

## Interpreting Pre-Performance Anxiety Symptoms

- Pre-performance anxiety can have both positive and negative effects on athletes. How the anxiety affects the athlete depends on how they interpret the symptoms they experience, as interpretations can be either facilitative (helpful) or debilitating (hurtful) to performance.
- Athletes that have a more facilitative perception of their anxiety symptoms view stressful situations as a challenge, are better able to use coping strategies, feel more confident, and often perform better. Athletes that have a more debilitating perception of their anxiety symptoms view stressful situations as threatening to performance, and often struggle to cope with their symptoms effectively.
- Due to the nature of pre-performance anxiety symptoms, it can be challenging to separate feelings of anxiety from appropriate feelings of anticipation prior to a sporting event. Things like an increased heart rate, increased breathing rate, butterflies, and muscle tension can all be signs of both readiness to perform and pre-performance anxiety. This can be a problem if an athlete is interpreting these things inaccurately. For example, if an athlete interprets their increased heart rate as a sign of anxiety, they may become nervous, get clammy hands, and struggle to perform at their best. However, increased heart rate is a normal symptom of warming up and getting ready for a game/practice/session. When interpreted correctly, this symptom may actually help an athlete feel more ready to perform.
- As a coach, the best way to determine whether the athlete is showing signs of pre-performance anxiety or just getting amped up to perform is to talk to them – ask them how they're feeling about the game/task/event, what they hope to accomplish, and if they have any concerns. If they express they're feeling nervous, hope to just get through the game, or are concerned about their place on the team, this may indicate that they are in fact experiencing pre-performance anxiety. But if they are excited for the game, are striving to score a goal, and don't vocalize any major concerns, they may just be experiencing the anticipation feelings that accompany preparing for a game/task/event.
- If an athlete expresses concern over a symptom that may just be a result of preparation for performance, you can help them alter their interpretation of the symptom by providing a simple explanation for why they are feeling the way they are. Below is a chart that offers some explanations for why an athlete may be experiencing symptoms of pre-performance anxiety, without actually being anxious.
- The next page provides some examples of pre-performance anxiety symptoms that are often interpreted incorrectly, and how you can help your athlete(s) change their attitude toward the symptom.

Symptom	Possible explanation for why athlete is experiencing symptom	What can you say?	What can the athlete do?
<b>Increased heart rate</b>	Heart rate naturally increases when you begin to warm-up, it's a sign of physical readiness and helps maximize performance	<i>"Having an increased heart rate is a normal part of sport. It shows that you've warmed up sufficiently and your body is ready"</i>	<i>Stop what they're doing, take a moment, and recognize that their heart rate goes down once they have stopped moving</i>
<b>Increased breathing rate</b>	Breathing rate naturally increases when you begin to warm-up, it's a sign of physical readiness and helps maximize performance	<i>"Having an increased breathing rate is a normal part of sport. Your body needs more oxygen when you move more, so you'll be breathing faster than usual"</i>	<i>Practice a short breathing exercise. For example inhale for 4 seconds, hold the breath for 7 second, exhale for 8 seconds. Do this 10 times.</i>
<b>Butterflies</b>	Butterflies can arise from anticipation of an event or action, they help the body get ready to act and keep us alert so we perform better	<i>"Butterflies mean you are anticipating your next move. They help you be ready to jump into action and stay focused"</i>	<i>Acknowledge what they are feeling. For example, saying or thinking "I am feeling butterflies because I am anticipating the game/event/task" may help to label the feeling in more helpful way</i>
<b>Clammy Hands</b>	Clammy hands can occur as a result of anticipatory excitement or simply from warming up and sweating	<i>"Because your moving around and getting ready, your body is trying to regulate it's temperature. This may cause your hands to get a little bit clammy"</i>	<i>Take a moment to stop what they're doing and cool down, have a sip of cold water (cold hydration can help regulate body temperature), wipe their hands on a spare towel or jersey</i>
<b>Withdrawal</b>	Withdrawal can occur when an athlete gets really focused or dialed in prior to a game/event. A very social athlete may become more withdrawn prior to a big game/event in order to get psychologically ready	<i>"When you get focused and block out distractions you are mentally preparing to perform and directing all your attention to the task at hand"</i>	<i>Reflect on their withdrawal. Do they find it helps them get in the right zone to perform? Or do they too dialed in and miss cues from their coaches and teammates. If they get too dialed it, they should engage in a brief conversation with a coach, trainer, or teammate to re-center themselves</i>