



**The NHSACA is proud to announce that Dr. Tiff Jones and X-Factor Performance has agreed to provide each NHSACA member free Mental Performance Resources. Dr. Tiff has worked with many college, professional, and Olympic athletes, but her true passion is with young athletes. Her message is the same for whomever she is working with - “providing skills and training that they need to compete in every aspect of their individual and collective excellence”**

**“Coach I’m in my Head”**

### **You’re Not Alone**

**Coaches, how often do your athletes come to practices, games, competitions, and they tell you (or you overhear them telling their teammates), I’m in my head? Or the dreaded, “coach I have a lot of anxiety, stress, and I’m overwhelmed?” Well, not sure this is going to help ease your own anxiety however, I can say you are not alone. No matter the age, sport, gender, location, coaches are hearing the same rhetoric from their teams and athletes. So, what in the world is going on? How can you help? Are you even qualified to help?**

### **The Science**

**The only time humans are supposed to feel fear, anxiety, and doubt is when we are under physical bodily threat. You know, if a saber tooth tiger ran into your room right now, I hope fight, flight (not freeze in this case) kicks in. Adrenaline spikes, heart rate increases, blood pressure skyrockets all so you can escape or fight the tiger. However, after 30-60 seconds, our physiology should return to baseline because we’ve either escaped or we’re dead. The survival instinct keeps us alive, and we don’t**



want to get rid of it, though it is not serving our athletes, nor does it allow for consistent athletic performance. Why?

99.9% of the time most humans are never under physical bodily threat, especially when competing in sports (though there are some sports that athletes do experience potential harm, i.e., gymnastics, downhill skiing, diving). So why are our athletes and teams “freaking out” when they are practicing or competing? For one, on the Western side of the world we’re not teaching young children about the connection between our thoughts and our emotions. Most humans are living in a reactive state which is the psychological equivalent to a physical bodily threat – it is an emotional threat – from our thoughts and stories we tell ourselves.

### Real Life Example

We don’t feel anything emotionally without our thoughts. For instance, if you send a text message to someone you really love and care about and you don’t receive a text back, what do you feel in your body and/or what do you feel emotionally? Now, what are the thoughts that are creating those feelings? And finally, because you are uncomfortable and there is nothing to fight or flee (remember you didn’t get a text message response) we will do almost anything to get rid of the discomfort in our bodies. Most of the time, our behaviors when we are uncomfortable due to our thoughts, our next move will be unconscious. What is your play/your next move when you don’t get the text response? I’ve heard:

Double text

Call them

Go on social media to see if the person has recently posted

Drive by their apartment

Call another friend

Text someone else

Eat a pint of ice cream

Distract myself by doing something else (which doesn’t usually work)

To quickly debrief: Sent a text message. Did not get a response. Started creating stories in our heads of why not. Discomfort is felt in body. Want to feel better. Turn into stalkers, cheaters, gossipers, stress eaters etc. When we aren’t aware of our



thoughts and are not equipped with the skills to recognize the reasons for the bodily discomfort, we develop unhealthy habits to dissipate the emotional pain.

### **Playing Out in Sports**

Players who get in their heads are saying they are uncomfortable in their bodies; they are experiencing emotional pain. Usually in sport, they are thinking about the past (don't want to make that mistake again, I just sucked at that, last time we played this team I played terrible etc.). Or players are thinking in the future (what if I mess up, what if I disappoint my coach, what if I'm not good enough, etc.). Therefore, it is critical that we teach players the why behind their discomfort because their thoughts are sabotaging their performance, not their commitment, abilities, and/or their mental toughness. In fact, the foundation of mental toughness is self-awareness (of own thoughts and emotions) and then having the bravery to be vulnerable with self and then with others who can help them learn the skills to stay present (yes coaches, this is you).

### **The How's**

Below are some quick tips for you to use with your teams and/or individual players when you recognize they are in a reactive state:

Have players write a RUT (Raw Unfiltered Thoughts); writing down all their thoughts and feelings allows for some of the emotional charge to dissipate.

Teach and encourage players to take a "Lion's Breath." When we are in a reactive state, we tend to hold our exhalations or take very quick exhalations. Holding our breath creates a build-up of CO<sub>2</sub> thus creating fatigue, lactic acid build-up, and tiredness in the body. Athletes should extend their breath at least one more second than their inhale.

Ask questions. What are you thinking right now? What are you feeling? What can and what will you do right now? All answers are acceptable and will allow you, as the coach, to help understand why the athlete's performance is inconsistent or poor. You then can provide the athlete with a very specific process goal that they can focus on rather than the thoughts of the past or in the future.



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