Stress Reduction Techniques

This paper shows you effective methods of reducing stress to a level where you can perform most effectively. The techniques that you select depend on the cause of the stress and the situation in which the stress occurs.

In choosing methods to combat stress, it is worth asking yourself where the stress comes from: if outside factors such as relationship difficulties are causing stress, then a positive thinking or imagery based technique may be effective. If the stress is based on the feeling of adrenaline in the body, then it may be effective purely to relax the body and slow the flow of adrenaline.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNIQUES

1. Reduce the importance of the event

A number of factors can make an event take on a high level of significance and cause stress as a result:

- the importance and size of an event

- the presence of family, friends or judges

2. Reduce uncertainties

Uncertainty can cause high levels of stress.

- not knowing what the coach thinks of your abilities

- receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

II. PHYSICAL TECHNIQUES

1. Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) is a purely physical technique for relaxing your body when muscles are tense.

The idea behind PMR is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tight and contracted as possible, and hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally you consciously relax them again as much as you can.

2. Biofeedback

Biofeedback systems use electronic sensors to measure stress, and then feed the results of this measurement back to the athlete. This feedback may take the form of movement of a pen on a graph plotter, or may be by the pitch of sound coming through earphones.

This feedback allows you to experiment with stress management techniques, and actually see or hear them taking effect on your body. It allows you to practise different ways of using the techniques and compare the results. Biofeedback methods convert vague feelings into hard, observable information, and help an athlete to fine-tune the use of stress management techniques.

III. MENTAL TECHNIQUES

1. Imagery in Relaxation

One common use of imagery in relaxation is to imagine a scene, place or event that you remember as peaceful, restful, beautiful and happy. You can bring all your senses into the image, with sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of cool white wine, the warmth of sun, etc. Use the imagined place as a retreat from places of stress and pressure.

Other uses of imagery in relaxation involve mental pictures of stress flowing out of the body; or of stress, distractions and everyday concerns being folded away.

2. Thought Awareness

You are thinking negatively when you fear the future, put yourself down, criticize yourself for errors, doubt your abilities or expect failure. Negative thinking can damage confidence, harm performance and paralyse mental skills.

Thought awareness is the process by which you observe your thoughts and become aware of what is going through your head.

Task 1: Look at the examples of common negative thoughts and rationally challenge them:

- fear about the quality of your performance
- worry about how the audience or the press may react to you
- self-criticism over less than perfect practice
- a preoccupation with the negative consequences of a poor performance

What other methods do you use to help you build self-confidence?

Task 2: Would you agree with the following statements?

1. The effectiveness of the stress reduction technique depends on practice.
2. Physical techniques are most effective where psychological factors are driving stress.
3. Positive thinking is a solution to everything.
4. Hypnosis is an excellent mental technique.
5. Only very smart people can take full advantage of the mental techniques.
6. An experienced athlete is able to cope with any uncertainties concerning his/her performance.

(adapted from: http://www.mindtools.com/stresstq.html)