

Managing Emotions

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Stress, anger, joy, worry, excitement: Emotions can help or hurt your cycling performance. What's the optimal level for each of your emotions before and during a ride or race? Regulating your emotions could be the mental skill you need the most.

Last month, I explored [Positive Self-Talk](#), the second of the [five core skills of mentally fit athletes](#). This month, we look at Managing Emotions – also known as Arousal Management -- in more depth.

Quick: What comes to mind when you see the word “emotions?” Mr. Spock on Star Trek saying he doesn't have them? Your significant other chastising you for not sharing them? Bill Murray as a lounge singer on Saturday Night Live, singing “feelings.....nothing more than feelings.....?”

According to one of the many “ABC” models in psychology, emotions have three basic components, each of which can vary hugely in intensity: Arousal, Behavior, and Conscious Experience. When we have an emotion, we become physiologically aroused in some way(s): heart rate changes, muscles tense or relax, and so on. We also have some behavioral expression of the emotion: we say something, we frown, we bang our hand (or head) on our powermeter. And, we have a subjective feeling: sadness, fear, anger, joy. When an emotion comes up in the midst of cycling, any of these components can be helpful, neutral, or harmful to our performance.

The Anxiety Family: Worse than the Simpsons

Stress, tension, worry, pressure, fear, anxiety; they're all related, and they are by far the most prevalent emotional obstacles to optimal cycling performance. On the one hand, as any effective public speaker will tell you, a certain amount of anxiety contributes to peak performance. An optimal level of anxiety gives us a welcome “edge” that sharpens our focus and helps us get the most out of ourselves. Yet each of us has a point beyond which anxiety begins to detract from our performance: our anxiety threshold. What happens, in a ride or race, when your anxiety isn't controlled and exceeds your threshold for too long? One or more of the following:

- 1. Distressing sensations or images.** You may feel jittery, nauseous, light-headed, or tense. You may picture being dropped, or losing, or crashing.
- 2. Negative self-talk.** As we saw in [last month's article](#), this perpetuates and fuels anxiety, which tends to fuel more negative self-talk. That's the kind of cycling you want to stop.
- 3. Distraction and errors.** It's instinctive for us humans to divert our focus to anything we believe is threatening. Your distressing thoughts, images, or sensations may attract your attention away from the ride or race for too long, and that could mean missing the break, touching wheels with the rider in front of you, or just plain not having fun.
- 4. Energy loss.** Anxiety loves to consume your energy. If it's running wild, it's eating into your reserves.
- 5. Avoidance.** If something triggers our anxiety, it's instinctive – unless we override that instinct – to try to avoid the trigger. For example, if descending at high speed is making you anxious, you may choose to descend slowly in every ride and race, rather than learning to manage your anxiety.

Manipulating Anxiety

So, when anxiety comes up in your cycling, how do you get it down below your threshold? And

how can you increase the chances that it stays down?

1. Pay attention. Discover as much as you can about how your anxiety works during training and competition, and log your findings. When anxiety comes up, or at least as quickly thereafter as possible (e.g., debriefing yourself after a race), identify whether there were any triggers for it. If there weren't any, note that. Note what effect it had – thoughts, images, sensations, behaviors. On the other hand, if you felt a useful “edge” before or during competition, note that, and note how it felt. You may have spent significant time and money identifying your lactate threshold; make discovering your anxiety threshold just as important.

2. Use your mind and body to reduce on-the-bike physiological arousal. In other words, get more relaxed. Not necessarily *relaxed*, but *more* relaxed. Your tools:

- *Breathing.* For some, deep abdominal breathing induces what [Herbert Benson](#) first called the [relaxation response](#). For others, [nose breathing](#) – used by meditators from a variety of traditions over thousands of years – is more effective.

- *Imagery.* You can train your physiology to respond quickly to images: of winning, of a calm scene, of a calming person, whatever works. Edmund Bourne's [Anxiety & Phobia Workbook](#) is a good resource for visualization and many other anxiety-reduction techniques.

- *Stopping negative self-talk.* At least interrupt the cycle, and at times replace the negative self-talk with calming thoughts, words, or phrases.

3. Reduce your baseline anxiety level. The higher your regular stress level, the more “triggerable” you'll be. In your cycling, one of the most effective tactics you can use to keep your baseline anxiety level down is to develop and use a pre-ride/race routine. It might include progressive muscle relaxation (see Bourne's book for guidelines), visualizing yourself performing well, or calming/focusing self-talk. And of course, how you sleep, eat, and otherwise prepare for your ride/race can have a big impact on your anxiety level at the start line. Incorporating [regular relaxation exercises](#) into your daily life can also make a huge difference. They strengthen your relaxation response just as intervals strengthen your climbing.

Last, But Not Least: Elation, Sadness, and Anger

Although the anxiety family dominates the emotion-management issues that we Mental Training types see, there are other common issues as well. Some tips:

1. Take care to distinguish between anxiety and elation/excitement. When are you effectively “psyched up” and when are you overly “hyped?” If you're blasting Metallica in your iPod and whipping yourself into a frenzy before your ride or race, it may be detracting from your performance.

2. Sadness is normal, to a point. Overtraining and significant loss (e.g., of a loved one or job) can lead to depression. If you're wondering, see a professional. [Free, confidential depression screenings](#) are held regularly across the U.S. There are also many [online screening tools](#).

3. Anger is useful, to a point. Floyd Landis in Stage 17 of the Tour de France last year showed the power of controlled fury. Yet last month, I raced with a guy who berated a rule-breaker in the field for 30 minutes: a waste of energy. Assess what your anger triggers are, and what plan you will use if you are triggered during a race/ride.

As always, if your efforts to manage your emotions aren't successful enough, get help. Coaches, sport psychologists and mental training consultants, psychotherapists, and doctors are all possible sources of guidance. Frequently, even a single evaluation session with a professional can give you actionable recommendations that make a difference. That's good self-care. Even Mr. Spock would approve!



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