

Reducing and Managing
Competition Anxiety in Ice Hockey:
Techniques for Performing Your Best

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About the Author

This project was created as a part of the requirements for a Bachelor of Science degree at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. During my time as an undergraduate, I completed an independently created concentration pertaining to sport psychology. Starting my sophomore year, I was involved in a variety of sport psychology related research, including concussion prevalence in ice hockey in relation to fear upon return to play, a literature review of the effectiveness of pre-game routines and rituals, and a research study on parental influence on the experience of pre-competition anxiety in Division I female college athletes.

I also have athletic experience outside of the academic setting, having played competitive ice hockey for fifteen years. During my career, I played at the AAA level as well as a season of Jr. A, during which I sustained a career ending shoulder injury.



After my playing career ended, I shifted my focus towards coaching. Over the last four years, I have coached teams at the youth level, run camps and clinics, and coached players one-on-one who have ranged from beginners to those at the AAA and prep levels.

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Competition Anxiety Overview

Many athletes are unaware that the experience of anxiety in the athletic context is actually necessary in order to perform optimally through preparing you both mentally and physically. However, while some anxiety is necessary for performing your best, excessive levels can have a negative impact on performance, often causing worry and negative thinking in relation to competition.

Athletic competition is no doubt stressful due to the demands placed on each individual. Often times, performance anxiety occurs when an athlete doesn't have the necessary tools to deal with the stressors involved in a certain situation.

The experience of over-arousal in association with competition anxiety is more common among athletes than it may seem, increasing the value of utilizing techniques aimed at controlling context specific anxiety. This booklet aims not only to introduce you to some of the various techniques that can be used, but also to walk you through them.



Competition Anxiety Reduction Techniques

Development of Pregame Routines:

Establishing pregame routines can drastically reduce the experience of precompetition anxiety through creating consistent physical and mental activities that help prepare an athlete for the game ahead. In creating these routines, there are a few things that athletes should keep in mind, and pay close attention to, such as the order in which these activities are carried out, and the purpose that they serve. See page 4 for more.

Minimizing Self-Focus and Keeping Errors in Perspective:

Mistakes and negative emotions are inevitable in elite sports. It's what you do with these experiences and emotions, both in and outside of the context of a game, that matters. Too often athletes are either taught incorrectly how to deal with these situations, or aren't trained at all. See page 5 for more.

Guided Imagery:

Guided imagery is a good way to not only reduce stress and anxiety, but is also a tool for preparing for competition. The goal of this technique is to put yourself within your own imagination using a combination of language and sensory-filled images. Most often, guided imagery is a useful tool that is incorporated into pregame routines. See page 6 for more.

Mindfulness Meditation:

Similar to guided imagery, meditation can also reduce anxiety and stress when preformed on a regular basis. This can also be utilized as part of a pre-game routine. One effective form of meditation is mindfulness meditation, which focuses on aspects of the self that are relevant to upcoming competition. See page 7 for more.

Somatic Relaxation:

Another relaxation technique that athletes can utilize is somatic relaxation. This method is particularly effective for those who experience intense bodily reactions to anxiety and stress, such as increased heartbeat, shortness of breath, and excessive sweating. Somatic relaxation can increase performance by giving you a greater sense of perceived control over these physiological stress reactions, lessening the distraction that they can create when preparing for competition. See page 8 for more.



Walking you through each step



Development of Pre-Game Routines

One major way to reduce anxiety before competition is to develop a pre-game routine. While some aspects of these routines are dictated by coaches, they are also highly individualized. The key is to find and establish a routine that you can carry out consistently, while making sure that it helps optimize performance. What does this mean?

It means incorporating both physical and mental activities that can be utilized in a productive manner. It should include techniques such as mental imagery (see section on guided imagery) but can also involve things as simple as re-taping your stick.

As mentioned above, consistency is key. The order in which these activities are performed as well as how long before the game they are done should be the same for every game. This means that you should take environmental factors into account (such as facilities available at home and away games) when creating a routine.

Additionally, routines should only include activities that are productive and serve to enhance performance. While rituals are also an important pre-game aspect for many athletes, their impact and reasoning should be analyzed and understood. Rituals can become powerful in a negative way if an athlete doesn't take the time to understand where the ritual came from, and what purpose it serves. Rituals can leave an athlete feeling powerless, taking control out of your hands. A ritual that becomes an excuse for poor play is unproductive in regards to future performance, since it takes away a sense of responsibility for one's play.



Minimizing Self-Focus and Keeping Errors in Perspective

Mistakes are bound to happen during games due to the high-pressure nature involved with competition. This makes it particularly important to keep these errors and mistakes in perspective.

Start by reminding yourself that the mistake is unlikely to affect the outcome of the game, and that it is unproductive to dwell on what happened. Instead, focus on your next shift and the game going forward as well as what you need to do in order to be successful.

When thinking about your next shift, emphasize positive emotions rather than negative feelings or self-defeating statements. Positive emotions will allow you to perform your best, which is why throughout the game you should make a point of noticing what you are doing well, and not just what mistakes you make. Minimizing success through only seeing mistakes is invalidating to your abilities as an athlete. Mistakes are an opportunity to learn and grow as an athlete when you view them as an opportunity rather than a problem.



Since experiencing negative emotions is unfortunately inevitable, it is important to deal with them productively through re-framing them into positive, constructive feelings. Focus on what you are able to control, and to not ruminate on the negative emotions that you experience.



Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is not only a good way to reduce stress and anxiety, but is also a tool for preparing for competition in general. The goal of this technique is to put yourself within your own imagination using a combination of language and sensory-filled images. Below are some guidelines and steps for achieving successful guided imagery.



1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breathes. Focus on your breathing, and relax your body.
2. Envision the upcoming game, starting with the first strides that you take onto the ice.
3. As you imagine these first strides, focus on how your legs and other muscles feel as you skate. Envision the sensations that surround you - the smells, sounds, sights, and feelings.
4. When you become comfortable in your own imagination with both physical experiences and sensory information, envision the beginning of the game and your first shift. As you play out this first shift in your head, imagine doing everything that you need to do to be successful.

What do you do best when you play well?

What are the systems that your team uses in various situations?

5. It is important to not only acknowledge these aspects of the game, but actually run through them in your imagination. Make sure to focus on the physical sensations of your muscles as you walk yourself through these various situations.
The more detail you envision, the better.
6. While imagining the sensations in your muscles as you make a play, also focus on the positive emotions you feel when you do these things correctly.
Positive emotions will boost your confidence in your abilities, and better prepare you than negative emotions such as worry and doubt.

It is important to try to envision a variety of game situations that are relevant to your success, both in general and in the upcoming game specifically. What factors apply to all games, and what are important in this game in particular? The more situations you imagine, the more prepared you will be when they arise in a game. Rely on your experiences in previous games to create vivid images, connecting physical muscle sensations with the various situations.



Mindfulness Meditation

Similar to guided imagery, meditation can also reduce anxiety and stress when preformed on a regular basis. This can also be utilized as part of a pre-game routine. One effective form of meditation is mindfulness meditation, which focuses on aspects of the self that are relevant to upcoming competition. Optimally, mindfulness meditation should be practiced both before competition, and on off days as well for 20-30 minutes at a time. The following steps walk you through the process.

1. Close your eyes and turn your attention towards your breathing. Take slow, deep breaths, clearing your mind of everything but your breathing.
2. Once you feel relaxed, become a passive observer of anything that comes to mind, avoiding judgment and analysis of these thoughts. Continue to maintain focus on your breathing.
3. While continuing this slowed pattern of breathing, begin to think about your team's game plan and systems in addition to your strengths as an athlete. As stated above, avoid analysis and judgment. Avoid involving emotion in these observations.

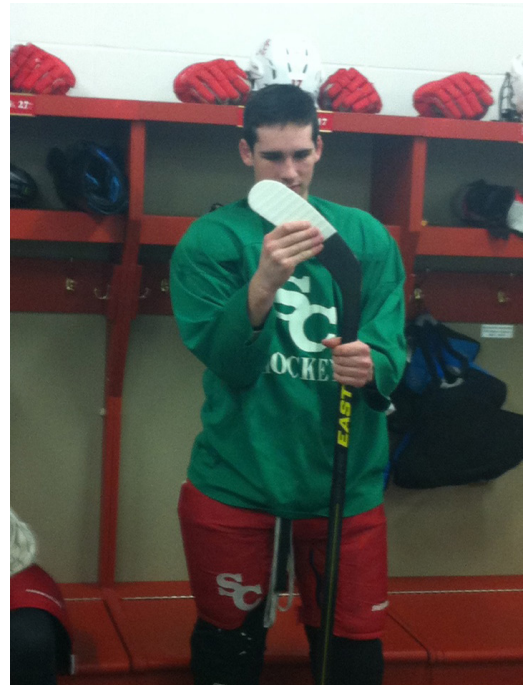
Avoiding judgement when thinking about an upcoming game can be difficult, and will no doubt require a good amount of practice. However, the more you are able to focus purely on the facts tied to success, the more effective this technique will be. Mindfulness meditation is especially useful when utilized both within and outside of the competition setting, as mentioned above. Preparing for games and dealing with competition anxiety away from the rink can be a powerful tool, and can greatly enhance the effectiveness of other techniques used prior to a game, such as guided imagery.



Somatic Relaxation

Another relaxation technique that athletes can utilize is somatic relaxation. This method is particularly effective for those who experience intense bodily reactions to anxiety and stress, such as increased heartbeat, shortness of breath, and excessive sweating. Somatic relaxation can increase performance by giving an athlete a greater sense of perceived control over these physiological stress reactions, lessening the distraction that they can create when preparing for competition. One specific type of somatic relaxation is known as progressive muscle relaxation. The goal of this technique, as you may have already guessed, is to relax different muscle groups and increase muscle awareness. The following steps will walk you through the process of this technique.

1. Close your eyes and take deep breaths, letting the tension in your muscles fade as you inhale and exhale.
2. Become aware of the different groups of muscles in your body- your forearms and hands, your chest and abdomen, your neck and shoulders and so forth.
3. Begin with your neck and shoulders, tensing these muscles for a few seconds. Next, count down from ten as you continue to take deep breaths. As you count down, slowly relax these muscles until all tension is gone.
4. Repeat this process with other groups of muscles in your body. The more you are able to isolate individual muscles, the more effective this process will be (e.g. doing your forearms separate from your upper arms etc.). However, grouping your muscles for this process is still effective, if not enough time can be dedicated to doing individual muscles.



The bodily reactions associated with the experience of anxiety can shift an athlete's focus from productive preparation to the anxiety itself, further intensifying the negative impact that anxiety can have on performance. Limiting these physiological reactions can be a major component in conquering negative competition related anxiety, putting control back in your own hands.



Putting it all Together

While each section in this booklet provides you with an idea of what these techniques entail as well as how to utilize them, it will still take practice to master them. Exploration of which techniques work and more specifically which aspects of each are most useful will vary from individual to individual. Optimally, more than one technique should be used, with each being appropriate in different contexts (pre-game, post-game, practice, outside of the athletic context all together, etc.) in order to increase control over the experience of competition related anxiety.

It's also important to keep in mind that, while this booklet does provide walkthroughs of each technique included, the intention is to give you a general idea of how to utilize each. If possible, a trained professional (such as a sport psychologist) should be consulted when developing any of the discussed techniques in order to maximize effectiveness and to ensure proper execution.

This should by no means, however, deter you from trying the various techniques and exploring what is or isn't effective. As stated above, it will take practice to get used to the process of going through each technique, much like what is required when learning a new system or working on any other aspect of your game. If you put in the necessary energy and time required to truly master these techniques, the rewards may very well surprise you.



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