

CLIMBING ANXIETY A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

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When examining factors that may influence a climber's performance, anxiety is often viewed as the most influential. One of the most extensively researched areas of sport psychology, anxiety has been defined as an unpleasant state of high arousal, likely to arise when individuals doubt their ability to cope with external or internal demands.

The loss of performance, energy, focus and enjoyment have all been attributed to the effects of anxiety. The vast majority of the studies linking anxiety and performance have examined the effects of anxiety on competitive athletes, with very little regard for the anxiety experienced by the recreational athlete. However, it has been highlighted that a recreational athlete's performance may be more affected by anxiety than that of an elite athlete. Despite the continued growth in recreational rock climbing numbers and the focus in a vast amount of psychological research on anxiety and its effects, very little attention has yet been given to recreational rock climbers.

As mountaineering instructors involved in the teaching and coaching of recreational climbers this should give us cause for thought. If we, as outdoor professionals, can gain a better understanding of the psychological experiences our students go through when climbing, we can be better prepared to help them deal with their anxieties and therefore progress with their own climbing development. It may also help us to further improve the standard at which we perform.

Anxiety can be differentiated into cognitive and somatic components. Somatic anxiety refers to physiological components that we will have experienced ourselves whilst climbing and seen in our students, increased heart rate: shortness of breath, clammy hands, butterflies in the stomach and tense muscles resulting in awkward jerky movements. Cognitive anxiety is the psychological aspect of anxiety and includes self doubt, negative imagery, distracted attention, loss of concentration and negative self talk. It is a conscious awareness of unpleasant feelings about our own abilities or the situation. The holds are too small, I can't see any more gear, it's a long way to that last piece, I don't think I'm strong enough, if I fall off here it's really going to hurt. Sound familiar?

Somatic and cognitive anxiety can

influence performance differently, with somatic anxiety peaking at the start of the climb, and lessening once the route begins, compared to the negative expectations of success in performing a task linked to cognitive anxiety which may have a more powerful influence on performance. The climber's ability to handle anxiety and stress has often been the deciding factor between success and failure. An understanding of anxiety and its influences on a climber's performance is surely essential for us and our students alike. One of our many faceted roles as a coach should be to ensure that our students are equipped with the skills to enable them to reach an optimal psychophysical state.

The anxiety experienced by climbers has been linked to their level of experience and the style of climbing undertaken. Leading trad routes will almost always result in higher levels of anxiety than on sport climbs, whilst leading winter routes where the conditions and gear placements are more thought provoking can result in higher levels of anxiety still.

When teaching our students to lead on trad or winter routes we require them to develop the ability to select and use natural and self placed protection to limit the seriousness of a fall. The lead climber's safety is reliant, should they slip, on their choice of protection and their technical competence in placing that protection. We possibly forget that the process of selecting the right piece of gear, whilst hanging on, can create anxious moments. We have developed these skills over an extended period of time, ultimately becoming subconsciously skilled. When climbing with students it may appear to them that we climb fluidly and confidently, pausing briefly to place gear before continuing effortlessly upwards. Our skills both physical and mental have been honed

through years of climbing; our mental coping strategies enable us to deal comfortably with the stresses caused by situations we have come across previously. Our students, however, do not have this bank of experience on which to draw when the going gets tough. The experience of anxiety comes from the student's perception of the situation, not the situation itself; it is an emotional response to a situation perceived as being dangerous. A similar situation may evoke feelings of stress or excitement depending on how the student interprets the experience.

Anxiety levels experienced before or during a climb affect how our students think, feel and perform. Our students can experience a wide range of affective reactions prior to climbing and these reactions can vary from one individual to the next. Skill level has been identified as one of the most influential factors with regards to an

the utmost importance to the lead climber.

Giving in to the fear, allowing it to take control, can ultimately lead to a climber's injury or worse. The fact that our students are experiencing fear is not the issue here, how we help them learn to deal with it is what's important. Fear is inevitable, but the way our students understand it and react to it is not.

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Whilst climbing, our students experience a psychological state which is a result of them processing information such as their perceived readiness, attitude towards previous performances and the importance placed on doing well in the current situation. Climbing has been described as a complex and unique sport incorporating a balance between physical strength, mental control and application of technique in potentially life threatening

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individual's reactions to anxiety, supporting research that highlights the fact that elite performers are more skilled in the use of coping strategies. Recreational climbers we are involved in coaching could well benefit from the abilities developed by the elite.

Anxiety and fear can be regarded as synonyms as they have very similar characteristics. Fear, the inherent threat of physical harm, has always been an element of the recreational climbing experience, a common ground all share but which is rarely discussed seriously between climbers. The most common aspect of fear in climbing probably concerns falling off and the most common cause of falls is succumbing to fear. Anxiety management is therefore of

situations. The psychological element is often overlooked but must be addressed by climbers in order to bring about maximum gains in performance.

It is thought that a combination of physiological arousal and cognitive anxiety is most likely to affect an athlete's performance.

To perform at their peak a climber needs to be sufficiently aroused, the optimal levels of arousal producing heightened awareness, focus and performance. It is worth noting though that some climbers will be able to tolerate a greater range of anxiety than others before their performance suffers. Some climbers relish the run out routes, performing at their best

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