

My Top 10 Personal Learnings on Dealing with Fear

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As a world champion freeride skier and master's degree graduate in mental performance coaching, I have an intimate relationship with fear and have spent many years learning about and researching this emotion. Whether you're struggling with anxiety in the context of sport, business, music, performing arts or any other activity involving performance under pressure, the following tips can help you. Here are my top 10 learnings on the nature of anxiety and how to manage it:

1. It can be helpful to understand that the emotion of anxiety is made up of two different components: physiological and mental.
2. Physiological anxiety symptoms—such as butterflies in the stomach, increased heart rate, sweating, nausea, and shaky knees—aren't inherently bad. We know from sport psychology research that it's not so much the *intensity* of the anxiety symptoms that impacts performance, but whether you *believe* if they are helpful or unhelpful for performance. For example, if you believe that your anxiety symptoms are a sign that your body is gearing up for action/performing and that they allow you to increase your focus, then you will likely cope much better with anxiety, feel like you are (at least to some degree) in control of the situation, and that you can achieve what you're setting out to do. On the other hand, if you believe that your anxiety symptoms are unhelpful or harmful for performance, you're likely to cope less, feel out of control of the situation, and believe that you can't achieve your goals. This could lead to you giving up before you even really tried.
3. The second component of anxiety is mental and includes thoughts such as worry and self-doubt. If we start listening to the negative thoughts and worry our brain is producing, we essentially become distracted. When we are distracted from the task at hand, our performance suffers. Even the best of athletes and performers experience self-doubt and worry, but they know how to keep their attention focused on what is important.
4. Successful athletes therefore can and do experience negative thoughts and self-doubt, but what differentiates them from the average performer is that they (a) notice when their attention waivers or focuses on irrelevant cues, and (b) know how to bring their attention back to what matters most in that moment. That is the master craft of a successful performer! This is also a skill that can be trained, for example through mindfulness practice or meditation.

5. I'm sure you've heard it many times before: be in the here and now; the present moment is all we have, etc. But our minds are constantly chattering away, often occupied with the past or the future. So how do you stay in the present moment? Consider this for a moment: our bodies are always in the present moment. By focusing our attention on one or more of our five senses, we can easily bring our attention back to the Now. Ask yourself: what can I see in this very moment? What can I feel? What can I hear? What can I smell or taste? In doing so, you will automatically direct your attention back to the present moment, where it needs to be in order for you to perform at your best.
6. One of the most simple and effective methods for reducing anxiety levels is to focus your attention on taking a few slow, deep breaths. By slowly breathing out, you activate the parasympathetic nervous system—which is responsible for the relaxation response—which will help you feel calmer in an instant.
7. On the other hand, if you're feeling tired or sluggish, the above technique also works in the opposite direction: emphasise the inhalation phase by taking a few deep breaths in, thus activating your sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the "fight-or-flight" response. This will help you get pumped up and prepare your body for rapid action.
8. Ultimately, a lot of the anxiety in performance situations comes from the pressure we place upon ourselves. The pressure often increases when the main focus is on winning or achieving specific outcomes or results. Most exceptional performers don't focus on achieving specific outcomes, they focus instead on learning and growth: on getting a little bit better, day by day. Not on being THE best, but on being THEIR best. This form of motivation in psychology is referred to as intrinsic (or internal) motivation and is known to be a much more powerful and sustainable driver than extrinsic (or external) motivation. Typical extrinsic motivators are money, medals, or titles. They can and do motivate too of course, but not in the same powerful way as intrinsic motivators.
9. By prioritising their own personal development, successful performers focus on the things they are in control of instead of focusing on things often out of their control, such as scores, judges, or competitors. With some work and intention, it is possible to reprogram your brain to prioritise learning and growth over external results.
10. The internal pressure in performance situations is often accompanied by a fear of failure. Perhaps you learnt in your childhood that failure has negative consequences, and so you try to avoid it. This fear of failure can be crippling and hold us back when we need to be confident and courageous in order to perform to our potential. A simple yet powerful change in mindset can help overcome this fear of failure. The change is seeing a mistake not as failure, but as precious feedback to be used for your personal mission to learn and grow.
Remember: mistake = feedback, not failure.
See it this way and feel the pressure lessen noticeably the next time you're about to perform at an important event.