of only 13 pediatricians in the United States to be certified as an approved consultant by The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis.

