

CONTROLLING ANXIETY

THE ART OF THINKING EFFECTIVELY



Is your mind playing tricks on you as you prepare for your triathlon swim? You can think yourself out of a negative mindset. Here's how...

TRIATHLON — A SOURCE OF STRESS?

Ask a triathlete to reveal their least-favourite discipline and more often than not, you will hear the words ‘the swim’ — it can be the most feared in a competitive situation. Whether the swim is open water or in the pool, even the most confident of swimmers can experience anxiety.

Anxiety can give triathletes a range of physical symptoms, such as stomach butterflies, sweaty palms, tense muscles, nausea or restlessness. Associated negative thoughts can also be commonplace. Recognising physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety is the first step to working on improving your mindset. For triathletes, mentally, the swim can present several unique challenges.

Open water or pool? Triathletes have many challenges!

In open water, the start can be intimidating with a mass of swimmers, scrums of flailing legs and attacking elbows. An inability to see in dark murky water can be challenging for some, the technicality of sighting (which can potentially take you off course and cause you to swim further) is a difficult test and even the temperature can be problematic — it can be really cold! In addition, wetsuits can cause claustrophobia, be uncomfortable

or restrictive for some swimmers and affect breathing — all factors which can contribute to anxiety-provoking thoughts.

Pool-based triathlons are also not without challenges. The heat, crowd, and noise can feel overwhelming and difficulties of navigating clockwise or anti-clockwise up and down lanes, surrounded by many other swimmers in close proximity can invoke pressure and stress. Often, triathletes start races based on their predicted finishing time, and it can be daunting to have a swimmer nipping at your heels or trying to overtake you in a narrow lane. It may also mean that you are catching up with other swimmers in your lane and having to navigate around them, which can affect your pacing.

Triathletes really do have a lot to contend with, and swimming is only the first discipline! Take some time to think about these swimming challenges and ask yourself whether your thoughts are helpful or not helpful to your performance.



DO YOU THINK IN ANY OF THESE WAYS?

Here is a list of thinking types that can provoke anxiety:

1 DON'TS. Does the language you use to talk to yourself include words that end with ‘n’ts’, such as ‘shouldn’t’, ‘wouldn’t’, ‘mustn’t’ or ‘didn’t’? Examples of these are saying things such as, ‘I shouldn’t tense up at the start

of the race’; ‘don’t set off too quickly!’ or ‘I mustn’t get caught up among loads of swimmers’. Here, you are focusing on what not to do, rather than what you can do!

2 LIMITATIONS. These are barriers, which are self-imposed about future performance, expressed as statements often preceded with

‘can’t’, ‘never’ or ‘doubt’. Examples of these are saying things to yourself such as, ‘I can’t hope to get a personal best today with the water so rough’; ‘I’ve never swum well in really cold water’; ‘I doubt I will have a good race today in these conditions’. Limitations such as these fail to challenge what is possible for you.

3 PUT DOWNS. These are statements relating to perceived weaknesses or errors in a previous performance, for example, ‘my technique was poor’ or ‘I went out too fast and ruined my race’. Put downs can begin to dominate thinking and overshadow the positives in a performance.

4 WHAT-IFS. These describe a negative loop;

the ‘worry’ is phrased in terms of a rhetorical question. The question is repeatedly posed, for example, ‘what if I swim badly today?’ or ‘what if my goggles come off in the mass start?’

5 SELF-DOUBT. These are expressions of doubt about having the ability to perform well. They may reflect a concern over physical readiness, technical ability or psychological

preparedness, for example, ‘I’m not breathing correctly’; ‘this wetsuit is too tight’ or ‘I can’t do this’.

6 LETTING OTHERS DOWN. This is a concern about how other people may be perceived to have judged your performance, so, ‘my coach will be disappointed in me’; or ‘I’ve let myself down by going completely off course’.



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Do you recognise any of these types of negative thoughts or worries in yourself? Follow the advice below; it can help you to relieve anxiety symptoms, think more effectively in times of stress and improve your performance...

Think yourself positive

Instead of... don’ts – Re-phrase
Instead of focusing on what not to do, focus on what you can do. So in place of thinking “don’t set off too quickly”, tell yourself to “start off steadily”.

Instead of... limitations – Believe it’s possible
Spend time focusing on what you are doing, rather than what you are not doing, so rather than honing in on your error of going off course during the swim, think about your technique as much as possible to ensure you are swimming as efficiently as you can.

Instead of... put downs – See it as unstable
It is important to develop a view that put downs are not permanent, weaknesses can be improved upon and recent lapses in form are unstable. Once you have identified a put down, commit it to the past, for example, “my technique was awful”, rather than “my technique is awful”. Imagine if someone else spoke to you in the way that you speak to yourself; would you be as accepting of him or her putting you down in the same way?

Instead of... what ifs – So, ifs
Prefixing the ‘what if’ question with ‘so, if...’ encourages a response based on what you can do to enhance your performance. For example, the anxiety-laden statement “what if my goggles get knocked askew at the start of my open-water race and I can’t see?” becomes a problem-solving one such as, “so, if my goggles get knocked at the start... I will move to the side, take three deep breaths, then carry on”.

Instead of... self-doubts – Flip it over!
Some aspects of self-doubt and performance may be framed in negative ways, yet it is always possible to shed a more positive light on the experience, for example, “I am not the slowest swimmer in the world, it just so happens there are a lot of people who are quicker than me”.

Instead of... letting others down – Be your own judge
It’s vital to remember that if you have concern over how you may be judged or evaluated by others, firstly it’s impossible to control the way they think, and, secondly, people will make judgements irrespective of how you perform in the swim — however good you are, someone, somewhere will be critical. The way people judge you is their concern, not yours.