

Actions—Not How You Feel—Win Games

How to focus on actions required for success instead of distracting emotions.

Posted November 7, 2021 | Reviewed by Jessica Schrader

KEY POINTS

- Learning to accept discomfort is crucial for athletic and other performance success.
- Anxiety and/or fear may be magnified when we dwell on them or try to make them go away.
- Confidence won't always be there when someone is competing, and that is OK.



Olympic athletes may not always feel comfortable when competing—that's OK.

Source: Ralf Roletschek, 12-01-2020h/Wikimedia Commons

“Be comfortable being uncomfortable,” advised self-help author Peter McWilliams. “It may get tough, but it’s a small price to pay for living a dream.”

Wise advice for sport participants at any competitive level. It’s also a good idea for anyone involved with skill-intensive activity and/or stressful, dangerous situations that can trigger discomfort—usually in the form of anxiety, fear, or both.

Comfort is nice when it happens. Problem is, you cannot depend on it being there, especially in competitive and/or high-stress situations.

Participants in such activities or circumstances must be willing to have—and accept—discomfort. We often struggle when uncomfortable by dwelling on the unwanted feelings, trying to make them go away, or trying to ignore them. All that increases focus on the discomfort, thus making it worse. It’s like pouring gasoline on a fire.

When inevitable discomfort shows up, many people stress out, causing them to dwell on their unwanted feelings and associated thoughts, thus becoming distracted from the task at hand. They spend more time trying to chase away or change discomfort—and the thoughts that tag along with it—than on the actions necessary for what they are doing.

Wrong focus.

Actions, Not Comfort

“You don’t win medals by having great and confident thoughts (and feelings),” explained Kelly Dekker, a Dutch sport and performance psychologist. “You win medals by doing the actions required in a competition.” Dekker works with a variety of athletes, including Olympians.

“Confidence (and comfort) as a feeling doesn’t matter,” Dekker continued. “At the end of the day, you must stick to the things you want to do, not on how you feel.”

Identify and focus on required actions—not on your feelings and associated thoughts—to achieve optimal performance.

“Do you know what it’s like playing in a Super Bowl?” Minnesota Vikings punter Britton Colquitt asked me a few years ago when playing for the Cleveland Browns. Given that I never played in the National Football League, I had no idea.



Punter Britton Colquitt in his days with the Denver Broncos back in 2011

Source: Wiki Commons/photo by Jeffrey Beall 08-06-2011

“You’re terrified,” Colquitt answered his own question. “It gets in your mind that ‘if I screw this up, I could lose the Super Bowl.’” A surprising revelation from an accomplished NFL veteran with extensive playoff experience and two Super Bowl appearances under his belt.

As author Stephen King says about writing, “the scariest moment is always just before you start. After that, things only get better.” That’s true of many other endeavors—including sports.

Instead of focusing on terrified feelings or on making mistakes, Colquitt focused on one action. "Catch the ball," he explained. "You're almost, like, frozen before that snap comes. I would be telling myself, 'just catch the ball.' Then my body and the work I've done kicked in."

Distracting thoughts and uncomfortable feelings of terror were certainly there for Colquitt, but he chose to focus on one simple action of his job. Thus, the intensity and impact of his distracting feelings and thoughts were neutralized. In-the-moment focus on an action quashed unwanted emotional flames instead of pouring gasoline on them.

Prepare for Discomfort

Whether you're getting ready for a game, high-stakes competition, writing, tryout, audition, dance recital, the first day at a new school, job interview, open-heart surgery, etc., recognize and accept that you're likely to experience uncomfortable feelings and accompanying bothersome and distracting thoughts.

You might not end up feeling the confidence you'd like, but that's OK.

What is confidence, anyways? It's nothing more than the absence of anxiety and associated thoughts of self-doubt, two things that are likely to show up in the above situations.

Prepare to accept and be willing to not be confident and to have uncomfortable feelings and associated thoughts. As explained earlier, trying to make unwanted feelings and thoughts go away by changing or ignoring them usually causes us to dwell on them more, thus magnifying the discomfort and distracting us from the actions required for success.

Next, notice discomfort and associated thoughts when they show up, but let them be and focus on the actions required for competition. Such actions include staying calm and performance-specific behaviors.

Staying calm when uncomfortable allows focus on the actions necessary for effective performance. Critical to staying calm is slow, rhythmic breathing. Military special ops forces, such as the United States Navy SEALs, receive extensive breathing effectiveness training.

Professional athletes engage in rhythmic, slowed breathing. Look for it at highly visible moments when watching pro sports—MLB pitchers before each pitch, NBA players before a foul shot. Continuous slow, rhythmic breathing throughout competition allows for smooth, effective execution of performance actions and skills.

“Slow is smooth, smooth is fast,” as Navy Seals like to say.

Give slow, rhythmic breathing a try. If it’s good enough for professional athletes and Navy Seals, it’s good enough for adult weekend warriors and youth athletes.

Breathe in slowly through your nose until your lungs are full and then push it out through your mouth slower than you took it in. Simple. Time yourself and see how many breaths you take in a minute (air full-in and full-out counts as a single breath). Believe it or not, five and a half breaths a minute is considered optimal, according to scientific data shared by James Nestor (2020).

Routine is another thing to help accomplish, maintain, or re-establish calm. Pre-performance and in-performance routines are two groupings of action steps that keep performers focused on what they are doing, rather than dwelling on uncomfortable, unwanted thoughts and feelings.

Pre-performance routines involve those things to do the day before, or on the day of, the performance. They are action steps taken to get ready and can include breathing, meal preparation, stretching, film study, sleep, equipment and uniform preparation, visualization, etc. Pre-performance routines can also include activities that have nothing to do with the performance itself but can provide calm. Listening to music, socializing, reading, or taking a walk, etc., are a few examples.

In-competition routines consist of actions that maintain or regain calm and effective focus. Watch MLB hitters before and after pitches, to get an idea of what in-competition routines look like. Watch professional golfers before and after each shot.

Finally, develop a list of one to four simple actions pertinent to your sport/performance to focus on when doing your thing—like Colquitt focusing on ‘catch the ball.’ A few examples: See ball, hit ball; follow-through; breathe slowly and rhythmically; aim small, miss small; pause at the top of the swing (golf).

Define and write down your action steps and bring the list to practices, rehearsals, games, etc. Practice and review the routines whenever you can. Finally, use them during performances. Adjust these actions to account for differing competitive situations. Consider penalty kills as opposed to power plays in ice hockey, as an example.

Get Out of Your Internal Experience and Play the Game

Remember that medals, victories, and most other accomplishments are not achieved with confident thoughts and feelings. They are earned with the actions required for competition. When feelings—and the thoughts that tag along with them—show up, accept and be willing to have them. Stay calm and focused on the actions required to do your job.

Be comfortable being uncomfortable and you will own success.

References

Nestor, J. (2020). *Breath*. Riverhead Books: New York, NY