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A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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Anxiety

Daryl B. Marchant

Daryl, I want you to walk down the end of the street and meet Julie [older sister] on her way home from school. There is a dog, and she’s a bit scared of it; she’ll feel much better if you’re there to walk her past that part.  

Merle Marchant, circa 1964

The above quote might not be word perfect. My prevailing recollection of the underlying meaning was, “You’re a big brave boy, and your five-year-old sister, who is scared of being bitten by the nasty local dog, needs your help.” Never mind that I was only four years old, without dog experience, and apparently on the verge of transforming from the unconditioned response of “no fear of dogs” to the conditioned response of a lifelong trepidation and avoidance of anything remotely canine. Amazing, what was my Mum thinking!? Clearly, she had not been subjected to the usual undergraduate psychology learning theory. A bell isn’t needed to make a dog salivate; a small child on a fool’s errand will do equally well. Nowadays, I don’t necessarily walk to the other side of the street when I see a large dog coming my way; I run (only joking). Seriously though, I have never since felt comfortable around dogs and generally avoid them. I mention the story because it is the first I can remember of experiencing anxiety, and because, even some 45 years later, it is vividly etched in my memory. The adage that psychologists enter psychology in an attempt to better understand themselves certainly resonates for me in that I was a relatively anxious child.

Although I will focus largely on sport and competition anxiety in this chapter, the dog story is a reminder that we are all faced with anxiety-evoking situations from an early age. This chapter is largely concerned with working through the process of counseling, including the initial referral or discussion of anxiety with an athlete and the many issues and questions that will inform the work. The questions, issues, and challenges that practitioners and clients negotiate are the main focus here.
Introduction

In reflecting on approximately 50 years of continuous sport anxiety investigations, there was a naïve quality to the early research with uni-dimensional models developed, reworked, and then eventually superseded by more complex, yet similarly inadequate models. A sign of the growing maturity of the field of sport psychology was when researchers took the lead from mainstream psychology and started examining sport anxiety as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Currently, there is a diverse range of published literature compared to the early research that was largely experimental and quasi-experimental conducted from a narrow quantitative paradigm. I have written this chapter from a practitioner’s perspective, and the focus is largely on working through how we might frame our collaborations with anxious athletes. Rather than explaining the fundamentals of anxiety theories, I only touch on the models used in the research in the context of theory informing practice. Undoubtedly, a sport psychology practitioner must have at least a passing understanding of the vast sport anxiety literature. For early career sport psychologists, in particular, there is considerable value in reviewing the key or hallmark sport anxiety papers (e.g., Martens, 1971). Experienced practitioners also sometimes need reminding that new approaches and critical knowledge are regularly being developed and published, and staying abreast of such developments is professionally enriching.

Framing anxiety: complexities in working with anxious athletes

In sport psychology, we are often working in the context of athletes or organizations wanting quick-fix solutions. Sometimes, there is a simple solution; a reliance on quick or generic approaches, however, can trivialize the work. Our training and experience should enable us to provide individualized anxiety interventions that represent state-of-the-art in relation to the currently available evidence in our field.

By the time an athlete seeks or requests help for an anxiety-related issue, there is usually a rich history of unsuccessful (or partially successful) attempts to cope with anxiety. This history needs to be respected and used where applicable. Often, in trainee sport psychologists, I see an overeagerness to move to solutions, treatments, and interventions without fully understanding the personal history and appreciating the unique perspectives and experiences that each client brings to therapy. Perhaps this tendency is borne from practitioners’ anxieties around their own skills or insecurities about working in an open framework. Irrespective of the reasons, to provide meaningful solutions for athletes and coaches, superficial or abbreviated processes are generally suboptimal and may have quick, but not long-lasting effects.

Applied sport psychologists can enhance the likelihood of positive outcomes by intentionally managing the working relationship (see Chapter 1) from the outset. Each time we commit to working with a client we embark on a journey together. This journey might be over almost before it begins, unless we attend to some basic, yet essential steps. Many years ago an academic sport psychologist talking about his applied work said to me, “I don’t know what it is with clients, but many of them only show up for the first couple of consultations.” Although clients can be unreliable, there was clearly an unrecognized problem with how the sport psychologist was framing his work at the outset. Setting-up includes: the initial contact or referral process, managing the working space, introductions, first impressions, sharing expectations, and developing a working alliance. Each step deserves careful
consideration, and, when done well will lead to a positive climate for working together, but when done poorly will result in obstruction, confusion, or sabotage of the working relationship.

Logistics and practicalities almost always influence the approaches we take and how we deliver our services. How has the client been referred? Who is funding the services? Is the athlete in season or in a pre-season phase? In what type of environment will the consultations take place (e.g., office, coffee shop/café, sporting venue)? There is little sense planning a lengthy series of psycho-educational sessions when time, resources, or other issues preclude the likelihood of the full intervention being delivered. Poor attention or awareness of practicalities can hijack the working alliance and undermine the practitioners’ confidence and clients’ motivation to commit to working through the issues.

Because anxiety in sport is multifaceted, exploration or data-gathering is foundational. Most sport psychologists, because of their research and applied training, will feel relatively comfortable in this exploration phase. The initial intake will generally start with demographic, personal, and sport background and at some point move to the presenting anxiety-related issue. Exploration will not only entail polished counseling skills (e.g., attending, active listening, empathic reflection), but also working with anxiety through linking related themes such as stress, arousal, coping, and past history of anxiety experiences. Fortunately, there is an enormous amount of published literature available on sport anxiety, but the sheer volume of literature can be intimidating. Sport psychology researchers have constantly proposed and tested relevant models ranging from arousal-performance explanations to multidimensional anxiety theory. Without a reasonable understanding of the many conceptual advances that have occurred in sport anxiety research, the practitioner’s efforts will most likely lead to limited positive (or even negative) outcomes. Leonardo da Vinci’s (n.d.) observation that “he who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast” is relevant here. For busy consulting psychologists engrossed in applied work, it can be a challenge to stay abreast of the published literature.

**Getting a handle on the causes and effects of sport anxiety**

A central purpose of the exploration process is to jointly discuss, sometimes in considerable detail, anxiety experiences and anxiety-related issues. I liken sport anxiety work to solving a jigsaw puzzle. Rarely are we are faced with a simple 200-piece puzzle, often the puzzle is, metaphorically, 1,000 pieces or more of a relatively unexplored landscape. The simple puzzle might suit neophyte sport psychologists who, being somewhat anxious themselves, are looking to apply basic theory and interventions in a relatively straightforward manner. More experienced and skilled practitioners might be drawn to 1,000-piece anxiety puzzles with unfamiliar terrain, complications, contradictions, and entrenched resistances. Undue haste in moving toward possible solutions without thorough exploration can be counterproductive. In looking for guidance in the types of issues worthy of deeper exploration, the published literature is particularly helpful. Quality research is available in peer reviewed journals relating to virtually all the exploration issues that, for brevity, are simply listed below:

- **Susceptibility, underling causes, triggers, and context (sporting task, level of competition, or environment) – possible parallels in general and other performance domains,**
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state-trait anxiety indicators, defining events, external factors, assessing associated anxiety clusters (e.g., arousal, stress, fear, pressure, self-consciousness, choking, yips);
- Effects – the range of cognitive, somatic, and behavioral manifestations, acute/chronic anxiety, performance facilitation and debilitation, directional interpretations, emotional and motivational consequences;
- Maintenance factors – conscious and unconscious motivation to not resolve anxiety-related issues, role of significant others, environments;
- Coping resources – social and environmental support, coping style, resilience;
- Other factors – personal insight, attempts to self-manage anxiety, personality (e.g., neuroticism), knowledge, evidence of overlapping sport psychology themes (e.g., concentration, self-talk, self-confidence, attributions), understanding and expectations of applied sport psychology assistance.

Sport psychologists borrow the term treatment from mainstream psychology, but the term sometimes carries unhelpful connotations, and the word assistance might be preferable. There are no definitive lines around where treatment begins. For example, we need to acknowledge that the process of talking about anxiety-related issues, and being heard by an understanding professional, are beneficial for many clients, albeit anxiety-inducing in the short term only. Depending on the approach taken, the talking might even constitute the central feature of the therapy (e.g., narrative therapy). With sport anxiety work there is quite a range of available treatments, programs, techniques, and interventions. The sport psychology literature is replete with research and evidence about the efficacy of treatments. Most practitioners are aware of frequently used approaches such as progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, breathing exercises, autogenic training, and the suite of cognitive-behavioral methods (e.g., rational–emotive behavior therapy, stress inoculation training). A common theme for the neophyte practitioner is the sometimes unrealistic expectations, and occasionally blind faith, accorded to what amounts to packaged treatment programs without due care in individualizing the treatment in the context of the client's particular needs.

Depending on our psychological orientations, the approaches and interventions can differ substantially. Much of the published sport anxiety literature is essentially cognitive-behavioral with infrequent smatterings of alternative approaches. Our frame of reference might be limited because of the paucity of published sport psychology intervention literature reflecting broader perspectives (e.g., humanistic, existential, psychodynamic, narrative).

Hearing the client’s story

A number of practical issues warrant further consideration including: psychological orientation or paradigm, practitioners’ professional range and skills, integration of client skills, practical considerations, supervision, mentoring, and professional support. Often our approach to therapy is not only guided by our own preferences and expertise but also the working time frame. Athletes who have the time, resources, and patience to commit to long-term therapy are rare.

An initial challenge for the practitioner is in fostering a working alliance whereby negative emotions, such as anxiety, can be discussed openly, authentically, and non-judgmentally. There are some athletes who are especially candid about the effects that their
anxieties are having on their sports performances, enjoyment, and their sense of satisfaction. My overriding experience is that athletes, for a range of reasons, tend to minimize the effects of their anxieties. Anxiety, for many athletes, is linked with negative memories, associations, and experiences that can be mentally difficult to share and reconstruct openly. Furthermore, associated emotions of shame, guilt, and embarrassment are often close at hand. Barriers to open disclosure may impede our progress or frustrate our attempts to help athletes. These barriers might represent a lack of trust or confidence in the sport psychologist or in sport psychology. Barriers might also stem from inner struggles to fully acknowledge anxiety, fears of admitting what might be perceived as a weakness, or poor timing with athletes (for myriad reasons) not wanting to work through the issue at present. Also, sometimes athletes unrealistically desire an abbreviated consulting exchange with the hope of a quick outcome in keeping with pressing competition commitments.

A competing athlete is often attempting, simultaneously, to manage the impinging anxiety and trying to foster a positive mindset, whereby negative thoughts and emotions are downplayed. In working with anxiety, we frequently rely on the retrospective recall of clients that, although not deliberately distorted, often entails elements of impression management that diminish the conscious acceptance and verbalization of anxiety. Unless the anxiety is severe and essentially crippling in terms of performance, the reality is that many athletes do not seek professional support.

At some point, usually in the intake session, the client will start to raise anxiety-related themes. Although it may be tempting to dive right into a detailed account of anxiety issues, generally I continue the intake consult taking note of other topics of therapeutic interest. Once I have established the athlete is being affected by anxiety or related issues (e.g., stress, arousal, poor coping), I will start to devise a plan within a particular framework. Another series of self-questions are salient at this point. What approach should I take to fully understand the etiology of the anxiety? For example, will a case history focused on anxiety-inducing events be useful? To what extent are others (e.g., coaches, parents, partners) involved in terms of instigating, reinforcing, understanding, or managing the anxiety? How does the pattern of anxiety being presented fit with examples from previous consultations? What level of self-insight is the client displaying? How do the issues being raised fit with the vast body of available anxiety research including performance-arousal theories, underlying causes and effects of anxiety, multidimensional anxiety theory, and treatment choices? What broad theoretical approach (e.g., cognitive-behavioral, psychodynamic) will frame the treatment? Will observation of the athlete training or competing be useful in understanding how this athlete experiences anxiety? Would administering any of the available anxiety-related tests add to the assessment? These questions and others might best fit under the general aim of what to me is “dwelling in the problem.” That is, gathering information, reflecting, observing, developing, and testing tentative hypotheses.

The Edmonton fog: the palpitating effects of anxiety with rifle shooters

When completing my master’s research at the University of Alberta in the early 1990s, I was working with a small group of rifle shooters. I had the good fortune to be collecting
heart-rate data during the Canadian National Championships when, prior to the first round, a dense fog descended on the shooting range. The ensuing 30 minutes of observation taught me plenty about the realities of anxiety and the range of individual responses. The targets became almost impossible to distinguish at 50 meters; the shooters became anxious, and heart rates escalated. Not surprisingly, shooting performances were relatively poor, but some of the shooters adapted quickly and effectively whereas others appeared to be ill equipped mentally to deal with this unexpected event. The Edmonton fog reinforced how useful first-hand observation can be. In later years when working with anxiety-related issues, I have drawn on lessons learned in the circumstances that morning in Edmonton. I expect other practitioners will have similar experiences where they have witnessed events first hand and gained new insights into how anxiety can manifest in high-level competition. Such learning is not necessarily restricted to situations where we are insiders working directly with athletes. For example, attending high-level sports events as a spectator or observer, although not affording direct interaction with athletes, still represents excellent opportunities to observe athletes coping with pressure and self-managing arousal, stress, and anxiety.

**Choking and anxiety**

The term choking is closely associated with anxiety and inevitably, for some clients, an assessment of anxiety symptoms will lead to the question: Is this athlete experiencing general anxiety or the more extreme anxiety response of choking? Although there has been a good deal of research on choking in recent years, a differentiation between anxiety and choking is not clear cut. Mesagno, Marchant, and Morris (2008) defined choking as “a critical deterioration in the execution of habitual processes as a result of an elevation in anxiety levels under perceived pressure, leading to a substandard performance” (p. 131) Moreover, the majority of published choking research emphasizes the dual presence of elevated anxiety and ineffective attentional processes in producing choking. Choking is not restricted to sport, and the colloquial understanding of choking is similar to the above definition. For example, popular rapper Eminem recorded the song *Lose Yourself* (2002). The song includes insightful lyrics into a choking experience from the point of view of a musician-performer (the reader can go to any number of websites to read the lyrics, such as [http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/eminem/loseyourself.html](http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/eminem/loseyourself.html)).

*Lose Yourself* can be a really powerful medium when working with athletes who present with choking. The lyrics encapsulate the choking experience and can really resonate with athletes. In a consultation, choosing to use stimulus material, such as the lyrics of a song, or a powerful image, can circumvent extended descriptive dialogue and help the athlete feel understood. In working with a choking-susceptible athlete, many of the same techniques and topics normally used with anxiety and attention regulation are still relevant (imagery, coping skills, building confidence, working on self-talk, moderating expectations, improving mental toughness). Hill, Hanton, Fleming, and Mathews (2009) recommended multimodal treatments that might combine elements of the above. In terms of specific choking reduction techniques, two studies have successfully used routines (Mesagno et al., 2008; see also Chapter 56) and music (Mesagno, Marchant, & Morris, 2009) to counter choking susceptibility.
Facilitating change: managing sport anxiety

There is no shortage of applied research and dedicated text chapters specifically about anxiety in sport to inform practitioners; the challenge is in making the right choices about how best to assist an anxious athlete. Some practitioners may choose to use sport anxiety assessment tools (e.g., Sport Anxiety Scale-2; Smith, Smoll, Cumming, & Grossbard, 2006; Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2; Martens, Vealey, & Burton, 1990). As with all assessment measures, these tools are helpful if they provide additional information, facilitate client-consultant dialogue, or assist in planning individualized treatments.

In working with sport anxiety, we need to draw on what effective coping skills the athlete has already developed. Athletes, often through trial and error, are quite innovative in developing strategies that work for them. Drawing out stories of when the athlete has successfully managed anxiety and performed well can positively change the tone of a consultation. A balanced approach whereby we are focusing on both facilitative and debilitative aspects of anxiety will generally be more engaging to athletes than focusing on debilitative anxiety and failures to cope. A useful initial perspective is thinking in terms of assessing athletes’ existing coping resources as balanced against the strength of their anxiety responses. What mental skills (or physical behaviors) do athletes already employ to cope with anxiety? How adaptive or maladaptive are these coping strategies? By staying attuned to clients, we can gain valuable information about their current cognitive and behavioral patterns and other relevant information (e.g., level of insight, willingness to talk openly, level of distress, motivation to develop coping skills). Encouraging client narratives or stories of particular circumstances where anxiety was prevalent is helpful in contextualizing issues and breaking down barriers to open and honest communication. Being patient in these early stages will often not suit the client who may generally want to move quickly into solutions, but a planned approach should set the conditions for a meaningful and ultimately successful working relationship.

I have largely discussed practical considerations and process matters in working with sport anxiety. Planned approaches will normally involve a practitioner taking a theoretical perspective and consequently drawing on treatment objectives and techniques consistent with the chosen model. The practitioner who chooses to use rational–emotive behavior therapy (REBT: see Ellis & Dryden, 2007) will first need to be well versed in the micro-psychology skills of REBT. Second, to draw maximum therapeutic potential, the therapist imbued with a particular psychological framework should ideally also appreciate the philosophical underpinnings, rather than solely concentrating on treatment modalities. That is, the treatment chosen will be more powerful and authentic when the broader background of the underlying psychological framework is well understood. From an REBT perspective, being familiar with Ellis’ classic contributions, other leading REBT practitioners (e.g., Dryden, 2009) and sport anxiety adaptations of REBT (see Ellis, 1994; Taylor, 1994) would represent a holistic philosophical-practical approach. I suspect that I am not alone in having occasionally taken the time-poor approach of lifting interventions without due consideration of broader philosophical considerations.

Without digressing into the relative merits of different approaches, the treatment of choice will depend on the athlete, the practitioner’s knowledge and skills, and the circumstances. Whatever the treatment used, the likely outcome hinges on a range of factors, such as the micro-skills of the practitioner. I use the term micro-skills in this context to include the
breadth and depth of specific knowledge, understanding, and experience in delivering planned anxiety management treatments. Breadth would likely include the range of approaches a practitioner can confidently use. Depth in this context relates to the proficiency of the practitioner in using the full range of tools generally associated with a particular approach. I mention micro-skills because sometimes there seems to be an assumption, especially with sport psychologist trainees, that employing a particular technique will somehow produce predictable results (rarely the case).

If working on a contractual basis with a sports team, psycho-educational approaches to anxiety management can supplement individual work. Applied strategies, such as conducting interactive workshops or focus groups on anxiety will quickly demonstrate how the array of athlete-driven anxiety management strategies is virtually limitless. When one is contracted to provide services to teams, opportunities are usually available to deliver targeted workshops to younger athletes or athletes particularly needing assistance managing anxiety. Embedding a guided interview with an experienced athlete into a workshop is usually well received by younger athletes, assists in terms of providing sport-specific anxiety management strategies, and helps to normalize anxiety. One of the advantages of being a contracted sport psychologist is the opportunity to work closely with athletes in an ongoing manner and seeing athletes in pre-competition and competition modes where behavior can be readily observed. On the subject of pre-competition preparation, I highly recommend non-obtrusive regular observations of individual preparation routines. Attentively observing the symptoms of anxiety and associated behaviors helps in understanding athlete idiosyncrasies and establishing behavioral patterns and benchmarks. This approach fits well with optimal arousal theories such as individual zones of optimal functioning (Hanin, 2000). Once typical anxiety patterns are established, behavioral departures from this normal pattern can be easily identified. Moreover, when substantial increases or decreases in anxiety are observed they can be placed in the context of the many factors that underpin such changes (e.g., specific opponents, game importance, quality of preparation, dispositional factors). Athletes are usually impressed when sport psychologists can later recall specific details of individual athlete competition preparations and signs of anxiety, especially when referenced with performance levels or other relevant factors. Practitioner–athlete conversations are thus likely to reflect the reality for the athletes, and planned management can be tailored to their specific needs and tendencies.

**Conclusion**

Anxiety remains one of the most intensely researched areas in sport psychology. Sport psychology as a field has moved well beyond the era of simple anxiety-performance theories and generic multi-modal therapies. The practitioner must do more than become familiar with the landmark research and have an appreciation for the many evidence-based treatment approaches and interventions. Flexibility in adapting to the specific circumstances of each athlete who presents with anxiety-related stories, observing and reflecting on each case, and readiness to work through the many challenges that sport anxiety work entails are also essential. See Box 28.1 for key points from this chapter.
Box 28.1

Key points about anxiety

- Anxiety in sport is ubiquitous. Most athletes have personal experiences that will normally enable them to connect their anxieties with triggers, cues, and their past histories.
- Generic treatments (e.g., relaxation) often do not work because sport anxiety is multi-dimensional and dependent on intra-individual circumstances.
- We are entering an era of increased accountability, and practitioners need to consider evidence-based treatments and respond to expectations from organizations about the efficacy of treatments for sport anxiety.
- Case history and in-depth individual work with athletes in the field can provide a useful “hands on” contextual perspective of anxiety-related issues.
- Choking represents the “extreme edge” of anxiety and the current trends toward developing choking-specific interventions should also inform our general understanding of anxiety in sport.
- Athletes may respond well to practitioners who take the time to understand their sports and particularly individual behavioral patterns gleaned from attending and closely observing athletes in competitive situations.
- Anxiety is sometimes best managed by taking a positive perspective and focusing on lessons already learned, assessing coping skills, and attempting to locate zones of optimal performance.

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