

How embracing stress helps young athletes develop a winning mindset

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Sports psychology academics from Staffordshire University are helping young athletes learn how to perform under pressure. The researchers have found that teaching athletes simple cognitive behavioral techniques can change their 'stress mindset' and, in turn, enhance their well-being and performance.

Lead researcher Dr. Paul Mansell explained, "Individuals often equate stress with distress, which means that most people perceive stress to have a [negative influence](#) on their health, performance, and productivity."

"Despite the [health benefits](#) of taking part in sport, athletes are not immune to experiencing poor mental health or mental illness. Young athletes can become concerned about de-selection from elite programs and the need to perform well academically."

"For these [young athletes](#), adapting to [stressful situations](#) is important. Many stressful situations are unavoidable, so we wanted to help them change the way in which they think about these situations."

The team designed a series of workshops delivered to teenage swimmers and footballers at four different clubs towards the end of the competitive season when there is often more at stake. Participants were allocated to an experimental or control condition, with content in the experimental condition covering stress mindset, irrational beliefs, self-compassion, and imagery.

The young athletes were encouraged to develop a 'stress-is-enhancing' mindset rather than a 'stress-is-debilitating' mindset through learning about how stress responses can help them when they need to perform.

Using imagery, they were asked to imagine how they might feel immediately before a [stressful event](#), like an important race or game. They were also tasked with focusing on the things they could control—like effort, attitude, and preparation—rather than focusing on things they couldn't control.

"It is not an event itself which causes us to think and respond in a particular way. Instead, it is our beliefs about an event that influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors," commented Jason Wright, a

researcher on the project.

"When viewed positively, stress can help to fuel our performance. We have all experienced that feeling when the adrenalin kicks and your heart starts beating faster. We encouraged students to embrace this and to see it as their body and mind preparing to perform well."

Participants also practiced [self-compassion](#) and mindfulness, including tasks to promote seeing reality, self-kindness, common humanity, and gratitude. They were encouraged to be more understanding and accepting rather than self-deprecating towards themselves in challenging circumstances.

Following the intervention, there was a significant increase in stress mindset among the athletes and a significant reduction in negative affective states such as anger, fear, or irritability. Feedback from the participants was largely positive, with multiple athletes reporting they now use imagery to prepare for competitions.

The team hopes this approach will be used more widely by practitioners working with young athletes, including sports coaches, to help them cope with stressful situations in their sporting careers.

The researchers also advise that these techniques can be used in all walks of life, and a similar intervention was delivered to school pupils preparing for exams last year.

Dr. Katie Sparks, Lecturer in Sports Psychology, said, "Experiencing stress is unavoidable and often beyond our control, but this research shows that shifting perceptions of [stress](#) from negative to a more balanced view can help athletes develop helpful rather than unhelpful beliefs."

"These are techniques that we can all use to manage the stresses of daily life better and ultimately to improve our well-being."

The study is [published](#) in the *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*.

More information: Paul Mansell et al, "Mindset: performing under pressure"—a multimodal cognitive-behavioural intervention to enhance the well-being and performance of young athletes, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2023.2296900](https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2023.2296900)

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