

Using Meet Anxiety to Your Advantage

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By Ailish Dougherty, Swimming World College Intern.

Since I was a little ten-year-old age group swimmer, I have stood behind the blocks before a race with my arms crossed tightly across my chest, eyes glued to my toes. My coach waves frantically on the deck, trying to divert my gaze up to his so that he can tell me to loosen up, jump up and down, get excited. I smile and shake my arms out, but soon enough I become lost in my thoughts and become frozen again. My hands shake uncontrollably as I reach up to repeatedly adjust my goggles, trying and failing to make my mind go blank. I have always been plagued by performance anxiety.

Psyching myself out has become a routine – “you never do well at championship meets,” “you always choke when it actually counts,” “you didn’t feel good in warm-up, so this race is going to be awful.” I feel my body actually following my mind, as I let these self-defeating thoughts dictate my performance.

I’ve spent years questioning whether my anxiety levels are normal and healthy, akin to what every swimmer feels before an important race, or if they actually prohibit me from performing to the best of my ability. I’ve realized that my worrying causes me to focus way too much on the details, interrupting the automatic skills that I know I’ve cultivated through endless practicing. But is it possible to reframe this anxiety into something positive?

Anxiety, the fight or flight response in anticipation of an imminent event, can include self-destructive thinking errors as well as physical manifestations such as butterflies, increased heart rate, and tensed muscles. While it may sound counterintuitive, there is a healthy level of anxiety for every swimmer – increased adrenaline increases motivation and a drive to win.

There are many coping mechanisms to calm down, but the challenge becomes keeping our jitters at an adaptive level. Take that tension in your body and, instead of freezing up and feeling your muscles turn to stone, imagine yourself as a coiled spring, ready to explode. Imagine the butterflies in your stomach giving you the energy to push through that last lap.

Never go into a race already having defeated yourself in your mind. Focus on the process, what you can control in the moment, rather than the future results. Don’t let apprehension discourage you, let it fire you up to stick with the girl in the next lane who looks way faster than you. Let it fire you up to make each turn perfect. Let it fire up your love for swimming, not your fear.

It all sounds well and good, but in the moment it is a lot harder than it seems to stop overthinking a 100 fly, or to ignore that sinking feeling of dread before a mile. As **Karen Welling** of Welling Coaching and Counseling suggests, it can be helpful to notice the maladaptive thoughts that you are having, and to try to arrive at a more honest, balanced thought.

Suppressing the thoughts will only hurt you – often it is best to think through what you are anxious about, and discount it. For example, if you find yourself jumping to conclusions and imagining a bad outcome, ask yourself what concrete evidence you have to make that assertion. Most of the time, there isn’t any.

Always ask, “Is this thought useful?” Most of the time, it isn’t. Even if you’re forcing it, tell yourself that you’re not terrified, you’re excited. Power pose. Force a smile. Your body follows your mind, just as it does when you tell yourself you’re going to fail. If you believe in yourself, your body will most likely perform.

If all else fails, just remember that meet anxiety is normal. It means that you care. But it doesn’t dictate your ability or your worth as a swimmer. And neither does one bad race.