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Handling Sports Pressure and Competition

Most people play a sport for the thrill of having fun with others who share the same interest, right? But it's not always fun and games. Most student athletes who play competitive sports have had thoughts that go like this at one time or another: "Man, I can't believe I let the ball in the goal, and I know from the look in coach's eyes he wasn't happy."

There can be a ton of pressure in high school sports. A lot of the time it comes from the feeling that a parent or coach expects you to always win. But sometimes it comes from inside, too: Some players are just really hard on themselves. And individual situations can add to the stress: Maybe there's a recruiter from your number one college scouting you on the sidelines. Whatever the cause, the pressure to win can sometimes stress you to the point where you just don't know how to have fun anymore. Perhaps it could even be the reason why you haven't been playing as well lately.

How Can Stress Affect Sports Performance?

Stress is a feeling that's created when we react to particular events. It's the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness. A little stress or the right kind of positive stress can help keep you on your toes, ready to rise to a challenge.

The events that provoke stress are called stressors, and they cover a whole range of situations - everything from outright danger to stepping up to take the foul shot that could win the game. Stress can also be a response to change or anticipation of something that's about to happen - good or bad. People can feel stress over positive challenges, like making the varsity team, as well as negative ones.

Distress is a bad type of stress that arises when you must adapt to too many negative demands. Suppose you had a fight with a close friend last night, you forgot your homework this morning, and you're playing in a tennis match this afternoon. You try to get psyched for

the game but can't. You've hit stress overload!
Continuous struggling with too much stress can exhaust your energy and drive.

Eustress is the good type of stress that stems from the challenge of taking part in something that you enjoy but have to work hard for. Eustress pumps you up, providing a healthy spark for any task you undertake.
What Can I Do to Ease Pressure?

When the demands of competition start to get to you, try these relaxation techniques:

- * deep breathing: Find a quiet place to sit down. Inhale slowly through your nose, drawing air deep into your lungs. Hold your breath for about 5 seconds, then release it slowly. Repeat the exercise five times.

- * muscle relaxation: Contract (flex) a group of muscles tightly. Keep them tensed for about 5 seconds, then release. Repeat the exercise five times, selecting different muscle groups.

- * visualization: Close your eyes and picture a peaceful place or an event from your past. Recall the beautiful sights and the happy sounds. Imagine stress flowing away from your body. You can also visualize success. People who advise competitive players often recommend that they imagine themselves completing a pass, making a shot, or scoring a goal over and over. Then on game day, you can recall your stored images to help calm nerves and boost self-confidence.

- * mindfulness: Watch out for negative thoughts. Whether you're preparing for a competition or coping with a defeat, repeat to yourself: "I learn from my mistakes!" "I'm in control of my feelings!" "I can make this goal!"

When sports become too stressful, get away from the pressure. Go to a movie or hang out with friends. Put your mind on something completely different.
How Can I Keep Stress in Check?

If sports make you so nervous that you get headaches, become nauseated, or can't concentrate on other things, you're experiencing symptoms of unhealthy, potentially chronic (which means long-lasting and continuous) stress. Don't keep such stress bottled up inside you; suppressing your emotions might mean bigger health troubles for you later on.

Talk about your concerns with a friend. Simply sharing your feelings can ease your anxiety. Sometimes it may help to get an adult's perspective - someone who has dealt with stress over and over like your coach or fitness instructor. Here are some other things you can do to cope with stress:

- * Treat your body right. Eat well and get a good night's sleep, especially before games where the pressure's on.

- * Learn and practice relaxation techniques, like those described in the previous section.

- * Get some type of physical activity other than the sport you're involved in. Take a walk, ride your bike, and get completely away from the sport that's stressing you out.

- * Don't try to be perfect - everyone flubs a shot or messes up from time to time (so don't expect your teammates to be perfect either!). Forgive yourself, remind yourself of all your great shots, and move on.

It's possible that some anxiety stems only from uncertainty. Meet privately with your coach or instructor. Ask for clarification if his or her expectations seem vague or inconsistent. Although most instructors do a good job of fostering athletes' physical and mental development, you may need to be the one who opens the lines of communication. You may also want to talk with your parents or another adult family member.

If you're feeling completely overscheduled and out of control, review your options on what you can let go. It's a last resort, but if you're no longer enjoying your sport, it may be time to find one that's less stressful. Chronic stress isn't fun - and fun is what sports are all about.

Recognizing when you need guidance to steer yourself out of a stressful situation doesn't represent weakness; it's a sign of courage and wisdom. Don't stop looking for support until you've found it.
Enjoy the Game

Winning is exhilarating! But losing and some amount of stress are part of almost any sports program - as they are in life. Sports are about enhancing self-esteem, building social skills, and developing a sense of community. And above all, sports are about having fun.

This information was compiled by
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