



Overcoming Performance Anxieties

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Performance anxieties are like fire alarms that signal danger. They appear to exist outside of us but, in truth, are projections of fear inspired recollections and/or apprehensions of what could have, should have or would have happened in reaction to our childhood experiences of task mastery. Our vulnerabilities betray these fears to be artifacts of a less mature level of development. These recollections or fantasies are pulled to a level of consciousness by associations between what is going on now and what we recall happened or dreaded happening long ago. Dangers of this sort must be defended against. It is our human nature to unconsciously defend against these nameless and faceless phantoms by assigning them dimensions in the outside world of the present. This way we can track these enemies and develop strategies to cope with the threats they pose to us.

Now you may better understand why some of us tow the starting line at amateur road races and feel extremely nervous. The race becomes emotionally charged in ways that leave us biting our nails in tense frustration. Our abilities to perform at our best may be compromised. In our efforts to instinctively protect ourselves from these threats and avoid being burned by them, we may lose sight of why we are running in the first place. We lose our focus often without even realizing it.

Your "inner child," to borrow a time worn pop psychology phrase from the 80s may become scared stiff of success as measured by running fast and/or scared stiff of failure as measured by running slowly. Or perhaps, we may become frightened of losing control of our bodies when fatigued. What we are not aware of may control us. This is best exemplified by self-defeating behaviors designed to defend against our apprehensions of danger. Such behaviors may include: Inadequate or excessive warm ups, poor pacing, and inattentiveness to running form. What we aren't aware of will control us and what we aren't aware of may be little more than a variation on the theme of "what monsters lurk under our beds." When performance anxieties swallow us up we are reconnecting to archaic fears of disapproval, rejection, envy, abandonment and annihilation.

The key to managing performance anxieties is to demonstrate to ourselves that we can modulate our anxieties, gain insights into them and disarm these fire alarms. By controlling our emotional thermostats we preclude the need to defend against them in self-defeating ways. We are able to then, maintain boundaries between what is inside ourselves and outside ourselves and what has already happened versus what may occur. The effective management of anxiety provoking material is a bulwark against losing perspective on the potential consequences of our race performances. If we can protect our focus on running from being sabotaged by performance anxieties then, the risks of giving our best efforts are perceived as worth taking.

Two effective vehicles for managing performance anxieties are meditation and guided imagery; an element of mental rehearsal. If our imaginations help shape our realities then, we need to learn to harness our imaginations to serve our needs. Jack Nicklaus, arguably the greatest golfer who ever lived as measured by his performances in Grand Slam events, was never the best ball striker among his peers. Still, according to golf immortal Bobby Jones: "He plays a game I am not familiar with." Nicklaus's mental game was incomparable. Before he swung his golf club he visualized a positive result. Then, Nicklaus offered himself positive suggestions and tuned out negative thoughts. Finally, he went on automatic pilot and made a pass at the golf ball with as much trust in his muscle memory as we've ever seen from any professional athlete.

You too can develop your mental game to the point of taming your performance anxieties by developing the following routines a few weeks before an important race. Every other day try sitting for 15-20 minutes alone in a room in a comfortable chair with your eyes closed. Sit with legs and arms uncrossed. Begin to visualize your stomach as a brightly colored balloon. Slowly and deeply breathe in and out and visualize your stomach inflating and deflating like a balloon. Use your breathing as a point of concentration. Patiently bring your attention back to your breathing. When your mind wanders (and it most certainly will). Learn to adopt the orientation of a scientist. Observe with emotional detachment, curiosity and acceptance your mind's travels and your self-talk. Patiently bring your attention back to your breathing when your mind wanders all the while taking note of its flights of fancy. Notice how your anxiety levels rise and fall depending on what your mind attends to. During these exercises begin to imagine race day situations. Visualize yourself going through these race day rituals as well as every stage of your anticipated race and

write a positive script. Observe the shifts in your anxiety levels and the thoughts and associations that impact them. Use the meditative technique discussed previously to empty your mind when self-defeating messages or images enter your mind. Challenge or replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk. For instance if you begin to hear yourself saying: "Im too tired to keep this pace," then, you can replace this message with: "Relax and trust your training to push through the mental fatigue." Experiment with a manageable number of high priority cues to ensure quality control of your running form. For example, my cues focus on relaxation of facial muscles, driving my arms around a "still" torso and, an upright posture with shoulders relaxed and back.

The more you experience and gain insight into your internal obstacles to optimal performances on race day, the greater will be your ability to contain and manage your anxieties so that you don't blur boundaries between inside and outside, past and present. Once practiced, the replication of a meditative state of relaxation even at the starting line or in the middle of a race is not beyond your capabilities. Meditative relaxation techniques combined with mental rehearsal/guided imagery techniques may help you get more mileage out of your training and coaching than you ever imagined. See you at the starting line!