**Helping Teens Learn the Mental Aspect of the Game**

<http://www.uwhealth.org/news/helping-teens-learn-the-mental-aspect-of-the-game/43715>

For those who were athletes in high school, you may have poignant memories of dropping the ball, striking out or missing a goal. Even years later, the feelings can be quite strong and with reason.

Teens are particularly hard on themselves, often feeling tremendous pressure to do well, but don't necessarily have the skills to manage the anxiety that can arise. And the effects can be lasting.

"I have seen clients who, years after, can recall a moment when they made a mistake during a game," says [Shilagh Mirgain, PhD](http://www.uwhealth.org/findadoctor/profile/shilagh-a-mirgain-phd/6930), UW Health Sport Psychologist. "It can be difficult to let the feelings go."

While every athlete is susceptible to anxiety, teens seem to be particularly vulnerable. They feel pressure from parents, coaches and teammates. Their sport can be very visible, such as the Friday night football game watched by nearly the whole school. Teens can feel like the stakes are very high because of how important acceptance by their peer group can be. And they can internalize feelings of "I'm not good enough" if they don't seem to meet everyone's expectations.

The symptoms of anxiety can make functioning under any circumstance difficult, but particularly during sports when reaction times, physical movement, endurance and focus are key. Anxiety causes individuals to think less clearly, have slower reaction times, experience shallow breathing, tense muscles, and a fear of taking risks. All of which can hinder athletes during competition.

Anxiety also has a certain amount of "stickiness." It can be difficult to move beyond a mistake and so the anxiety increases the next time around with fear of making the same mistake again. The concern is that when left untreated, anxiety can start to leak over into other areas, like academics or social interactions, making it difficult for teens to cope or keep things in perspective.

"A lot of time is spent learning the physical technique of the sport, but very little on the mental aspect of the game," comments Mirgain.

Sometimes, teens (and even professional athletes) develop coping mechanisms – like wearing the same pair of socks to every game for luck. The problem is that the ritualized behavior doesn't actually deal with what is going on internally. For some players, it can become a self-fulfilling – they can't find the socks and are so distracted and lack confidence that they perform poorly during the game. It reinforces in their mind the importance of the socks. The problem is that what's really missing is the confidence to know they can manage with or without those socks.

"I've heard of an Olympic athlete's coach who used to focus on 'getting comfortable with chaos' and would do different things like unexpectedly smashing a pair of goggles, or showing up late to pick the athlete up for practice, just to help him get comfortable with the unexpected," shares Mirgain.

While practicing chaos is one way to approach the mental aspect of the game, mind body techniques are another effective technique.

"The idea is to learn skills to help build and maintain confidence, and recover from mistakes," explains Mirgain.

There are many different strategies, like having a 'mantra' to calm anxiety such as, "Do your best, forget the rest" that can be repeated to help calm the mind down. Learning some brief centering techniques to use before competition can help an athlete feel calm, focused and prepared. Another is to visualize the game and imagine possible setbacks and how to recover from them. And strategies for after the game are important as well.

"Many teens will tend to beat themselves up for how they performed," says Mirgain, "so focusing on what happened, highlighting what went well, and identifying what can be done differently can help reframe the negative thoughts."

Parents and coaches can also be important partners in the process as well. Coaches and parents can sometimes become overly invested in the game and the outcome. It's important to remember that even at the high school level, teens tend to flourish if the focus is on the effort not the outcome. And teens can actually help ensure that happens. Mirgain suggests teens can educate their parents on what kinds of support are most helpful. For parents that may mean just listening, or offering a gentle reminder of, "you tried your best" and most importantly, keeping things in perspective.

"Anxiety is an all too common problem in children today, with one in eight children experiencing an anxiety disorder that is impacting their academic performance, athletic performance and social functioning. Many will not go on to become collegiate athletes, so it's important to remember to focus on the personal growth, not the sport," says Mirgain.

For some teens, when anxiety begins to impact their behavior it may be time to seek help. A few signs to look for include:

* Excessive worry
* Ruminating and not being able to move beyond the issue
* Having panic attacks
* Withdrawing from activities and friends
* Difficulty concentrating
* Trouble sleeping
* Physical ailments like headaches and stomachaches
* Developing a nervous habit like nail biting
* Lashing out and moodiness
* Substance abuse

There are effective approaches to help reduce anxiety that can provide lasting benefits beyond just sports. And it's important to remember that not all anxiety is disruptive.

"While there can be negative aspects of anxiety, channeling it to become positive energy can actually enhance performance," she says.

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