

How To DIAGNOSE Fear

There is a better way to deal with choking fear than PRESSING.

You can listen to your fear and diagnose why you are afraid. This will give you the information you need to cure your fear so you can stop PRESSING and trust yourself.

This took me years to learn because for a long time I was convinced I wasn't supposed to have any fears about competing.

This idea was drilled into me by coaches and sport psychologists.

The books I read told me to "change the channel" of my mind any time I got scared or frustrated during competition. These authors implied that the reason I got scared was because my mind was weak.

I even had a sport psychologist tell me to put my fears into a mental Black Box and never think about them.

What a boneheaded idea.

Fear and frustration are part of competing. The faster you deal with them, the more mentally tough you will be.

The easiest way to deal with fear and frustration is to listen to them.

Most athletes are quite dismal at listening to their fears. We judge and condemn ourselves any time we are not 100% confident, positive, and happy.

Tremendous relief comes from listening to yourself, because you do not have to pretend, cover up, or stuff down your fears about competing.

You enjoy an inner relaxation that is heavenly.

And there is even more good news.

When you accept yourself in this way, it's easy to figure out WHY you are feeling stressed or frustrated.

You can DIAGNOSE why you're anxious and then PRESCRIBE a solution for it. Once you apply the solution, your fear will be cured.

DIAGNOSE Before You PRESCRIBE

The idea you should DIAGNOSE before you PRESCRIBE is as old as time itself. For example...

PROBLEM: Your motivation to practice is low.

You think you're being lazy.

But when you listen to your malaise, you DIAGNOSE that you have no idea why you lost your last major competition -- and can't face competing again until you do.

PROBLEM: You're terrified of choking under pressure.

You think it's because a big event is coming up.

But when listen to your performance anxiety, you DIAGNOSE that you've never competed internationally before, and you're totally unsure about what to expect.

PROBLEM: You get annoyed when your dad criticizes you.

You think it's because he's right, but when you listen to your fear, you DIAGNOSE that what you *really* need is unconditional support -- and he's not getting the memo.

PROBLEM: You're starting to doubt yourself.

You think it's because your coach is being harsh.

But when you listen to your stress, you DIAGNOSE that you secretly agree with his criticisms and want to change...but have no idea how.

You can see that diagnosing your fear is all about self-acceptance. You must be able to acknowledge your weaknesses and mistakes. This takes self-acceptance.

The Barrier to Self-Acceptance

The reason we find it so hard to accept ourselves is that sometimes, we are not the athlete we would like to be.

When we dislike something, we resist it--and the fears that come with it.

Consider anything you dislike about your skills, fitness, or conditioning. Is your attitude towards it one of acceptance or resistance?

You may be wondering, "*What if I despise something about myself? How can I accept it?*"

And, "*If I accept it, am I stuck with my bad serve, poor agility, or limited defensive skills?*"

The answer is No.

I am not asking you to accept an unsatisfactory situation.

I am merely asking you to accept your fears about it so you can DIAGNOSE their root cause.

The courage to accept your fears (and yourself) paves the way for mental toughness.

I know what you may be thinking. "*Lisa, seriously...why can't I just order myself to stop being afraid?*"

Because trying to manipulate yourself like this will not work. It will not work because most of the time, *your fear exists for a reason.*

Something is happening to cause you to doubt yourself.

Maybe you're making mistakes...maybe you're being over-powered by an opponent... maybe your strategy is all wrong...maybe you were ill-prepared...maybe you came out flat...maybe you're especially tired or just not feeling good in your skin today.

No matter what the reason, you're either ill-prepared or not performing well. And this is creating deep fear inside you - choking fear.

Remember, choking fear is different from typical nerves. Nerves are normal. They are a form of excitement and they energize you. Choking fear makes you clumsy and self-conscious. It is an athlete's worst nightmare.

During moments of choking fear, your body is saying, "*Wake up! Pay attention!*"

Your body is talking to you.

And when someone as important as your body is talking, the right thing to do is LISTEN.

If you do, you can easily figure out why you're scared - and what you need to do to cure your fear.

Choking Fear Is A Symptom

The bottom line?

Think of choking fear as a *symptom* of a deeper challenge in your event you need to face and solve.

When you act like a doctor and DIAGNOSE why you're not performing well and then come up with a solution, you cure your poor performance and your fear.

In the following case studies, I ask every athlete two important questions: "What are you afraid of?" and "What is your fear asking you to learn?"

Their answers were very powerful. Check them out for yourself.

Karen, Figure Skating

Karen* came to see me because she had lost her motivation four months after a bad fall.

Karen said she had no confidence in her ability to win anymore. And, she was frustrated with her coach and parents, who were constantly giving her pep talks.

At first Karen scoffed when I asked her to listen to her fears about competing.

She just wanted to talk about discipline. How could she get back on track?

I persisted. I kept asking Karen to visualize a time she felt really confident when jumping. I knew this would force her fear to come to the surface.

After many tries in which she couldn't get an image, Karen made a breakthrough. She finally touched the fear in her heart about missing axels, falling, and re-injuring herself.

I asked Karen what her fear was asking her to do. It was easy for her to answer: *"My timing is a mess. I don't know how long to wait before jumping. Sometimes I jump too soon or too late."*

Karen left my office determined to get her timing back.

If you don't listen to your fear and DIAGNOSE what it is asking you to do or learn, your fear will grow stronger. Your body will literally yell at you, making you anxious and even panicky.

That's why you need to be open to what your body has to say at all times.

*All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Joan, Tennis

Recently I worked with Joan, a tennis player who had choked at the key moment in her doubles match.

She had no idea why.

After some probing she admitted, *"Lisa I hit an overhead smash to win but the other team called it out. I was wild with anger and wanted to protest, but my doubles partner didn't back me up. Instead of sticking to my guns I backed down. But after that, I wasn't the same. I lost all the key points."*

The reason Joan had lost her confidence?

She violated her own integrity and overrode her instincts. This weakened her terribly. To restore her confidence, Joan needs to be honest with her partner and assert herself. Otherwise her anger will eat away at her from the inside, causing her to punish herself with mistakes.

Brandon, Badminton

"Lisa I won the first match and was up 18-12 in the second. I just needed three points to close it out. But I got anxious. I hit the bird into the net and then out. He got momentum; I got frustrated...I ended up losing the tournament. Lisa I need more mental strength."

Can you see Brandon's MAJOR problem?

What he's missing?

He's thinking about the fact that he got nervous and choked.

And he's putting himself down for choking.

He forgot to ask WHY he got so nervous.

So I asked Brandon the one question he WASN'T asking: *"What was happening in this match that filled you with choking fear?"*

As it turns out, Brandon's opponent is a long time rival. Brandon beat him five months ago by moving him around the court.

See, Brandon's trademark is his quickness. He specializes in exhausting the other player, moving him around the court so he can't get shots back.

That's how Brandon won five months ago.

But then the inevitable happened.

After he lost, Brandon's rival got mad.

Then he got better.

When he saw Brandon again, he was returning Brandon's shots. This unnerved Brandon, whose strategy hinges upon his opponent not being able to get the bird back. He doesn't have a great serve or disguise shots well, so this is his major way of getting points.

Here's what you can learn from Brandon...

There's a story behind every match, every game, and every race. There are physical, technical, and tactical REASONS why one side wins.

There aren't many flukes in sport.

That's why it's so sweet when you win.

But Brandon forgot to dig up the story. He got upset about his fear instead.

Again...no matter what the cause of your choking fear, there's usually a very good DIAGNOSIS -- technical, strategic, mental, or physical.

Once you know what it is, you can fix your performance issue. In Brandon's case, he needs to stop being a one-trick pony. He needs to develop a great serve and a stellar drop shot. He also needs more patience when his opponent returns his shots.

Nadia, Golf

Nadia, a golfer, called me because she was suffering from 'overwhelming nerves.'

Nadia's nerves were so bad she couldn't get her hands to stop shaking before important putts.

Usually when an athlete is having really intense emotions it's because there is a build up of emotional baggage from the past.

I asked Nadia to reflect on past disappointments in golf and open up to her choking fear instead of blocking it.

Nadia was really shocked to discover that underneath her anxiety was tons of anger. This confused her. Anger? She had always associated anger with hurt. She didn't realize she could be angry about golf failures.

Nadia finally realized she was angry about her lack of progress in recent years. She said, *"Players who aren't nearly as dedicated are playing better than me. I'm no longer considered the best golfer in my club. I am just another golfer."*

I asked Nadia to interview the two women in her club who were playing better than her and ask them why they had improved.

Both women said it was their new golf clubs - something that shocked Nadia.

Golf clubs aside, Nadia realized that her anger was keeping her from learning anything new about golf. An intense perfectionist, Nadia needed to feel totally dominant over all the other players to feel confident.

She said, *"I have really been trying to protect an image of myself as being the BEST, the one who makes NO mistakes."*

I dropped this and I'm getting curious about different technical elements of my game, and I'm learning a lot. For example, in my last tournament I kept missing putts. Instead of pretending I was having a good day, I asked one of the fellows here who is a really good putter for help. He told me how to deal with really fast greens."

By listening to her fear, Nadia learned strategies about golf she never would have discovered otherwise.

Now you know the true value of fear. It's your friend. It will tell you exactly what you need to learn to win.

Courage to Win Exercise

What are your WORST fears about competing? What are the mistakes or losses that terrify you? What are you most embarrassed about in your career?

What is your fear asking you to learn as an athlete? Do you need to improve a technical skill? Fix a weakness? Address a conditioning problem? Do you need to understand the strategy of your sport better?

What is the ONE technical, strategy, or physical improvement you could make as an athlete that would wipe your fear off the map?
