

Strategies and Exercises to Overcome Pre-Competition Anxiety

Mental imagery is a mental skill that can aid performance. Athletes who visualize successfully performing in their sport prior to competition are better prepared during the actual competition because they have seen it countless times in their own minds. Imagery has proven to be a successful strategy among athletes because it functions as a “dress rehearsal” for the competition that lies ahead. It also facilitates self-confidence since the athlete literally sees her or his body and behavior differently.

How Imagery Works

1. To increase **confidence**—visualizing performing successfully helps athletes to feel they can perform under particularly challenging circumstances
2. To **practice** and **perfect** skills—If an athlete is incorrectly executing a particular skill, he/she can visualize correcting it and performing at peak performance
3. To improve **concentration**—if you are experiencing negative thoughts and feeling sluggish during your pre-competition warm-up, visualizing a past peak performance can help you attain a state of competition readiness
4. To control **emotional responses**—imagery can help athletes to control their thoughts and emotional reactions to unexpected situations that might occur prior to or during competition

Making Imagery Effective

1. Imagine your total performance
2. Generate vivid images that are clear and include everything you experience in the actual competition
3. Develop control of your imagery by only imagining positive performances and outcomes
4. Imagine realistic conditions in which you normally compete
5. Imagine in “real time”—take the same amount of time to visualize executing the skill as it takes to actually execute the skill. If you run the 400m in 60 seconds, then visualization or imagery of this race should also take 60 seconds or faster

When to Implement

1. Prior to practice to increase focus and concentration and better prepare for practice by visualizing the skills you expect to perform
2. Prior to competition
3. During breaks in competitive actions
4. During personal quiet time (library, dorm room, apartment, etc.)

Taking Charge of Yourself

Successful athletes demonstrate their confidence by managing their thinking and emotional states in a manner that increases their personal effectiveness. Confident self-talk is characterized by the following:

- A. Focus on the process (what am I doing) rather than the product or outcomes (how am I doing)
- B. Focus on the present moment (what am I doing right now to deal with...) rather than being distracted by future worrying (what if?) or past failures (I should have..., If only I had...) and second guessing

Example of Negative Self-Talk

- A. Situation: Third throw after a close sector foul and a poor first throw
- B. Thinking (self-talk): "I've got to get a good throw. What if I foul? I'm out of the meet!"
- C. Emotional: Anxiety, pressure, depression
- D. Physical: Overarousal, impaired motor skills
- E. Behavior: Tried too hard (fouled), or tentative, afraid of mistake (poor throw, technical breakdown)

Example of Positive Self-Talk

- A. Situation: Third throw after a close sector foul and a poor first throw
- B. Thinking: "Focus on process, easy out of back, good positions, explode"
- C. Emotional: Composed, focused, confident
- D. Physical: Optimal arousal, focused on motor skills
- E. Behavior: Good start, sound technique, efficient, solid, explosive throw