Using Medical Hypnosis To Enhance Sports Performance

I want athletes to have fun playing their sports and excelling at whatever they do. Regardless of the sport, I can teach athletes to teach themselves to increase their confidence, decrease their stress, stay focused, and participate at a consistently higher level.

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 poor performance. Then, stress is 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, just relax, you’re too tense.” Other people suggest that athletes should “try harder,” especially when they are in a slump. Neither of those pieces of advice works.

Turning It Around
To play well, athletes need to play with a certain amount of intensity. They need to be in their “zone of optimal performance.” 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 or her hand, and 10 means he or she is wound up so tightly that he or 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 or she thinks it is. Next, in a medical hypnosis session, I teach the athlete the technique of self-hypnosis. Finally, I assign homework.
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 it towards positive self-talk. Athletes can learn to identify negative or irrelevant thoughts, dismiss them, and alternatively create positive thoughts.

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

Setting Goals
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
- 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 discard the anxiety using physical techniques (such as shaking off the anxiety with their hand, or throwing it away like a ball).

Mental Imagery Can Create Muscle Memory
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. We are all taught about muscle memory from the bottom up, i.e., from the muscles to the brain. It turns out that mental imagery can also create muscle memory. When we visualize kicking a soccer ball, the same areas of the brain are working as when we are actually kicking the ball. And, every time we do this visualization, we are creating new neural pathways that help enhance muscle memory.

"Before every training or game with the national soccer team, I spent moments visualizing myself in scenarios, with each resulting in positive outcomes. Then during those “real” moments on the field, I was prepared and calm to attack the challenge at hand, knowing I had seen it before and knowing how I could be successful. “

Brandi Chastain, Olympic gold and silver medalist, twice Women’s World Cup champion