Athletic performance anxiety

Dear Alice,

I compete in an individual sport. The problem is that on the day of a major competition, I have really bad indigestion. Sometimes, I have to run to the bathroom every half hour for a bowel movement! Besides being annoying, disgusting, and a little embarrassing, this interrupts my competition and adds unneeded stress. Why is this happening and what can I do to prevent it?

Signed,
Dashin' to the Bathroom

Answer

Dear Dashin' to the Bathroom,

It sounds like your angst about competing in athletics is being played out in your gastrointestinal system! Stomach rumblings from nervousness and stress are often linked to performances of all kinds: athletic, theatrical, academic, or professional. The short-term stress response known as "fight or flight," causes muscle tension and acid production. For some, this leads to stomach discomfort, diarrhea, or constipation.

Rehearsal imagery is one technique widely used by athletes and performance artists to enhance focus and settle the proverbial butterflies. It can also be used successfully by the rest of us who get jittery thinking about the thrill of victory... or the agony of defeat. Here’s how: a few weeks prior to your competition, make a written list of the who, what, when, where, and how of the upcoming event. Who will be there? What will they be doing, wearing, and saying? What time of day will the event take place? Where will you be: a school, a gym, a stadium? How will you look, stand, run, and perform in comparison to others around you?

When your long list is finished, close your eyes and visualize each of these factors in your mind’s eye. Imagine in great detail your actual movements, and how your body will feel as you proceed in your glorious performance. Think of yourself sprinting around the track, following the ball from your hand into the hoop, delivering a slice serve to a specific spot on your opponent’s court, passing other bikers, and pacing yourself up and down hills.

Why does rehearsal imagery help reduce performance-related tension and improve the quality of the task at hand? Stress can be generated by fear of the unknown, and by new demands and challenges. By imagining that you are really there, even if the actual details are unknown to you, you are familiarizing yourself with what might come, as well as how you see yourself in
that situation. This strategy also reduces the element of surprise, which goes a long way when you want to reduce stress. Practice rehearsal imagery once or twice a day right up until your event. You can even tape record your description of the event and play it back, if that's easier. (Leave out the bathroom part.) If possible, make a site visit to where you will be competing. This can make the imagery that much more real.

Other options include over-the-counter anti-diarrheal medications. A health care provider may be able to prescribe an anti-anxiety medicine that can help, too. You may also find talking to a counselor about your anxiety to be helpful as well.

You may also want to avoid certain foods before competition that might upset your stomach or make your symptoms worse such as excess caffeine, fatty foods, or dairy products. It may take some time to figure out which foods work best for you, but establishing a set routine and using rehearsal imagery before competition could help you cut down on stress and unwanted stomach jitters.

Good luck!

Alice!
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