

Anxiety can subvert athletic performance

By Elle Metz, *Outside*

You're lying in bed, and you suddenly start worrying. It could be about anything. Or nothing. Maybe it's just a sinking feeling in your chest, with no thoughts at all—until that old, familiar darkness descends, beckoning the doubts back in again. Then your heart rate quickens as your mind whirs with worst-case scenarios. Tightness creeps into your neck and shoulders, but you're too busy worrying to notice.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. While stressing doesn't necessarily make you diagnosable, it does mean you're anxious, probably tired, and possibly less likely to be at your physical best. In addition, we often don't realize the extent to which everyday stress can compromise performance.

Even if you don't recognize its physical manifestations, your anxiety is burning up energy stores and motivation levels you could be using to train. When your brain detects and responds to a threat, it leads to the release of adrenaline, says psychologist Richard Zinbarg, who heads up Northwestern University's Anxiety Lab. In the short term, this gives the body a boost of strength and energy. But when it persists, it leaves the body drained. While the exact impact varies from person to person and is difficult to quantify, the effect is major.

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