

Question: My teenage daughter plays basketball and loves it. The problem is she becomes nervous before games and as a mother I find it difficult to cope with because she either cries or yells. She is extremely critical of herself and if her team loses the game the next two days are miserable at our house. What can I do to help her?



Answer: It sounds like your daughter is experiencing performance anxiety. It is quite common and anxiety will increase with negative thoughts. Fighting may be her manner of coping with the negative thoughts

about her performance. If she displaces her anxiety and projects her negative feelings toward you, she does not have to own her own thoughts or feelings. However, the negative energy is likely not helpful to her performance in her game or in the family dynamics.

First I would suggest finding a time to talk with her about this when she is not anxious about her performance. Compliment her on her passion for basketball and her motivation to excel in the sport. Share with her information about how elite athletes cope with performance anxiety. It may be surprising to hear that mental preparation and practice is as important to athletic performance as athletic practice. Sharing this information is one way of initiating a conversation about how an athlete best prepares for competition, as opposed to initiating a conversation confronting her about her arguing and crying.

Emotional management is often the difference between those who excel in sport, win a gold

medal and those who do not. Emotional management requires that the athlete is educated about how to best approach mental preparation for a sport. Skills such as the ability to calm oneself prior to competition through centered breathing, (deep relaxed breathing through the diaphragm, not the chest), improving an athlete's ability to focus and concentrate, mental practice visualizing a successful athletic performance, the ability to identify and stop negative thoughts, positive self-talk and the use of positive affirmations are all skills that build confidence and improve athletic performance.

You may ask exactly what is visualization? Visualization is the athlete's focus on mentally imagining the physical movements of the sport. Research on visualizing an athletic performance demonstrates that vivid mental images produce actual firings along the neural pathways that participate in the physical activities. EMG muscle activity in the legs of skiers who were visualizing a downhill race show electrical activity in their muscles mirrored what occurs during actual skiing. Visualization prepares the muscles for the athletic task. The images in visualization condition your brain, nervous system and body to perform in the way that you want it to, increasing your chances of doing well in competition.

Further proof of just how powerful visualization can work is demonstrated in research completed at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado. Thirty college golfers were divided into three groups. For an entire week the first group practiced visualizing every putt toward the hole and successfully sinking the putt. The second group visualized the ball veering to the left of the hole and stopping inches before the hole. The third group practiced putting with no visualization. The group of golfers who visualized sinking the putt improved their putting accuracy by 30%, the group who practiced putting with no visualization improved

by 11%, the group who visualized missing the hole declined in their performance by 21%.

Clearly visualization success produced an improved athletic performance, and visualizing failure resulted in poor performance. Therefore, encourage your daughter to visualize herself playing an amazing basketball game. Ideally the athlete should practice visualization on a regular basis.

John Claude Killy, an Olympic skier, injured himself before an important race. Due to the injury, visualization was his only practice. He skied the best race of his life, coming off an injury. Col. James Hull was a North Vietnam POW in isolation for five years. The entire five years he visualized himself playing golf at Augusta and Pebble Beach every day. He visualized every stroke of his game, including choosing each golf club. When he was released and played golf for the first time in five years at a pro-am tournament he shot the best score of his life.

Your daughter can learn to change her negative thoughts to more realistic and positive thoughts. In addition practicing positive affirmations on a daily basis is a powerful mental tool. Affirmations such as, “I have confidence in my basketball skills”, “ I can trust my body to perform what I have practiced well, both mental practice and physical practice, “ or, “My discipline and hard work is visible in my jump shot.” The power of positive affirmations increase confidence, decrease anxiety, and assist in improved athletic performance.

Thought stopping techniques are also a necessary tool. When an athlete experiences negative thoughts using the mental imagery of a stop sign to redirect thoughts is helpful. The athlete should reframe the negative thought to a more realistic thought. For instance, if an athlete’s thought is, “My foul shots stunk this

week. I’ll probably miss, “it can be changed to; “I can re-focus and complete a successful foul shot even when practice has been challenging.”

You can choose to use this experience of helping your daughter to examine your own beliefs and attitudes about performance anxiety. How do you cope with anxiety about a new job, meeting new people, preparing a dinner party? All of the same techniques described above are helpful emotional management tools for other life situations. Remember, it takes approximately 200 positive thoughts to undo the damage of one negative thought. Negative thoughts can poison our lives.

Good luck. I’m visualizing and interesting and productive conversation between you and your daughter!

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