

Frozen by fear

By Dr. Natascha Wesch, PhD



Fear is one of the most basic human emotions, and it can be conditioned to work for or against us. We learn to fear things by how those around us react or by

what we are told.

Here's how it works: In our brains, fear follows two pathways at the same time: 'Don't-Think-Act-Fast' response, and the 'Slow-Down-And-Think' response. The 'Don't-Think-Act-Fast' response is quick, and it happens automatically. The brain gets information and assumes danger, so reacts to protect us by setting off the fight-or-flight response. This is what causes your heart rate, breathing rate, and muscle tension to go up so that you can react quickly and run!

On the other hand, the 'Slow-Down-And-Think' response is more thoughtful. It considers all options to determine if the person is in real danger or not. If there

is no real danger, the brain shuts off the fight-or-flight response and the body eventually calms down. All of this takes time. That's why sometimes we logically know we shouldn't be afraid, but our body responds to the fear. To complicate things, because both of these responses happen at the same time, sometimes our brain gets stuck in between both responses and we become frozen by fear.

How does this apply to sports? Let's take just one example. Let's say there's a hockey coach who yells from the bench to an athlete on the ice, "No, don't pass! Why are you passing? Shoot!" Over time, the young athlete becomes afraid to make mistakes for fear of getting yelled at by his coach. Eventually, when he gets on the ice, he fears making a mistake and overthinks the play rather than trusting his instincts and skills. The result is either that he freezes or makes a poor decision. Over time, you have an athlete who is frozen by fear on game day.

To be successful, the athlete has to



need photo caption

learn about fear and be able to calm his thoughts. By learning mental skills to help calm the mind and override the fear response, the athlete can focus on the key things that make him successful.

Mental preparation and mental sharpness are keys to success, and the ability to be calm when everything inside us tells us to run, requires practice. Relaxation, breathing, and calming skills are important mental skills that athletes should develop.

Dr. Natascha Wesch is a Mental Performance Consultant in private practice who works with athletes, coaches, and teams of all levels and sport backgrounds. To learn more and to contact her, visit her website:

www.elitemindperformance.com