

Manage Your Stress to Maximize Your Performance

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what is not controllable, and then focusing your energy on the things that you can control in your life and letting go of the things that you can't.

satisfying relationships, a happy life, and maximal performances.

Because stress is a reality in life, it is important that you learn to recognize your stressors and stress reactions. By doing so and then by applying some of the coping strategies discussed in this article, you improve your chances of effectively managing your stress and putting yourself in the position to have

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Anger in American Sport: How Can We Manage It?

By Justin S. Anderson, Psy.D. &
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Anger and Sports – sadly those two words have become inextricably linked through the years. Although some view anger and aggressive play as a natural part of sport, particularly at the college or professional level, others see sport becoming increasingly violent and out of control, as the bench-clearing brawl that erupted during the Clemson – South Carolina football game and the melee between fans and players that ended the Indiana Pacers – Detroit Pistons basketball game suggest. Sadly, such violent behaviors are not limited to college or pro athletes, but have occurred during youth sport events as well, with parents acting abusively toward referees and fights breaking out in the stands.

So why the connection between anger and sports? Although some suggest that athletes are more prone to violence and anger because of their psychological makeup (e.g., view situations as hostile or threatening), others (e.g., Abrams & Hale, 2004) argue that their anger may be more a result of situational factors. Because of the competitive nature of sport, athletes and coaches often face situations in which they are unable to reach their goals. As a result, they experience frustration and anger (common responses when one's goal-path is blocked) on a more constant basis. Although most athletes/coaches do not allow these feelings to lead to violence, some do. When that happens, the results often are seen by thousands, if not millions, of spectators and the

perception of athletes as angry and violent is increased.

Whether the cause of anger is primarily internal or external, the reality is that becoming violent is simply not acceptable in our society and often leads to severe penalties and consequences for the perpetrators. As athletic administrators, owners, general managers, coaches and even athletes themselves recognize the real costs associated with out-of-control anger and violent behaviors, they are seeking assistance from sport psychologists to more effectively cope and make better decisions regarding how they will behave when frustrated or in situations they view as hostile. In this article, we summarize a three-step approach to help you or your athlete better manage your anger.

Step 1 – Understand Your Anger Profile

The first step involves learning what anger is and becoming aware of how you experience it. The American Psychological Association defines anger as an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage. It also is accompanied by physiological and biological changes, such as increases in heart rate and blood pressure and general activation of energy, hormone, and adrenaline levels (Spielberger, 2004).

Anger not only involves emotional and physiological reactions, but cognitive (how you think about the situation) and behavioral (what you actually do in the

situation) responses as well. Of these, you have the most control over your cognitive and behavioral responses. In fact, when you become more aware of your responses in all four areas, you can learn to control them and more effectively manage your anger.

To start this awareness process, think of any instances you have experienced in the last year or two when you have felt very angry or behaved in what could be described as an angry, or even violent, way. Keeping these instances in mind, answer the following questions:

1. What emotions/feelings do I have when I am angry (e.g., frustrated, hurt, scared, annoyed)?
2. How does my body feel when I am angry (e.g., tense, heart racing)?
3. What am I thinking about when I am angry (e.g., "this person has hurt me" "I have been disrespected" "I am threatened and need to fight back")?
4. What do you do when angry (e.g., walk away, talk to the person, fight)?

Your answers to these questions represent your "anger profile" and give you an awareness of how you tend to feel (emotionally and physically), think, and behave when angry. By profiling these areas, you can see that anger is a process, not an automatic response. In fact, how you feel and behave is strongly influenced by how you think about the people around you and the situations you are in. If you perceive the situation or person as threatening,

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Anger in American Sport *Continued*

disrespectful, unloving, unaccepting, uncaring or perhaps unfair, your feelings may be intensified and you increase your risk of behaving in more violent ways. If, however, you learn to think about situations in less negative ways (i.e., change your perception), you can deescalate your emotional and physical responses and make better choices about what you are going to do. Although this process sounds simple, it takes practice to translate awareness into action.

Step 2 – Recognize Your Triggers

The second step involves recognizing your situational, emotional, and physical triggers of anger. Your anger profile can provide you with some of these triggers. For example, through creating your profile you may have learned that you are more prone to behave angrily when you feel hurt or when your heart is racing or when you interpret a person's action as being "hostile" toward you. Being aware of these triggers can help you deescalate your responses and/or avoid behaving in ways that are violent and regretful.

In addition, you want to identify and learn to recognize situational triggers. Usually these are the environments in which you tend to experience anger. To learn what your triggers are, again think about situations in the last year or two when you have become angry/violent. Write down on a piece of paper the environments in which you had these responses. What commonalities are there? Do you tend to get angry in specific environments (e.g., bars/clubs), with certain people (e.g., out with friends, with teammates), when doing specific things (e.g., competing, practicing) or when certain things happen (e.g., fans yell at you)? Once you recognize what these environments are, you can use your awareness to reduce

your risk by (1) choosing not to put yourself in that environment or with those people, or (2) exercising more caution and/or more effective coping strategies (see below) if you cannot outright avoid the situation. Either way, just having this awareness puts you in the driver seat when it comes to decreasing your risk of becoming angry or behaving violently.

Step 3 – Adopt Anger Control Strategies

Once you have developed your anger profile and recognized your triggers, the third step is to learn new strategies for stopping the escalation of anger and preventing a violent or unfortunate outcome. Although there are several effective strategies, which we introduce here, the key is to adopt those that will best help YOU deal effectively with your responses and your situations.

Relaxation – these strategies, such as deep breathing, help you lessen your physical/physiological reactions and calm down faster.

Cognitive restructuring – this strategy, which incorporates thought stopping and learning to think more positively and rationally, helps you change your perception of situations/people and thus deescalate your reactions.

Problem Solving – this strategy helps you find alternative ways to handle situations that usually increase your risk of becoming angry. It's like having a good game plan in advance of a competition.

Changing Your Environment – as we mentioned previously, sometimes the best strategy is to remove yourself from the environment or situation in which you find yourself becoming angry. By knowing your triggers and profile, you can be proactive and avoid risky situations.

Communication – this strategy, which includes listening with an open mind,

maintaining eye contact, and not interrupting the other person, can help you remain emotionally calm and thus facilitate a more rationale, nonreactive dialogue about what is going on. Poor communication can be a key reason that emotional anger leads to behavioral violence.

Consult a Sport Psychologist – this strategy, which usually involves one-on-one meetings, gives you the opportunity to work individually with an expert to gain control of your anger and attain your goals.

So, as you think about the situations in which you tend to become angry and the responses that are part of your anger profile, consider which of these strategies might best help you (remember, often you will use multiple strategies at one time). If you tend to experience strong physical reactions, then relaxation might be best. If, on the other hand, you tend to interpret situations in very angry/personal ways, then cognitive restructuring may be the way to go. Whatever the case, learning different strategies gives you new tools to defuse your anger and minimize the likelihood that you will do something that you may later regret.

Although aggressive play is a part of sport, the key is to not let it turn into anger or violence. For most coaches and athletes, the line between the two is clear. For others, though, the line is fuzzier or more easily crossed. If you've been told you have a "temper" or find yourself engaging in behaviors that you later regret, remember that you can learn to better control your anger and, as a result, attain your goals.



Manage Your Stress to Maintain Your Performance

By Justin S. Anderson, Psy.D. & Trent A. Petrie, Ph.D.

All of us do well when things are going well, but the thing that distinguishes athletes is the ability to do well in times of great stress, urgency and pressure.

— Roger Staubach,
NFL Hall of Fame Player

All too often, we let stress interfere with our ability to perform and enjoy life both on and off the field. So, what can you do to more effectively manage your stress and maximize your performance? In this article, we define stress and then offer some concrete strategies to help you reduce stress levels and lead a happier, more fulfilling, and more successful life.

Stress is a dynamic, bi-directional relationship between the person and the environment that the person appraises as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and thus endangering his/her well-being (Folkman, 1985). But what does this definition mean in practical terms? First, stress is individually determined...what is stressful for your friends, might not be stressful for you and vice-versa. Second, over time stress can fluctuate in its severity and effect on you...it is not uniformly bad, nor does it stay with you forever. Third, and perhaps most importantly, you have control over how much stress you experience. That control lies in how you appraise or interpret the events that happen in your life. In other words, how you think about a situation and your ability to cope strongly influences how much "stress" you experience. If you think the situation is overwhelming and there is no way you will be able to handle it, then you will likely experience a lot of stress. But, if you see the situation more as a challenge, one you can handle, then your stress levels are likely to be much lower.

In learning to handle your own stress it is important to recognize the things that cause you to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. In other words, what are your stressors? Before you read more of this article, take a moment to think about and write down the current stressors in your life. These stressors may be internal (e.g., high expectations, or a need to do things perfectly) or external (e.g., job deadlines, relationship concerns, finances, or simply running late). Whatever their origin, knowing your stressors is a key first step.

After you identify your stressors, the second step is to understand how you respond when stressed. Do you tend to react physically/physiologically (e.g., increase muscle tension, butterflies in your stomach, headaches)? Emotionally (e.g., feel angry, sad, scared...etc.)? Cognitively (e.g., worry or think negatively about yourself and your situation, such as "I am not good enough; I can't do all of this; it is unfair"...etc.)? Behaviorally (e.g., sleep more, eat less, yell at your friends, drink alcohol, smoke...etc.)? Although we presented these reactions as separate categories, remember that you can experience simultaneously any number of them when stressed. So, take a minute to think about and write down the ways in which you tend to respond when stressed.

So how do you cope with your stressors and stress responses? First and foremost, you have to take care of yourself, because being physically and psychologically healthy gives you an advantage when it comes to responding to and coping with your stressors. So, to give yourself a foundation for successfully managing your stress, make sure you exercise, eat nutritiously, sleep enough

hours, not drink excessively, have friends to talk to, engage in fun activities...etc.

Second, you can use behavioral strategies to either change the stressor itself or cope with some of your responses. For example, if preparing for a competition causes you a lot of stress (e.g., feel physically tense, don't talk to people, have a short temper, don't sleep well), you might cope behaviorally by practicing relaxation, such as deep-breathing, by delegating some of your game preparation to assistants so you don't feel overwhelmed by doing it all, by making sure you don't isolate yourself and you talk to people who are supportive of you, or by making sure you give yourself time to do one fun/relaxing thing during that week. The key in deciding how to cope is to match your strategy to the stressor and the way you are reacting.

As we mentioned earlier, how you think about the stressors in your life is key in determining how you will respond. Thus, the third strategy is a cognitive one and involves learning to think more positively and constructively. Often, your "stress" will come from how you talk to yourself about the events that are occurring in your life. So, instead of thinking negatively about the event/situation, train yourself to think more positively, to focus on what you can control (e.g., the effort you and your team put forth in practice and competition) versus what you can't (e.g., who will win the competition or the referees' calls). Imagine yourself acting as your own "cognitive coach"...talking positively to yourself about the situation and how you can cope, identifying what is and

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