

A is for Anxiety



If you want to swim fast, you've got to prepare yourself mentally. That's not always an easy process. Beginning this week, Sport psychologist Aimee Kimball, PhD., introduces a series of articles on usaswimming.org that makes mental training as easy as A-B-C.

The ABCs of mental training will run every two weeks. This week's topic is Anxiety

Why do I have anxiety?

Many athletes have anxiety before they compete, whether it's a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, tight muscles, or worried thoughts. All animals have what's called the fight-or-flight response in which our bodies prepare to either fight a challenge or to run away from it. These symptoms of anxiety aren't always bad, as they can signal a readiness to compete. Think of a race you were involved in that wasn't important to you or where you knew you would win it easily. You probably didn't have the same signs of anxiety because you didn't see this event as being as threatening. The perception of a challenge/threat is what makes athletes feel anxious.

Changing the Perceived Threat

If situational factors (event importance, your opponents) cause you anxiety, focus on controllable factors that help you to swim well- a smooth stroke, a strong kick, and a well-timed start. When you start to add "uncontrollables" to your focus, you are adding thoughts to your head that don't need to be there and are making it a lot harder to swim to your potential.

Physically Relaxing

To release anxiety, take some long, deep breaths and picture all the physical and mental stress leaving your body. You can also take a few minutes each day to go through your muscle groups, tightening them and then relaxing them. By doing this progressive relaxation, you can recognize when and where you are carrying physical tension and learn to physically loosen your muscles so that you can perform your best.

Therefore

Anxiety as you know it doesn't have to exist. You may have some physical activation (faster heart rate, quicker breathing) but you can control this. Simply think how you want to think and leave some time for a pre-race routine that allows you to physically relax. While it requires training, you can regain control of your body by taking control of your mind.

Make it Great!

For more information contact: 412-432-3777; kimballac@upmc.edu

About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD:

Dr. Aimee C. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Center for Sports Medicine. She received a PhD from the University of Tennessee where she specialized in sport psychology. She is an Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau. As a Mental Training Consultant, Dr. Kimball has worked with professional, collegiate, high school, recreational, and youth athletes in a variety of sports, and assists the Pittsburgh Steelers in analyzing potential draft picks. She has been a featured speaker at conferences across the nation and has appeared in Men's Health Magazine, Runner's World, Athletic Management Magazine, various local and national newspapers, and has appeared on ESPN, NPR, and news broadcasts across the country. She is a Clinical Faculty member in the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Orthopaedics and an adjunct faculty member in the Sports Marketing Department at Duquesne University. Currently, Dr. Kimball works with athletes and other performers to assist them in achieving success in sport and life.