

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.

The homework consists of an individually designed program to help athletes think about and visualize their game challenge in different ways. Homework utilizes self-hypnosis and mental imagery to help create an experience in the athletes’ minds that empowers and enables them to do things they were previously not aware that they could do.*

Self-Hypnosis Is Like Any Other Skill

Self-hypnosis, also called visualization, mental imagery, or guided imagery, must be practiced. The more you practice self-hypnosis, the better you get.

Athletes Are Great Candidates For Medical Hypnosis

That’s because they are so motivated. Typically, there is improvement after only two or three visits. Moreover, there’s a huge spillover into other areas of their lives 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 self-awareness, builds confidence, and gives a sense of mastery and hope.

Why Medical Hypnosis?

It’s short-term therapy, with significant improvement after only 2 or 3 visits. It gives athletes a lifetime skill. Plus, it’s fun...and it builds tremendous self-confidence and self-esteem.

In sports, athletes succumb to anxiety if they overestimate the risks they face and underestimate their own resources.

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



Using Medical Hypnosis To Optimize Performance And Manage Sports Anxiety

For Coaches and Athletes

Jeffrey E. Lazarus, MD



Brandi Chastain, Lindsey Vonn, Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Joe DiMaggio are well known for their use of self-hypnosis.

Strategies For Managing Sports Performance Anxiety

Anxiety Management

When anxiety negatively impacts performance, athletes can use general calming exercises. These can include:

- deep breathing
- mental imagery or visualization
- 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. Anxiety is future-oriented. The athlete is thinking, "What if I miss this shot? What if I strike out? What if I double-fault?"

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.



Photograph by Richard Elzey

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

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.

About Jeffrey E. Lazarus, MD



Jeffrey Lazarus, M.D., is a board certified, Stanford-trained pediatrician in Menlo Park, CA, specializing in the use of medical hypnosis to treat conditions not always effectively managed with traditional medicine. He

is one of only 8 pediatricians and one of 52 medical doctors in the U.S. certified as Approved Consultants by The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis. After completing his pediatric residency at Stanford University Medical Center, Dr. Lazarus practiced general pediatrics in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was also an Associate Clinical Professor at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital. Dr. Lazarus combines more than 25 years in general pediatrics with a 12-year medical hypnosis practice.



Photograph by Finizio