

Player Anxiety

Playing in the Little League® Baseball World Series is a tremendous achievement and something that will be treasured for a lifetime. Performing on the big stage, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, can bring out a lot of emotions in the players, particularly heightened anxiety.

This is an overview of anxiety, its different types, and how you can help your player(s) cope.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is our body's natural reaction to a situation with an uncertain outcome, often accompanied by nervousness, worry, and uneasiness. Because it is an uncomfortable feeling, our bodies recognize anxiety as a problem.

Often times, it can lead to fight/flight/freeze responses. Symptoms include:

- **Physiological** – Muscle tension, clenched jaw, rapid heart rate, nausea/stomach cramping, trembling or shaking, headache, “on edge” feeling
- **Cognitive/Emotional** – Racing thoughts, thoughts of impending doom, catastrophic thinking, feelings of being “out of control”
- **Behavioral** – Fast-paced movements or restlessness, increased isolation, increased errors/mistakes, apprehensiveness, blank stare, angry outbursts, any atypical behavior outside of a person's norm

Natural Performance Anxiety

There is an expected level of natural anxiety that comes along with playing on such a big stage. This can be attributed to:

- **Thoughts/feelings related to player and team performance**
- **Fears of failure or committing mistakes**
- **The weight of representing region/team/coaches/parents**

To an extent, the players have likely been dealing with this type of anxiety leading up to the tournament.

COVID-19 Anxiety

Playing in the Little League® Baseball World Series can be overwhelming in normal circumstances, but playing while in the midst of a worldwide pandemic can add even more stressors, including:

- **Increased isolation and disconnect from others**
- **Fears of testing positive for COVID-19 and the impact it would have on the individual and team**
- **Fears of the unknowns create negative thoughts**
- **Keeping up with protocols i.e., social distancing, hand washing, capacity limits, etc.**

Helping Your Player Cope

When you encounter a player(s) experiencing anxiety and want to intervene, you may be wondering how you can help.

How can I help a player in times of anxiety?

- **Notice, acknowledge, and normalize symptoms** — let them know that it is natural and okay to be feeling this way.
- **Focus on mindfulness** — awareness of our surroundings, our thoughts, our emotions, and how our bodies feel.
- **Practice grounding skills** — use breathing as an anchor, sensory skills, 3x3x3 technique – a grounding or anchoring skill to re-center a person by bringing their awareness to their surroundings and their body. This increases present moment awareness and allows for a person's focus to return to the here and now rather than say racing, anxious thoughts/emotions.



When should we step in to support a player?

- Use your intuition and relationships.
- Give the player an opportunity to work through and use their already existing skills before having a discussion.

What should I say?

- **Take a non-judgmental, non-critical approach to player anxieties** – recognize their anxiety as natural and expected.
- **Avoid using terms like “calm down” or “relax”**, both of which give anxiety a negative connotation and will make the player feel like they are doing something wrong.
- **Assist the player in a re-appraisal of their anxiety** i.e., “The anxiety is present because this is exciting.”

What if I’m anxious too?

- Use this as an opportunity to experience your own anxiety differently.
- Use the same skills mentioned for the players.
- Use the shared anxious experiences as bonding moments with one another.

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