

## ANXIETY

Competition can cause athletes to react both physically and mentally in a manner, which can negatively affect their performance abilities. From a physical perspective, these include:

- Increased muscle tension
- Trouble breathing
- Increased fatigue
- Reduced muscle coordination
- From a mental perspective, these include
- Reduced concentration
- Impaired decision making and tactical judgement
- Reduced confidence
- Giving up mentally

Stress, arousal and anxiety are terms used to describe this condition. Most competitive tennis players have felt feelings of nervousness or anxiety at some point, and many have left the court feeling they “choked” or “bottled it”.

Even the top players in the world admit to being anxious at times when the pressure is great, but they usually have developed coping strategies to deal with their anxiety.



## Regulating Anxiety

The key point is not to eliminate feelings of anxiety since some anxiety can benefit performance. Instead, it is crucial to control and manage feelings of anxiety more effectively.

Reducing muscle tension is particularly important, because muscle tension not only impairs coordination and timing, it also uses your energy because your muscles are working overtime. There are a number of relaxation tips that have been developed to help players cope more effectively with excess anxiety and nervousness.

### 1. Slow down – take time between points

One of the things that excess anxiety often does to players is to cause them to play too quickly. When the pressure starts to build, and feelings of frustration and anger surface, one of the easiest (but least effective) ways of coping is to rush and get off the court.

This may occur because anxiety can be uncomfortable, and one way to get rid of it is to get away from the situation causing the anxiety. Therefore, when a player experiences feelings of anxiousness and tension, and starts rushing their serves, they should walk to the back of the court and play with their strings, go for the towel, or walk to the ball farthest away from them to use for the next point.

An even more effective way to slow down is to develop consistent pre-serve and pre-service returns routines. This enables you to keep composed and slow down under pressure.

### 2. Breath control

One of the simplest ways to cope with pressure is through proper breathing. Research has indicated that in pressure situations, players do not coordinate their breathing patterns with their stroke production.

Often they hold their breath while performing (thus increasing muscle tension) rather than breathing out (thus decreasing muscle tension). Some players accentuate breathing out by 'grunting' when striking the ball to ensure that they do breathe out on every shot.

Furthermore, deep breathing from the diaphragm between points will reduce accumulated pressure and help keep the player relaxed.

### **3. Set up stressful situations in practice**

A very effective way to prepare for stressful situations is to occasionally practice under pressure. As you come more accustomed to playing under these conditions, you will not be negatively affected by pressure during competitive situations.

For example, instead of simply practicing groundstrokes, try to get a certain number of strokes in a row to fall past the service line as you practice keeping the ball deep. If you hit a ball short before you reach your target you have to start over.

As you get closer to your target the pressure starts to build, which is similar to a competitive match.

### **4. Have fun – enjoy the situation**

Most top players look forward to pressure situations rather than fearing them. Keeping the enjoyment of tennis foremost in one's mind can help to prevent burnout, especially in younger players.

This involves keeping winning in perspective and focusing on the experience without undue concern for the outcome. Remember, 'it's only a game', and games are meant to be fun.