



If you want to swim fast, you've got to prepare yourself mentally. That's not always an easy process. Beginning this week, Sport psychologist Aimee Kimball, PhD., introduces a series of articles on usaswimming.org that makes mental training as easy as A-B-C.

Why do I have anxiety?

Many athletes have anxiety before they compete, whether it's a pounding heart, difficulty breathing, tight muscles, or worried thoughts. All animals have what's called the fight-or-flight response in which our bodies prepare to either fight a challenge or to run away from it. These symptoms of anxiety aren't always bad, as they can signal a readiness to compete. Think of a race you were involved in that wasn't important to you or where you knew you would win it easily. You probably didn't have the same signs of anxiety because you didn't see this event as being as threatening. The perception of a challenge/threat is what makes athletes feel anxious.

Changing the Perceived Threat

If situational factors (event importance, your opponents) cause you anxiety, focus on controllable factors that help you to swim well- a smooth stroke, a strong kick, and a well-timed start. When you start to add "uncontrollables" to your focus, you are adding thoughts to your head that don't need to be there and are making it a lot harder to swim to your potential.

Physically Relaxing

To release anxiety, take some long, deep breaths and picture all the physical and mental stress leaving your body. You can also take a few minutes each day to go through your muscle groups, tightening them and then relaxing them. By doing this progressive relaxation, you can recognize when and where you are carrying physical tension and learn to physically loosen your muscles so that you can perform your best.

Therefore

Anxiety as you know it doesn't have to exist. You may have some physical activation (faster heart rate, quicker breathing) but you can control this. Simply think how you want to think and leave some time for a pre-race routine that allows you to physically relax. While it requires training, you can regain control of your body by taking control of your mind.

Make it Great!

For more information contact: 412-432-3777; kimballac@upmc.edu