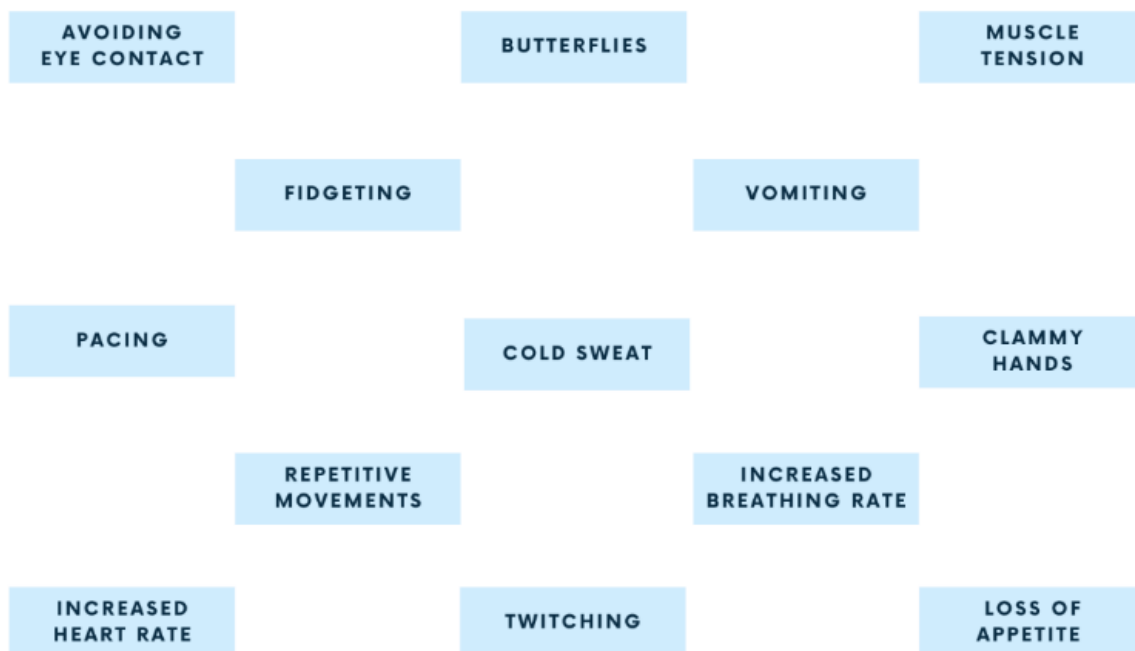


Strategies For Managing Physical Symptoms

Although performance anxiety is often thought of as a mostly mental experience, the physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety can be equally as harmful to an athlete's performance. Providing strategies directed towards both mental and physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety will give your athlete(s) the best chance to effectively manage their symptoms and perform their best. Below are some of the most common physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety that athletes may experience, and some strategies that may help to manage them. We recommend giving these strategies to athletes to work on outside of game, practice, and training time. You can explain the strategy or run through it during a practice to make sure they have the right idea, but then ask them to practice the strategy on their own. This allows them to focus on themselves and reduce the amount of distractions or interruptions using found in a game/practice/training environment.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF PRE-PERFORMANCE ANXIETY



Meditation

Meditation is a form of mental training that encourages mindfulness, concentration, and anxiety management in athletes. A brief meditation session can help an athlete take inventory of their thoughts, acknowledge how they are feeling, and provide the space to address any thoughts or feelings contributing to their sense of pre-performance anxiety. This may help to address symptoms such as muscle tension, fidgeting, pacing, repetitive movements, increased heart rate, twitching, increased breathing rate, and butterflies. Below is an example of a brief body scan meditation exercise that you can share with athletes to help them learn how to manage their physical pre-performance anxiety symptoms. We recommend giving these strategies to athletes to work on outside of game, practice, and training time. You can explain the strategy or run through it during a practice to make sure they have the right idea, but then ask them to practice the strategy on their own. This allows them to focus on themselves and reduce the amount of distractions or interruptions using found in a game/practice/training environment.

Once athlete(s) have practiced this exercise few times, they should be able to conduct a body scan exercise without the guidance of the script.

Body Scan Meditation Exercise Script

“Find a quiet place to sit or lay down and get into a comfortable position. Close your eyes (if you are comfortable) and clear your mind of all thoughts about the upcoming game/event/practice. Focus on the sensations of your body in your environment. Feel your feet or back touching the floor, feel your lungs expanding and your chest rising with each breath.

You will begin the body scan by starting at the top of your head and focusing on the sensations you feel there. Feel the weight of your head, the tenseness of your forehead, the muscles in your face. Are they relaxed? Are they tensed? Try to relax any muscle you find to be tense.

Then move on to your neck and focus on the sensations there. Is it tense? Relaxed? Then move on to your shoulders. Focus on the sensations you feel there. Feel where your shoulders are touching the back of the chair or the floor. Continue scanning down either arm and focus on any sensations you feel as you go. Flex your right arm for a few seconds and then slowly relax the muscles there. Now flex your left arm and then slowly relax the muscles there.

Then focus on your chest. Can you feel it rising and falling with each breath? Can you feel your ribs expanding and contracting? Can you feel your heartbeat in your chest? Can you slow your heartbeat down at all? Take a few deep breaths while focusing on this area. Try to make them as smooth as possible.

Then move on to your legs. Feel the weight of your legs pressing into the chair or the ground. Focus on the sensations you feel, are your muscles tense or relaxed? Flex your right leg for a few seconds and then slowly relax the muscles there. Now, flex your left leg for a few seconds and then slowly relax the muscles there.

Now turn your attention to your ankles and feet. Feel the weight of your feet pressing into the ground. Focus on the sensations you feel there. Are your muscles tense or relaxed? Flex your right foot for a few seconds and then slowly relax the muscles there. Now, flex your left foot for a few seconds and then slowly relax the muscles there.

Now broaden your focus to your whole body. Are any muscles still tensed? If so, take a moment and focus on relaxing them. Feel your whole body and the weight of it as it presses into the chair or the floor. Take a few deep breaths.

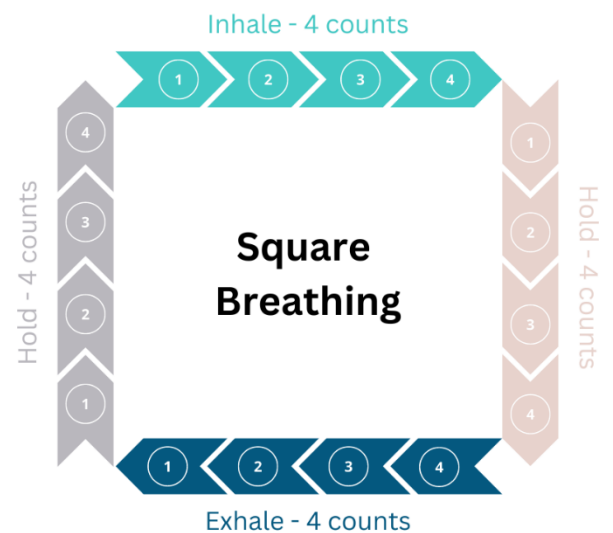
You can begin to stand up whenever you are ready. Please be mindful of those around you as you begin to move.”

Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises can be very similar to some forms of meditation. Focusing on breathing can help an athlete ground themselves within their body and recalibrate their thoughts. While breathing exercises may appear simple, they can be very effective in helping an athlete focus, settle their thoughts, and manage any physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety they may be experiencing. This may help to address symptoms such as muscle tension, fidgeting, pacing, repetitive movements, increased heart rate, twitching, increased breathing rate, and butterflies. We've provided two examples of breathing exercises below. We recommend giving these strategies to athletes to work on outside of game, practice, and training time. You can explain the strategy or run through it during a practice to make sure they have the right idea, but then ask them to practice the strategy on their own. This allows them to focus on themselves and reduce the amount of distractions or interruptions using found in a game/practice/training environment.

Square Breathing

The idea of square breathing is to bring attention to one's breathing pattern and focus on evening it out to reduce any harmful thoughts or sensations an individual may have as a result of performance anxiety. Focusing on breathing in this way can help to distract the mind and calm down the nervous system, which will help in the management of many physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety. Square breathing is quite easy to do – inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts. Repeat this sequence for about a minute.



10 breaths with long exhales

This may be the simplest strategy we offer, but it can be very effective in helping athletes re-center themselves and manage their physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety. Lengthening the exhale of a breath can help to calm down the nervous system, which aids in the management of some of the physical symptoms of pre-performance anxiety (i.e., muscle tension, fidgeting, increased heart rate, increased breathing rate). This exercise requires athletes to take 10 controlled breaths, focusing on making the exhale longer than the inhale. While this can take some practice – it is a strange feeling at first – it's very easy to do in any situation. We recommend introducing this exercise in a practice setting so athletes can get used to it before trying it in game situations.