

Coping With Pressure

Stress

Stress is a word in common use. Basically stress simply means load, but in current usage it implies overload.

Bodily stress is part of daily life, and this is really where the expression comes from. Noise, heat and work are stresses on our systems, but in the mental area we feel stress too, and in social interaction strains and tension are even more apparent.

As humans we react to loads and tension by making an adjustment. At first we try to endure the load and call on a kind of defence mechanism. Our heart beats faster and body temperature rises. We are ready to make an effort.

Under pressure we achieve more than we normally do in everyday life. But stress can also have a negative effect. When we reach the point at which we cannot deal with stress anymore, i.e. when we are overloaded, then a sharp drop in performance follows. In such situations we cannot even reach our customary performance level.

Overload does not allow us to make any more extraordinary efforts. However, for an extraordinary effort a certain degree of stress is necessary. For a good officiating performance, an increase in the state of tension is essential, in other words a level of stress. Only when this stress level is optimal can an above average performance result.

Thinking back on successful performances does not bring to mind those performances where the level of challenge was too low, or those in which the challenge was too great. In an overload situation the ability of the system to perform would collapse. But it is also just as bad to be under challenged. The secret of good performance is an optimal load level. This brings maximum performance.

Pressure Control

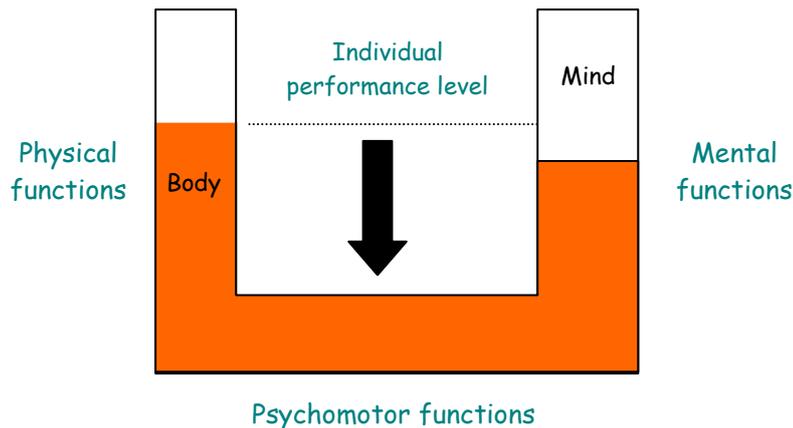
Ability of officials to deal with pressure can frequently be linked to how well they can control their levels of anxiety. Controlling anxiety in 'clutch' situations during a competition is what can distinguish a good official from a great official.

Anxiety may also be associated with the concept of fear, or more specifically for officials the fear of incorrect decisions leading to unsafe situations. An official who manifests anxiety before and during competition can experience an elevated level of arousal and feelings of tension and apprehension.

Body – Mind

The following diagram shows a mechanistic relationship between body and mind, but it indicates very clearly that they are dependent on each other.

In this model a lack of mental strength would limit physical ability too.



Specific knowledge, which includes knowing the rules and generally understanding the sport, form the foundation of a top official.

Knowledge of the rules can be trained to perfection.

Physical ability (stamina, speed, reactions etc) can be well trained up to a certain level.

Via **mental training**, etc, areas of the mind can be improved, e.g. the ability to concentrate, which is essential for an official.

Leadership qualities are hardly trainable. To all intents and purposes, these have to be regarded as given factors.

Working with colleagues is also a question of character, a leader comes to the fore.

Psychological skills (mental toughness training)

Developing the ability to control emotions and mood states by applying a few simple psychological skills is beneficial for all sportspersons. In particular, improving self awareness and motivation, and decreasing reactions to stress are essential life skills. Recognising the complex interaction and strong relationship between physical and mental states is important for recovery and training. This is evident when muscle relaxation is complemented by lowered heart rates and blood pressure, and improved mood states. The term used to refer to the techniques and skills employed to aid an individual's emotional and psychological state in this way is mental toughness training. Relaxation techniques, meditation, breath exercises, music, relaxation massage and flotation are the most frequently used techniques.

Meditation

Although passive rest is an important component of recovery practices the time spent during passive rest can be used to include one or more of the above relaxation techniques. Meditation trains the athlete to relax by controlling the parasympathetic (calming) nervous system by reducing *noise* or stimulation to the brain. By controlling this system the official can lower blood pressure and heart rate, slow down breathing rates, relax muscles and calm the sympathetic (excitatory) nervous system. This technique is useful for controlling stresses during a game, after training or competition, particularly if the official has had to control a very explosive game. Meditation skills take some time and plenty of practice to acquire and they are most readily learned by younger individuals.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) can be done at the end of training or before going to bed. The technique involves tightening and relaxing specific muscle groups so that the individual identifies the sensations of muscle tension and muscle relaxation in that body part. This results in a reduction in muscle tension and helps to improve body awareness so the individual can recognise muscle tension and focus on reducing it. When this skill is used regularly in training it can lead to significant improvement in training and competitive abilities

Imagery and visualisation

All individuals have an imagination that can be developed to contribute to their training potential. Imagery relaxation and visualisation involve using the imagination to create a vivid scene. Four senses are used to generate the image – sight, smell, sound and touch. The image created by the individual should evoke feelings of comfort and relaxation.

Breathing

Breathing exercises are used frequently in the martial arts. Learning breathing techniques and focusing on relaxing tense muscles leads to a more relaxed state. Exhaling while applying static stretches also helps to produce a relaxation response in the body.

REST and flotation

Other psychological techniques revolve around the concept of REST (restricted environment stimulation therapy). Some skills are as simple as closing the eyes to reduce stimulation while other techniques require training (e.g. meditation) or specialised equipment (e.g. flotation). Reducing the amount of stimulation to the brain enables the official to focus more effectively on relaxing and becoming emotionally calm. Flotation tanks provide an environment of minimal stimulation by blocking sight and sound (unless the client relaxes to music or to an affirmation tape) and reproducing weightlessness. It usually takes two or three trials for most individuals to learn how to relax completely, but flotation is remarkably effective in reducing stress and preventing burnout, particularly after or during stressful periods.

Music

Music as an adjunct to training is underutilised. Although it is sometimes used in the gym to provide a motivational atmosphere conducive to hard work, it is equally effective in evoking a relaxation response if the appropriate music is selected. It is useful for individuals to create a bank of music to generate a range of emotions and atmospheres, either stimulating

or calming. These can be used in training and, because music playback devices are quite portable, they are an excellent tool for pre and post games and competition, or when you are in an unfamiliar environment and finding it difficult to relax. With practice any individual can learn to manipulate mood states for optimal arousal or relaxation.

Apart from flotation, all of these techniques can be practiced daily without the need for any major specialised equipment or facilities. An ideal time for rehearsing these skills is immediately before going to bed. Learning how to switch off from the day's events will also promote a good night's sleep.

Emotional recovery

At key times during the year, such as competitions and tournaments, school or university exams and Christmas, individuals are often excessively stressed. If a game or tournament was very intense, or the official's performance was below their expectations, they can gain considerable benefits from emotional recovery techniques. Mood lifting activities can include watching an amusing video or comedy show on TV, reading an escapist or adventure novel, or going to a fun park, zoo or light entertainment centre. During periods of extended competitions, such as overseas tours planning these activities as part of the tour is essential.