

# DEALING WITH FEAR IN GYMNASTICS: Mental Resilience and Focus



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**In order to help gymnasts deal with fear issues in their sport,** it is important to understand a few “basics” about fear. From a psychological

perspective, if we recognize that fear is a normal component to development in sport, then coaches and parents can be better prepared to help their athletes deal with fear when it occurs. There is no data that indicates “when” it is most likely to happen in gymnastics. It may occur early in tumbling, at level 5 when she begins to master new skills, or it may happen at level 8 when she begins to deal with back series on beam. But at some point, most gymnasts will face fear and they will either overcome it or it may inhibit their further development in the sport. Let’s move on to some mental training tips to help with fear-related issues in gymnastics.

**Fear is a multi-faceted anxiety issue.** When I first begin to work with a gymnast that presents fear issues, I explore fear in the following domains: Affective (emotional); that is, what is the intensity/length/precipitating of the feelings of fear that the gymnast experiences; Cognitive (thinking)...what are the thoughts/images/self-talk that the gymnast experiences when feeling fear; and, Behavioral (actions)...what are the “symptoms” related to the gymnasts’ fear...tense muscles, upset stomach, increased sweating, headaches, or other behaviors. When these various domains of fear are explored, it allows us to create a mental skills plan to help overcome the fear. If the anxiety is disrupting their functioning (e.g. vomiting before practice), then a more specific anxiety management plan is developed.

**Physical responses to fear can be managed with relaxation training.** It would be helpful for any gym to have available for their gymnasts a relaxation training handout/audio CD and incorporate it early into the gymnast’s career. Teaching gymnasts to learn to relax and “take a deep breath” before executing new (or challenging) skills is always useful in optimizing an athlete’s performance. I would recommend that gymnasts begin to practice regular relaxation exercises when they begin optionals, as the increased skills required may add other external stressors to challenging new skills. If learning a relaxation skill helps the gymnast to remove some of the “symptoms” of anxiety, they may have less cognitive/behavioral symptoms of fear in the future.

**Talking about “fear” can help.** If coaches, parents, and gymnasts talk about “fear” as a normal part of gymnastics skill development, then gymnasts may be more prepared to manage learning new skills when there is more anxiety/fear potential. When a young gymnast knows that

he/she is going to feel some anxiety when they are learning their full on the floor, or their back tuck on the beam, they can better approach the new skill with a “mental plan” to help reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety and build confidence (cognitive skills) to keep persevering with new skills. I recommend that coaches learn about mental training skills (especially composure skills, such as relaxation training and relaxation “cue” words) and incorporate these into training when teaching new skills to their gymnasts.

**Have a “Plan” to help athletes with fear issues.** Because everyone has his/her own developmental history, it is difficult to have just one management strategy. It is important to recognize, first and foremost, that gymnasts will experience fears as a “normal” process in developing gymnastics skills. When a gymnast overcomes a fear issue, then it is important to reinforce the positives and communicate optimistically within the team. When one gymnast observes a teammate overcome a fear issue, it reinforces that they can learn the new skill and work through anxious moments. By teaching athletes mental skills, they will be able to apply goal setting techniques (focus on basics of a new skill, which minimizes the fear), relaxation techniques, focus strategies (visualizing a great back series on beam), and self-talk strategies (focusing on positive cues that reflect “doing” a skill...verses a negative statement such as “Don’t balk...”).

In some situations, the anxiety related to a fear-based issue may create significant stress over a longer than expected time period (2-4 weeks) with increased symptoms of anxiety (tension/headaches/not wanting to go to practice/irritable mood at practice when approaching the feared skill). When this is the case, a referral to a qualified sport psychologist (a licensed psychologist in case of an anxiety disorder diagnosis) would be appropriate. A typical treatment plan would include assessment, homework assignments, relaxation training, and on-site (practice) strategies to reduce anxiety related to skill performance. The sport psychologist may often provide education/consultation to the parents and coaches regarding communication and managing their own emotions (for example, a coach that gets frustrated when a gymnast acts fearful will only INCREASE ANXIETY with the athlete). Thus, sport psychologists that treat fear-based issues often encourage parental education/behavior change, as well as coach consultation.

Always remember that one of the most wonderful aspects of gymnastics performance is the sheer athleticism, grace, strength, and skill in executing complicated routines. To achieve optimal gymnastics performance requires managing the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to the experience of fear and anxiety. Sport psychology and mental training can play a significant role in helping gymnasts develop mental toughness in pursuit of these great performances with minimal fear and anxiety. 🧘

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