

7. Sports psychology, stress reduction techniques, environmental techniques, physical techniques, mental techniques

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.

Stress Reduction Techniques Explained

1. Environmental Methods
 1. Reduce the Importance of the Event
 2. Reduce Uncertainties
 3. Listen to Music or Relaxation Tapes
2. Physical Techniques: these are most effective where stress is driven by excessive levels of adrenaline.
 1. Progressive Muscular Relaxation
 2. Breathing Control
 3. Biofeedback
3. Mental Techniques: most effective where psychological factors are driving stress.
 1. Imagery Relaxation
 2. Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking
 3. Remembering past good workouts, performances and achievements
 4. Self-Hypnosis and Auto-Suggestion

1.1. 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 thought of a large financial reward
- The presence of family, friends, selectors, or judges
- The consequences of an event may be important, e.g. for selection to a higher level team

If stress is a problem under these circumstances, then think carefully about the event, try to reduce its importance in your eyes:

- If the event seems big, put it in its place along the path to your goals. Compare it in your mind with bigger events you know or have attended.
- If there is a financial reward, remind yourself that there may be other opportunities for reward later. This may not be the only chance you have. Focus on the quality of your performance.
- If friends or family are watching, remind yourself that they liked or loved you before you took up the sport, and will continue to do so whether you win or lose.
- If selectors are watching then remind yourself that you may well have other chances to impress other selectors.

1.2 Reduce Uncertainties

Uncertainty can cause high levels of stress. Causes of uncertainty can be:

- Not knowing whether you will be performing, perhaps because teams are not announced until just before a performance
- Not knowing what a coach or instructor thinks of your abilities
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

In these cases the actions of other people are negatively affecting your ability to perform. The most effective way of countering this is to ask for early posting of a team list, to ask for a clear statement of what a coach thinks, or to ask for clarification of vague instructions.

2.1. 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.

2.2. Breathing Control

Deep breathing is a very effective method of relaxation, which is a core component of everything from the 'take ten deep breaths' approach to calming someone down, right through to yoga relaxation and zen meditation. It works well with other relaxation techniques such as *Progressive Muscular Relaxation*, *relaxation imagery* and *meditation* to reduce stress.

2.3. 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 practice 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.

3.1. Imagery in Relaxation

Imagery is a potent method of stress reduction, especially when combined with physical methods such as deep breathing.

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.

3.2. Thought Awareness, Rational Thinking and Positive Thinking

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.

To use the technique, observe your "stream of consciousness" as you think about the upcoming event. Do not suppress any thoughts. Instead, just let them run their course while you make note of them.

As you notice negative thoughts, write them down and then let them go.

Here are some examples of common negative thoughts:

- 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

Rational Thinking

The next step in dealing with negative thinking is to challenge the negative thoughts that you wrote down using the Thought Awareness technique.

Look at every thought you wrote down and rationally challenge it. Ask yourself whether the thought is reasonable. Would your friends or mentors agree with the thought or disagree with it?

3.3. What is Self-Hypnosis, Autosuggestion and Hypnosis

Self-hypnosis is not a magical state. It is merely a state of mind in which:

- You are very relaxed
- You are paying complete attention to the suggestions you want to implant
- You do not criticise the suggestions made, and accept them at face value.

Self-hypnosis is used to directly program your unconscious with affirmations and suggestions that would otherwise have to run through critical processes in your mind. You can use this programming as an effective method to reduce stress and induce relaxation.

Normal hypnosis is not normally effective in sports psychology as it requires the presence of a hypnotist. Self-hypnosis, however, is just as easy and has the additional benefit that you can completely control the inputs to your mind when you are in a suggestible state.

Hypnotising yourself in a few simple steps

The first few times that you use self-hypnosis, it is best to find a place where you can be undisturbed for a while. Sit or lie down, eliminate any distractions, and relax. This puts you in the best possible conditions for using the technique - however as you get more practice you will find that you can use self-hypnosis almost anywhere.

The first step is to relax yourself: close your eyes, and try using imagery of waves of relaxation running down your body from your scalp downwards, washing out stress. Let the waves run in time with your breathing, first washing down over your head, then your neck, then your torso, then arms, and finally your legs. Feel the muscles in your body relaxing as the waves of relaxation wash over them.

Alternative techniques can involve fixing your eyes on a spot on the wall, or riding down in a lift/elevator from the top of a tall building, slowly dropping down into relaxation and drowsiness. The method you choose to induce hypnosis is up to you. The next step is to use suggestion to deepen the state. This is as simple as saying to yourself something like 'I am feeling relaxed and comfortable. With every breath I am becoming more relaxed and more comfortable.'

Once you are completely relaxed and focussed on your own suggestions, you are in a useful state of self-hypnosis. One suggestion you can usefully embed is that when you repeat a particular trigger word to yourself you will relax into this state.

As stated earlier, self-hypnosis is not a magical thing - it is just one of many things people have tried to make mystical to boost their own self-esteem and bank balance.

Autosuggestion is a process by which an individual trains the subconscious mind to believe something.

Before you enter a **hypnotic state** it is useful to think about the **suggestions** that you want to apply in it. Once you have decided what you want to use in suggestions, spend a little time working out a form of words for each suggestion that is short, positive, and powerful. Repeat this to yourself when you have reached a self-hypnotic state.

Effective use of suggestion can build confidence, reduce stress and motivate and energise when you are feeling sluggish.

Suggestion can be used without hypnosis, for example you might make a suggestion tape to play when you are driving, while still wanting to remain alert. Using suggestion with self-hypnosis just makes it more effective.

Source: <http://www.mindtools.com/stresstq.html>