

7. STRESS

*I don't think any man or athlete thrives on pressure.
You survive pressure and rise above it.
You even conquer it, if you're good enough.
-Reggie Jackson-*

Think of how many times you had an opponent pressuring you. How did you react in those pressure situations? Did you rise above them? Did you conquer them? Did you enjoy squashing your opponent in those situations, as Jimmy Connors once put it?

Stress is an inevitable part of training and competition. It usually occurs when you perceive an **imbalance** between the demands of a task or situation and your ability to respond to these demands. For example, if you have to perform a skip shot during a game but you feel that you haven't refined the technique sufficiently enough to be able to do this yet, you might experience stress, which can be manifested in the form of:

Cognitive Anxiety:

Increased mental activity / intensity

- fear
- worry
- apprehension
- doubts
- indecision
- negative thoughts
- inability to focus
- over-thinking/analyzing

AND/OR

Somatic Anxiety:

Increased physiological arousal / intensity

- sweating
- shaking
- nausea (butterflies in your stomach)
- increased heart rate
- shortness of breath
- clammy hands
- headaches
- muscle tension

Some individuals have high levels of **trait anxiety**, which means that they have a general tendency to perceive stressful situations as threatening and negative and to become anxious or over-intense. Do you consider yourself as having high trait anxiety?

It is possible for individuals to only suffer from anxiety in certain situations. This is called **state anxiety**. If you experience state anxiety, it could mean that you might get tense and apprehensive only when your team has fallen behind during a game, but the rest of the time, you feel great and in control.

In all cases of stress and anxiety, you must remember that it all starts with the way you perceive the situation. You always have the option to see the stressful situation in a **positive** way, that is, to see it as a challenge or opportunity to learn and succeed, OR perceive it in a **negative** way and see it as a threat or an opportunity to fail or deceive people.

Negative reactions to stress or competitive pressure can hurt your performance. For example, these reactions can distract you, decrease your motivation, consume your time and energy, and even cause you an injury. On the other hand, positive reactions to stress can lead to enhanced performance.

Successful athletes tend to view stress in a positive way.

In this day and age, stressors are everywhere. You cannot avoid them but you can develop effective ways to respond to them so that they will not prevent you from achieving your goals. What are some of the stressors you are facing in your sport and in other areas of your life?

EXERCISE 7.1 - IDENTIFYING STRESSORS IN MY SPORT

List everything that stresses you out or worries you in your sport. Note the big things and small things. They can be related to you, your family, your teammates, your coaches, your environment, training, competition, etc. Be as specific as possible. It's time to let it all out!

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 1. | 2. |
| 3. | 4. |
| 5. | 6. |
| 7. | 8. |
| 9. | 10. |
| 11. | 12. |
| 13. | 14. |
| 15. | 16. |

EXERCISE 7.1 - IDENTIFYING STRESSORS IN MY SPORT *(cont)*

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 17. | 18. |
| 19. | 20. |
| 21. | 22. |
| 23. | 24. |

Now, categorize each stressor in **one** of the four boxes based on whether or not you perceive it as important, and within your control.

1	2
Important / Can control	Important / Can't control
3	4
Not important / Can control	Not important / Can't control

If you experience stress in your sport or in other areas of your life, but it doesn't affect your performance because you perceive it as something positive and to a certain extent helpful, great! Just be aware of any changes in your perceptions.

However, if stress appears to be more of an intruder than a friend, first ask yourself whether or not you can change your perceptions so that you see it in a more constructive light. If you can't seem to change your perspective, you may attempt to do the following:

- 1) Clearly identify the stressor (*Refer to Exercise 7.1*).
- 2) Assess whether or not it is important to you. Should you really be concerned?
- 3) Is the stressor within or out of your control? Should you waste time and energy worrying about it?
 - If it is within your control, then get it under control and stop worrying about it.
 - If it is out of your control, there is probably very little you can do about it so why worry in the first place?
- 4) If the stressor is important to you and you have assessed that you can do something about it, try to determine its cause. What is really upsetting you? How would you rather feel?
- 5) Once you have identified the root of your concern, attempt to solve it. Seek support from others if needed. Let how you want to feel (rather than feeling stressed) guide you.
- 6) At all times, assess and monitor your reactions to the stressor. Are you predominantly affected mentally, physiologically, or both?
- 7) Develop appropriate coping strategies (i.e., self-talk, relaxation, imagery, hypnosis, meditation, etc.) to get your reactions under control.

Don't run away from your stressors, embrace them.

EXERCISE 7.2 - IDENTIFYING COPING STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH STRESSORS

Go back to the previous exercise and observe the stressors you identified in Boxes 1 and 2. There is no sense in dwelling on those in Boxes 3 and 4 because you have already decided that they are not important. Note those in Box 2 and assess whether or not there is *anything* you can do about them. If there isn't, don't waste anymore energy. Focus your attention on the stressors in Box 1. Prioritize them to distinguish which ones are affecting your performance the most, then describe actions you can take to get them under control and manage them effectively.

Important Stressors**Actions to Manage them Effectively**

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

6)

7)

8)

9)

TABLE 7.1 - SUMMARY SUGGESTIONS

1. Choose to perceive stress in a positive way.
2. Clearly identify the stressors in your sport and personal life, and determine whether or not they are important and within your control. If they are not, don't waste any time and energy worrying about them.
3. Assess the causes of stressors that affect your performance in order to eliminate them. Don't try to run away from them or patch them up. Confront them and seek the support and guidance of others to facilitate the process.
4. Monitor your mental and physiological responses to stress. Use coping techniques such as goal-setting (*see Section 2*), positive self-talk (*see Section 5*), relaxation and self-hypnosis (*see Section 8*), and imagery (*see Section 12*), to keep any undesired responses under control.