

THE ROLE OF STRESS IN SPORTS

COACHES: Stress is a normal part of life and softball offers many opportunities to help players learn how to handle it. So this material should be taught to athletes quite early in their development, probably at Squirt level.

Stress is the term used to describe the underlying source of arousal or activation. In fact, these words are sometimes used synonymously, i.e. stress level and activation or arousal level.

CHOKING Stress is responsible for triggering the chemistry that produces the physical symptoms we experience in competition. At its worst, vision may become blurred, co-ordination can be reduced through increased muscle tension, and breathing becomes shallow and rapid, which can cause performers to literally "choke". That's the down side!

But stress is not all bad. In fact, stress is necessary for life and most certainly for optimal performance. Research clearly shows that as stress goes up, performance increases towards a peak level. Once that point is reached, performance starts to decline if the stress level continues to rise.

The mental skills used by athletes, are for the specific purpose of minimizing negative effects of stress.

STRESS REDUCERS

By learning to breath properly, centering and relaxing players can keep stress under control. Other techniques include goal setting and imagery which will be covered later in this program.

THOUGHT CONTROL

One of the main causes of stress is the way we think, so teaching players to control their thought processes can go a long way towards controlling stress level. Highly anxious performers tend to have negative feelings about their performance and a fear of failure. All of these can be detrimental to success because of these consequences.

1. ***REDUCED ABILITY TO USE CUES***, which are occurring continually. This leads to an increase in mistakes. ("I didn't pick up the pitch"; "I couldn't read the pattern"; "I wasn't ready")
2. ***STRESS PRODUCING THOUGHT PATTERNS***, which stimulate useless activities. Players do things they wouldn't normally do, which could cause them to break their performance routine and concentration.
3. ***REDUCED TOLERANCE FOR PAIN AND FRUSTRATION***. Players feel they are beaten before they are and approach the performance with a negative attitude.
4. ***PERFORMANCE ERRORS OVER-EMPHASIZED***. Players may view one missed cue or error as being more important than it really is, so they fail to recover.

To sum up, worry and anxiety can have a devastating effect on performance. Even highly skilled and well trained performers can perform at a very poor level, simply because of their thought content.

***PERSONAL
APPLICATION***

Take a few moments to review the list of tension and anxiety Indicators with your players. Have them identify those which they have actually experienced at one time or another. Use those responses as a catalyst to discussing ways of managing stress.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU EXPERIENCE SIGNS OF STRESS

ALWAYS SOMETIMES NEVER

<i>Facial grimace, frowning</i>	()	()	()
<i>Clenching, grinding teeth</i>	()	()	()
<i>General restlessness</i>	()	()	()
<i>Continuous movement, hand, foot, knee, etc.</i>	()	()	()
<i>Excessive sweating</i>	()	()	()
<i>Chewing fingernails</i>	()	()	()
<i>Heart pounding or racing</i>	()	()	()
<i>Anger, hostility</i>	()	()	()
<i>Forgetfulness</i>	()	()	()
<i>Excessive eating</i>	()	()	()
<i>Unexplained fears</i>	()	()	()

There are many more symptoms of stress, but these are some of the most common

CONTROLLING ANXIETY

Here are some practical suggestions for reducing and controlling negative, self-oriented thoughts, and the anxiety they produce. The trick is to recognize when these harmful patterns occur, then divert attention to other matters or in other directions.

1. ***CONCENTRATE ON EXTERNAL EVENTS.*** Focus on goals, work on the techniques and skills needed to succeed.
2. ***PRACTICE RELAXATION,*** and use positive mental imagery, seeing yourself succeed.
3. ***PRACTICE THE MENTAL CONTENT OF THE PERFORMANCE*** before it starts, to keep focused in the right direction.
4. ***SIMULATE THE BEHAVIOURS AND THOUGHTS*** you want to use, before they are needed. Go through your performance routine and imagine what you need to do to perform well.
5. ***PRACTICE THE SKILL OF "PARKING";*** putting negative thoughts aside to be dealt with later. If you think of something negative, you simply "park" it until later.

CONCLUSION

Performance does not have to suffer from stress because, with training and practice, every player can learn to control their own stress level.

The starting point is to become aware of the feelings associated with stress and the relationship between that and performance. Then determine the ideal level needed for your a best personal performance. Finally, practice the techniques of breathing, centering and relaxing to manage stress level.

A FOUR STEP PROCESS

1. *Learn to recognize personal signs of stress and relate these to the inner feelings they produce.*
2. *Monitor stress level during performances; try to reproduce the behaviours and feelings which occur prior to your best results. This can be done through post performance analysis.*
3. *Develop and perfect techniques for raising and lowering arousal level, so players can be where they need to be at the right time.*
4. *Develop, over a period of time, consistent, predictable methods of preparing for competition. These should include positive thinking patterns.*

**"HE WHO IS AFRAID OF A THING,
GIVES IT POWER OVER HIM"
MOROCCAN**