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Life Stress and CrossFit

Dawn Fletcher explains how too much stress can affect performance and what you can do to relax.

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The “stress family” is not a fun one. This family consists of anxiety, fear, pressure, nervousness and panic. Each one of these components can negatively affect your CrossFit performance.

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Pressure can make athletes crack, or it can produce outstanding performances.

Numerous theories (drive theory, inverted-U hypothesis, individualized zones of optimal functioning theory) attempt to describe how stress affects performance. The bottom line is that every individual has a unique reaction to stress. It's likely that small amounts of stress may help your performance and larger amounts of stress will negatively affect your ability to perform at high levels.

Let's take a deeper look at the components of stress and the mental skills you can practice to help negate any decreases in performance outcomes.

Stressed Out?

Literature in the field of sports psychology commonly expresses that a certain amount of stress is necessary for performance. Our bodies initially respond to stressors by releasing hormones that prepare our bodies to respond. This is known as the "flight or fight" response. These hormonal and physiological changes provide an increase in energy and awareness and can therefore have a positive effect on our ability to perform. As all CrossFitters know,

there is only a certain amount of stress that we can handle. When any member of the stress family becomes chronic and/or increased, the stress response is no longer beneficial.

Some commonly noted somatic (pertaining to the body) and cognitive (pertaining to the mind) signs of increased stress are cold and clammy hands, constant need to urinate, profuse sweating, negative thoughts and self-talk, inability to focus, headaches, butterflies or nausea, increased muscle tension or pain, difficulties sleeping, energy loss, and burnout.

Any aspect of life that becomes stressful may lead to negative responses that can decrease CrossFit performance.

These signs can be brought on by stress at work, home or even training stress from CrossFit. Although the stress mechanism may be very different (e.g., a challenging day at work vs. seeing Fran as the WOD), the somatic and/or cognitive stress response may be exactly the same (e.g., inability to focus on task at hand). As one can see, any aspect of life that becomes stressful may lead to negative responses that can decrease CrossFit performance.

Many CrossFit movements require composure, finesse and absolute concentration, and it's easy to see how each stress symptom might negatively affect your performance. Most athletes are able to cope with one or two of these signs of increased stress and may not sense any threat to performance. A culmination of these symptoms may lead to an excessive amount of stress, and over time that may have a detrimental influence on many areas of function, performance and health. As these symptoms accumulate, athletes have a very hard time regulating and controlling the negative effects.

Psychology has been studied and used in sport performance scenarios to describe, explain and predict behaviors. Mental performance training is necessary in order to halt or negate the negative impacts of stress on performance. I have broken down mental performance training into three segments that are expressed as a simple continuum:

Awareness → Development → Application

This basically means you need to become aware of the thoughts in your mind (or your mental processes), develop and learn skills to improve control of your mental processes, and then apply those skills during performance situations. CrossFit athletes should constantly tune in to their mental state and continue to find ways to improve on their mental control under pressure or during performance scenarios.

Awareness

The first step of mental performance training is becoming aware of your mental processes. When dealing with the stress family, it is important to become very aware of what is causing you any negative thoughts or emotions and how exactly it may be affecting your performance. As an athlete, you must become aware of the direction of your stress. Is it facilitative (benefitting your performance by increasing your arousal levels) or debilitating (hindering your performance)?

There are some very simple steps to becoming more aware of your excessive life stressors:

1. When stress arrives, write down any causes or triggers for it.
2. Share these notes with a coach or someone who is an emotional support in your life.
3. Take note about when stress is occurring and how it makes you feel. It is important to tune in to which situations cause you stress and especially any negative emotions. You may also note in your journal how you feel before, during and after a WOD.



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Diaphragmatic Breathing

To test whether you are breathing properly, here's what to do:

Lie down comfortably on your back. Put one hand on your upper chest and your other hand on your abdomen, just above your belly button. Allow your breathing to normalize for a minute, and then notice which hand is moving. The correct way to practice relaxation breathing is by moving your diaphragm, which means the hand on your abdomen should be moving up and down as you breathe. The hand on the chest should be steady.

If you find that the hand on your chest is the one doing the moving, then practice breathing from the diaphragm.



These behaviors will help you become more aware of the stressors in your life and will give you an idea how they affect your performance.

Become fully aware of the exact effect stress has on you.



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Pressure to perform can come from outside factors like crowds, coaches and major competitions.

Other questions you may ask yourself: What thoughts were in your head before, during and after the WOD? How was your self-confidence? Were you under-aroused or overly stimulated for the WOD? Did you experience any physiological responses such as clammy hands, the need to urinate or increased heart rate?

This is all part of the awareness aspect of mental performance training. Until you are very aware and accepting of your mental processes, you cannot begin to take proper steps in ensuring that you gain control of them. Become fully aware of the exact effect stress has on you somatically and cognitively.

Development

The second step in mental performance training is development. This involves acquiring and learning mental strategies that will help you maintain emotional control. Now that you have become more aware of your mental processes and how they affect your performance, you can begin learning and developing skills that will help you control your thoughts and emotions (aka stress) specifically in a performance situation. Development strategies:

1. Re-evaluate your goals to make sure they are SMART—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-bound.
2. Explore the demands that are being placed on you from all aspects of your life.
3. Stay closely connected to people who are supportive of your goals and lifestyle and weed out those who constantly demand too much emotional energy and are unsupportive.
4. Develop healthy alternatives outside of your typical work/CrossFit schedule.
5. Practice common relaxation techniques such as meditation, listening to soothing music, visualization, relaxation imagery sessions (example below), massage and diaphragmatic breathing.

A mental performance coach can really help an athlete develop these particular strategies, similar to how your CrossFit coach helps you with new physical skills.

Application

The last step of mental performance training is application. This simply means maintaining control of your mental processes and applying proper mental strategies in a performance setting.

Relaxation Imagery Script

It would be best to record yourself reading this script in a slow, steady and relaxed tone, then play it. Otherwise have someone read it to you.

To begin, choose a comfortable position, seated or lying down. Make sure that you have no distractions around you and are not trying to do anything besides focusing on these words and allowing yourself to become relaxed. Get comfortable, preparing to relax. Start to relax your body.

Take a deep diaphragmatic breath in, and breathe out. Continue to breathe deeply, slowly and comfortably. Count down now, from 10 to 1. As you count each number, you can become more relaxed. Let's begin:

10. Let your muscles start to relax.
9. The tips of your toes are warming and a sense of relaxation is spreading through your body.
8. Your muscles are becoming more and more relaxed.
7. Notice your mind drifting, becoming more relaxed.
6. You are relaxing even further now, letting everything go, feeling peaceful.
5. A warm feeling of relaxation and love is spreading through your body, pleasant and relaxed.
4. You are becoming more and more relaxed and peaceful, tranquil.
3. Free your mind to relax.
2. You are feeling completely relaxed.
1. You are now in a deep state of relaxation. Very deeply relaxed, comfortable, loved, secure and happy. Allow this feeling of relaxation to grow, becoming even more relaxed, calm and peaceful.

Keep with you the feeling of relaxation and security as you think about CrossFitting. Notice your reaction, physically and emotionally, to the concept of competing. Perhaps in the past this has been a source of anxiety for you. Notice now how you can be relaxed, calm and confident while thinking about CrossFitting. Calm, relaxed, confident. Peaceful and relaxed.

In the future, you will know that the stress symptoms you may experience when faced with performance scenarios indicate excitement. This is a positive feeling, filling you with energy. The thought of performing fills you with good feelings of excitement and anticipation. You may even be feeling a bit excited now, just thinking about CrossFitting. Let this feeling subside as you return to a state of deep relaxation.

Take a deep diaphragmatic breath in. Hold and exhale. Breathe in and out. In, out. Continue to breathe deeply, noticing how you relax a bit more each time you exhale. Breathe in and relax, breathing out. In, relax. Keep breathing slowly and calmly.

You can relax like this any time you need to. Whenever you want to calm down, you can breathe deeply and relax ... like you are relaxing now.

Now that you have completed relaxation guided imagery, take a few moments to reawaken your mind and body, gradually becoming more alert.





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You can set yourself up for success by preparing for the pressure of competition.

The three parts of mental training are meant to be continually cycled, which is why they are displayed as a continuum. Once you become aware of your processes, then practice ways to improve your mental strategies. Then you must apply the learned strategies when it counts (pressure or performance situations). You can always continue to become more aware of how your mind and emotions affect your performance outcomes. Mental training is very similar to physical training. You never stop improving if you keep learning and practicing.

As I said, a certain amount of stress is necessary for optimal performance. Too little stress is expressed through boredom and lack of motivation. A particular amount of stress provides alertness and activation that improve performance. But too much anxiety, fear, pressure, nervousness or panic can drastically decrease performance.

As CrossFitters, we are concerned about outcome, performance and improving ourselves. It is important to become aware of stress and the impact it has. Practice and apply mental strategies that control and limit the negative affects of the stress family: 3, 2, 1 ... Go!



About the Author

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