

Coaching Strategies for Helping Players Handle Stress

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“When it comes to choking, the bottom line is that everyone does it. The question isn’t whether you choke or not, but how - when you choke – you’re are going to handle it...Choking is part of every sport, and a part of being a champion is being able to cope with it better than everyone else.”

As the above quote from tennis great John McEnroe shows, all players will experience stress and the key is to learn to effectively handle it. This presentation will discuss coaching strategies for helping your player’s better cope with stress and anxiety. It is argued that before stress can be effectively managed, players must first identify their ideal level of anxiety and emotions needed for best performance. This zone of optimal emotional functioning differs from player to player and often consists of both positive and negative emotions, with the mix more heavily weighted toward positive emotions. Once a player’s optimal zone of emotional functioning is identified, emotional control and stress management skills must be developed. It is especially important to identify major stress sources and link specific coping strategies to specific sources of stress.

Key stress management guidelines include the following:

- Nervousness is not always bad, but is often associated with competitive stress.
- The player’s personality (level of trait anxiety) influences how much momentary on court (state) anxiety is experienced.
- Too much stress causes players to experience unwanted muscle tension and concentration and attention problems.
- Focusing on one’s strings helps facilitate the relaxation response (with training).
- Stress causes players to rush points (teach them to purposefully slow things down when stressed).
- De-emphasising winning and the outcomes of competition reduces stress.
- Emphasising fun helps reduce anxiety.
- Anger increases anxiety and arousal.
- Use cognitive or mental anxiety reduction techniques (e.g., thought stopping).
- Use somatic or physical anxiety reduction techniques (e.g., progressive relaxation, massage).
- Players should develop pre-match, pre-serve, between point and post-match routines and rituals.
- When choking, focus on following one’s ritual.
- Rituals should involve: focusing on one’s racquet strings to facilitate the relaxation response; taking a centring (slow deep) breath; a pre-shot ritual; and exhaling at contact in smooth regular patterns.
- Elite players need to develop a wide variety and array of coping skills, and these should be taught in junior tennis.



- Coping strategies need to be individualised to each player.
- Players need to recognise the importance of coping at major competitions by identifying and discussing possible unforeseen events that might occur.
- Efforts must be made to over-learn coping strategies as they must be automated to be most effective in major competitions.

In the end, it is critical that coaches implement programs to teach their players how to effectively cope and manage stress. In essence, young athletes need to learn how to get up, but not uptight, for matches and at the same time be ready to cope with unexpected events and distractions.

VIDEOS

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