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Managing Anxiety To Improve Performance



**EQUESTRIAN
QUEENSLAND**



Greetings! The following pages are a summary of Anxiety Management Techniques designed to assist you with your performance. The techniques are generalised for this handout, however if you would like the opportunity to individualise these techniques to your needs, or would like assistance with other mental aspects of Equestrian, please don't hesitate to get in touch with Damien on the contact details above.

Best Wishes,
Damien Stewart

Anxiety Management

Anxiety is essentially a state of mind in which we are worried about something that hasn't happened yet and might not happen! Therefore, the best way to cope with anxiety is to stay in the present moment as best we can and prepare for what is to come. The best way to stay in the present moment is to focus on the process:

- What is my process for executing this skill/ event?
- Am I following my routines?
- Am I following my game plan?
- Am I in the present moment?
- Am I focused on the right things?

Pre-Performance Routine's

Routines are a "Sequence of task relevant **thoughts** and **actions** which an athlete engages in systematically prior to his or her performance of a specific sport skill". A routine is not the same as superstition. A routine is an active process.

Why do we use routines?

- To create the optimal mindset to achieve the desired task.
- To guide our attention towards the task at hand and remain focused on it.
- Consistency - To give us the greatest chance of success in achieving the task at hand on a consistent basis.
- Confidence & self-belief.
- It has the side effect of reducing anxiety.

Characteristics of a routine:

- Thoughts.
- Behaviours.
- Mental Skills.
- Systematic...

... That are relevant to performing the task at hand.

Mental processes that are important within routines:

- Task Relevant processes only.
- Positive Self-Talk.
- Process goals - Thinking about what needs to be done (strategy), what is the desired outcome?
- Anxiety control – Breathing.
- Task focused cues or triggers.
- Visualisation.
- Attentional Focus.

Behavioural aspects of a routine:

- Consistency – you do the same thing every time you execute that skill.
- There is a start and an end and a start again.
- Includes what needs to be done physically to achieve the skill.
- Must be sequential & in exactly the same order, every single time.
- If you begin your routine & you get distracted, it is out of order, or there is an interruption, STOP & start again, if possible.
- Routines are very individual processes & athletes should have input into their routines.
- It must be within the rules of your sport, eg, time limits.
- Do not deviate from your routine.

Your routine is only as good as your ability to adhere to it in both mind and body:

- Like any other skill, routines take time to get right. Deliberate - Practice practice practice.
- Used each & every time you execute a skill at training AND competition.
- This routine has been created for a reason – it works for you.
- Moments of difficulty are the most important times to adhere to your routine.
- Only make changes to a routine out of competition.
- Write it down, draw it, practice, practice, practice.

Athletes who have routines, and adhere to them, are more successful than athletes who don't.

SELF TALK

We must be mindful of our self-talk, that is: what we think and what we tell ourselves. Self-talk is important because negatively orientated self-talk is likely to lead to a decrease in motivation and an increase in anxiety, whereas positively orientated self-talk is more likely to lead to maintaining or increasing motivation towards our goals and decreasing anxiety. Our Self-talk can also be the difference between us giving up or persisting when the going gets tough. In focusing on our self-talk, we want to ensure our self-talk is positive, instructional and/ or motivational. Below are some tips on ensuring we are focused on self-talk that is going to assist us in achieving our goals.

Positive – We must be mindful in ensuring our self-talk is stated in the positive. Many people make the mistake of using a negative orientation towards their self-talk such as “Don’t screw up”. The human brain does not hear the word “don’t” and therefore hears “screw up”. A positively stated statement might be “do a good job”.

Instructional – Instructional self-talk is self-talk where we talk ourselves through the process of achieving whatever activity we are currently involved with. For example, back straight. Instructional self-talk is particularly helpful when you are learning a new skill or need to focus carefully on completing the activity.

Motivational – Motivational self-talk is self-talk that focuses on giving ourselves that extra motivational kick we need to complete an activity. For example, we might tell ourselves “you can do this”, “you’ve got this”, “you’ve done this before and you will do it again”.



Be careful of how you are
talking to yourself
because you are listening

~ Lisa M. Hayes ~

Focus

In the world of high performance sport:

- Of all the psychological constructs of high-level performance, attention is the most important.
- More specifically, attentional focus & attentional flexibility are the most important.
- It is those athletes who can continuously attend to the right things at the right time that excel.

What does it mean to attend to the right things at the right time?

- The most important things at the right time.
- Can be influenced by anxiety, emotions, thoughts, & external factors (E.g., other competitors, weather, judges).
- The key result of paying attention to the right things at the right time is that it allows the athlete to select the best response under the circumstances and execute that response accordingly.

Strategies for focusing attention:

- Competition plans.
- Process Goals.
- Performance routines.
- Five F's.
- Positive Self-talk (i.e., Cues):
 - Instructional (e.g., watch the ball).
 - Motivational Cues (e.g., I can do it).

What processes do I need to focus on to execute this skill excellently?



Diaphragmatic Breathing

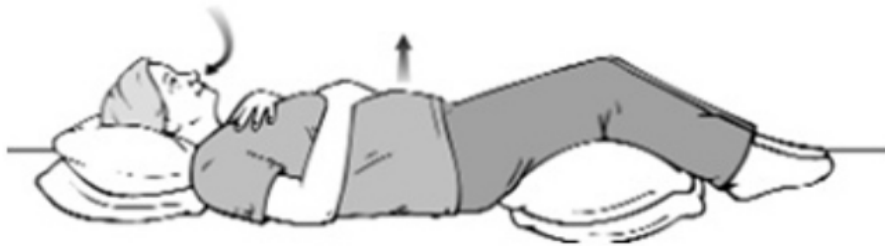
Mindfulness

Buddhists have been using mindfulness for centuries to help them stay in the present moment and train their mind. Mindfulness has now become a useful tool in western psychology. Many of us get caught up in past or future thinking as we consider what we “should have done” or “what we should be doing” leading to rumination and anxiety. The concept of mindfulness involves being present in the here and now to the exclusion of the past or future. It is a focus on what we are engaged with right now. Focusing on our breathing is one simple way of becoming mindful.

Why diaphragmatic Breathing?

- Breathing is the bodies most natural and most effective form of anxiety regulation.
- We get the oxygen we need to think clearly & fuel our muscles for performance. We also expel CO2.
- Mindfulness technique.
- Keeps our centre of gravity low.
- Minimises tension in our muscles - particularly the shoulders.

Breathing in:

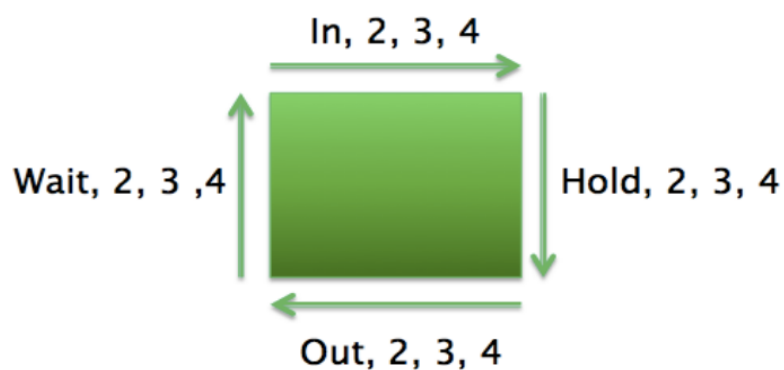


Breathing Out:



The Breathing Cycle:

Start by pushing all of the air out of your lungs, and then in...



Other Tools for Regulating Anxiety

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

- We can either tense our body and let it go, or we can simply identify tight spots and let those go – concentrate on allowing the muscles to relax.
- Work “progressively” down your body in a systematic way.



Body Scan:

- Stop for a moment & close your eyes.
- Start at the top of your head & slowly work your way down your body to your feet.
- What do you feel? Are there any tight spots?
- We can use PMR or breathing “into” the tight spot.

Visualisation or Imagery:

- Picture yourself executing the skill excellently.
- Focus on your process goals – What processes do I need to go through to execute this skill.
- Make sure you visualise yourself at normal speed.
- The most effective model for Imagery is the PETTLEP model:
 - Physical
 - Environmental
 - Task
 - Timing
 - Learning
 - Emotion
 - Perspective

A Pleasant Thought:

A pleasant thought can relieve you of negative and anxiety inducing thought patterns and bring you to a calmer and more relaxed state of mind:

- Ensure you have practiced with the thought.
- Use your five senses to really put yourself in that place.



Pleasant Event Scheduling:

Pleasant event scheduling is designed to change our outlook from rewarding or punishing ourselves based on achievement or non-achievement of a desired outcome, to simply rewarding ourselves for effort. Therefore, rather than rewarding ourselves for doing well or punishing ourselves for doing poorly, we can reward ourselves for the effort we put in by planning a pleasant activity for after the event and ensuring we follow through with the activity despite the outcome. Having something to look forward to beyond the anxiety-producing event reminds us that the outcome of the event is not the end of the world thereby decreasing our experience of anxiety before and during the event.

Pleasant activity: _____

Pleasant activity: _____

Pleasant activity: _____

Pleasant activity: _____

Pleasant activity: _____



Music:

Music can be a great way to regulate emotion:

- Be mindful of personal time & team time when you have your headphones in.
- Pre-select your music – Test it out before competition. Does it give you the reaction you're looking for?
- Ensure it is calming.
- Be mindful of lyrics – Songs can have great music but when you listen to the lyrics, they contain negative messages.
- Have about 6 songs in your playlist.
- Songs can become familiar and their affect can wear off over time, be sure to update your playlists regularly.



Worry Time:

A strategy for overcoming worries is to assign a certain time of the day to worry about the things that do need to be worried about:

- Use a pad or other device to list worries as they arise.
- Set aside 30 minutes of the day.
- It is only at this time we are allowed to worry about our worries.
- An active approach can be taken to problem solving where the time is dedicated to listing, prioritising, & strategising solutions, to our problems.



The 5 F's of Error Recovery:



- **F**inish
- **F**rustration
- **F**ix
- **F**orgive/ **F**orget
- **F**ocus/ **R**e**F**ocus.

Cognitive Reframing:

Challenge your thoughts:

- Is what I am thinking realistic? If not change it.
- Is what I am thinking positive? If not change it.
- Is there another way think about this situation? If so change it.
- Is what I am thinking helpful? If not change it.

Further Tools for Regulating Anxiety:

- Contingency planning – What If's.
- Incorporate other mental skills techniques.
- Slow down & take your time – Control.
- Come prepared with a good game plan or strategy & stick to it.



. *“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall”*
Nelson Mandela