

Stress and anxiety impact us just as much on the court as off the court and can be directly linked to a player's performance.

Understanding your stress response and building skills to control arousal and anxiety will improve your focus, motivation and overall performance!



Stress & Performance

How stress and anxiety help & hinder our game

When it comes to being on court, our **stress, arousal, and anxiety** can be directly linked to our **performance**. We all know the term stress, but in performance situations we need to look further into how stress affects our bodies, concentration, resilience and in turn, the way we perform under pressure in a game.

Stress is a normal response by both the mind and the body to any pressure or demand, such as an internal thought or external event. Not all stress is negative - there are two types of stress that have different impacts on our performance:

- **Eustress** is positive and gives a feeling of fulfilment and arousal
- **Distress** is a negative form of stress and in extreme cases causes anxiety and apprehension

Arousal is a psychological state of alertness and anticipation that prepares the body for action. Individual players have different levels of arousal and it can have either a negative or a positive impact on our behaviour and performance.

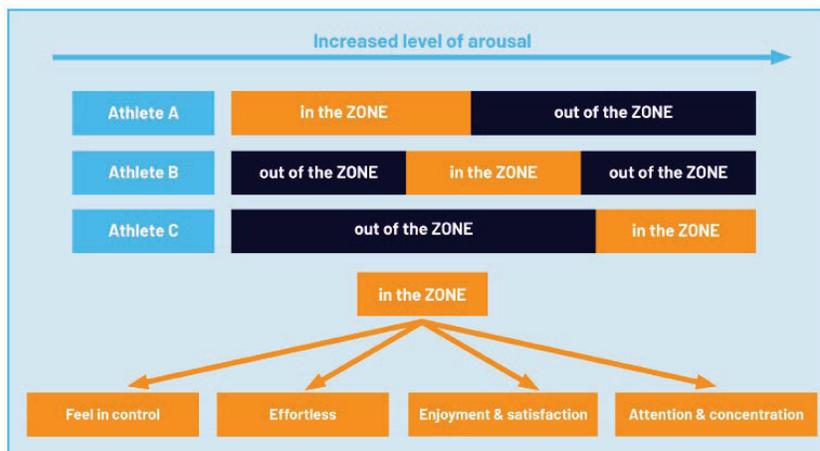
How much stress we are experiencing prior to a game, our level of ability and competition, and how we perceive the environment we are playing in will have a big impact on performance.

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Perception is incredibly important here. If we view our environment positively (as being a challenge), or negatively (as being a threat), our anxiety and arousal will rise and either help us to become more motivated, play our best and get **“in the zone”** or make us feel overwhelmed, distressed or bored, effectively placing us **“out of the zone”** – reducing our performance.



Causes of stress

Often, individual players will respond differently to the same situation. Some of the main causes of **stress** are:

- Internal – illness, sleep, personality type
- External – environment, other people, occupational

Anxiety is another aspect of mental health and performance that differs for each player. Anxiety is made up of two aspects: the consistent core worries and behaviour we have regardless of our situation (traits), and anxiety that is changeable, temporary and dependent on situation (state).

When a player experiences worry and negative thoughts (cognitive state anxiety) it causes decision making to become poor and concentration levels to drop, increasing the number of errors. This can be monitored by the increase in physical stress responses, which include an increase in heart rate, sweating and blood pressure. Some of these symptoms of anxiety are beneficial to sporting performance, but if the player perceives them as happening because they are unable to meet the demands of the activity they further increase state anxiety.

Controlling stress, arousal and anxiety

When you notice your body or mind is becoming overwhelmed by the game or pressure, the below strategies can work to bring you back to focus and get your head back in the game.

Physical	Emotional	Psychological
<p>Progressive muscular relaxation is a technique used to remove tension in the muscles. This technique allows the player to control the tension and relaxation of the muscles. It also combines the control of breathing helping with the symptoms of somatic state anxiety. There are many different types of this biofeedback control.</p>	<p>Imagery allows players to increase/decrease arousal/ anxiety levels by visualising aspects of previous positive performances. If psyching up is required the player focuses on performances that require high levels of energy and feelings of heightened arousal. If anxiety and stress need to be reduced the player focuses on the feelings of well-being and positivity.</p>	<p>Self-talk focuses on the player convincing themselves that they are good enough to perform and play well; most sportspersons will have used it e.g. 'come on you can do it!'. Talk to yourself the way you would a friend! Focus on reminding yourself of your strength and ability to succeed!</p>