



MANAGING ANXIETY AND PRE-MATCH NERVES IN UNDERWATER RUGBY

Not eliminating nerves, but managing them in a safe, useful and team-focused way

BODY

THOUGHT

FOCUS

Why was this guide prepared?

Pre-match nerves are common, especially in children and adolescents. A racing heart, stomach discomfort, frequent trips to the toilet, shaky hands or the thought 'what if I fail?' are often part of the body's preparation for competition. The problem is not the presence of nerves, but interpreting them as proof of danger, inadequacy or failure.

Underwater Rugby combines breath-holding, physical contact, a three-dimensional playing space and rapidly changing situations. These features can intensify pre-match anxiety. Young athletes may also fear disappointing a coach, parent or teammate.

This guide does not promise to remove all nerves. Its purpose is to help athletes recognise arousal, notice catastrophic thoughts, return attention to the task and ask a trusted adult for support when needed.

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Nerves versus anxiety

Pre-match arousal is not always negative. A manageable level of nerves can increase attention, energy and readiness. Anxiety grows when the mind interprets that arousal as a threat.

USEFUL NERVES

- Provide energy.
- Open attention.
- Prepare for effort.
- Brief and manageable.

RISING ANXIETY

- Creates catastrophic thoughts.
- Locks attention onto the body.
- Slows decisions.
- Increases avoidance.

MAY NEED SUPPORT

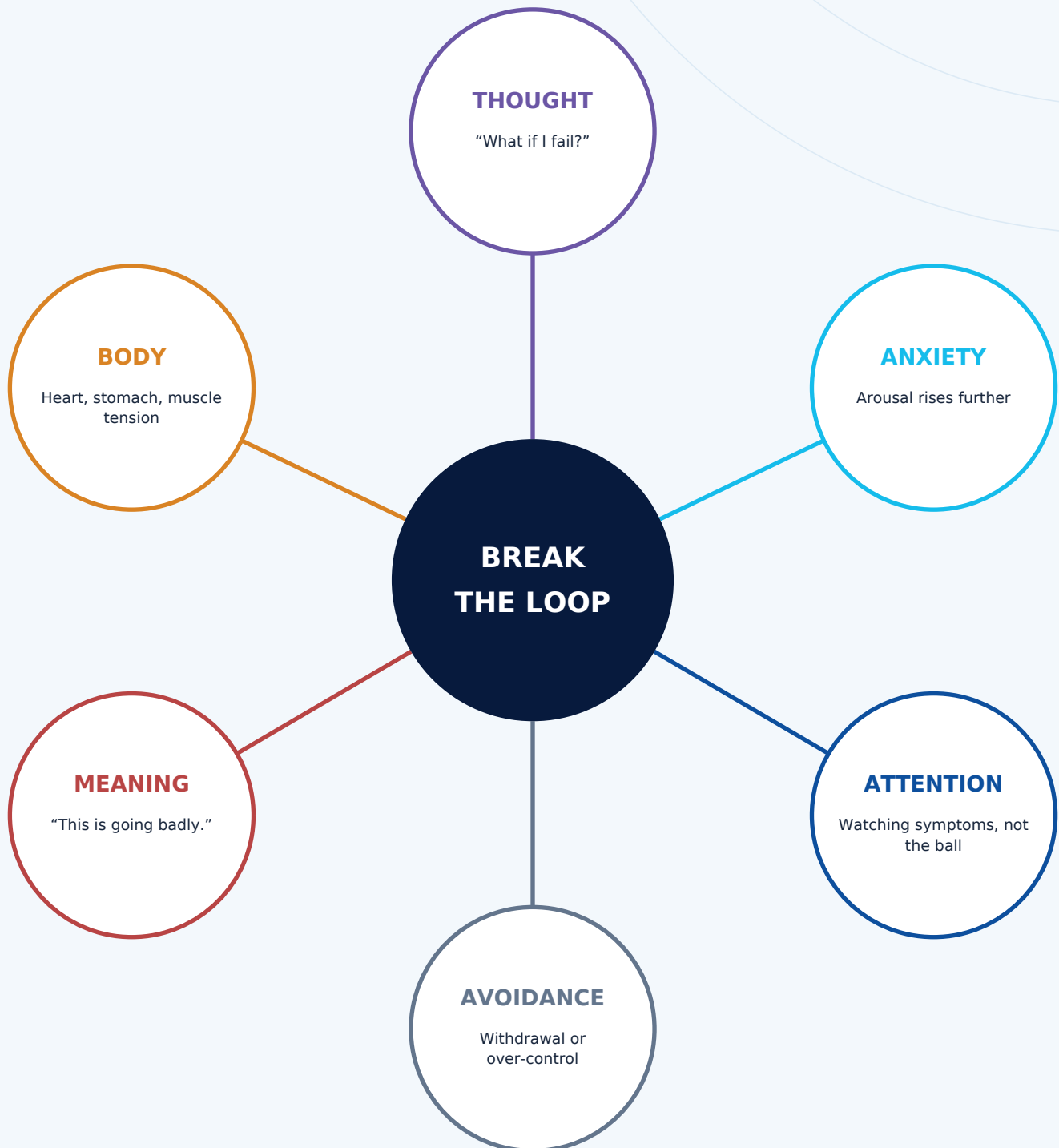
- Persists for weeks.
- Affects sleep or school.
- Leads to avoidance.
- Includes panic or low mood.

“Feeling nervous does not mean I am unprepared.”

The aim is not to stop the heart from speeding up. It is to choose the next task while the body is activated.

The pre-match anxiety cycle

Anxiety often begins with one thought and becomes a loop involving the body, attention and behaviour.



You do not need to change every part of the loop at once. One brief cue, one natural breath and one task can change its direction.

Signs in children and adolescents

Young athletes do not always say “I feel anxious.” Anxiety may appear in the body, behaviour or the way they speak.

PHYSICAL

- Stomach ache
- Nausea
- Headache
- Frequent toilet trips
- Shaking or sweating

THOUGHTS

- “I will definitely fail.”
- “They will laugh at me.”
- “The coach will be angry.”
- “I will ruin it for the team.”

BEHAVIOUR

- Refusing to attend
- Becoming very quiet
- Irritability
- Repeated reassurance seeking
- Last-minute equipment checking

IMPORTANT

These signs alone do not establish a disorder. Duration, intensity and impact on daily life matter.

A SMALL TIP FOR ADULTS

Instead of saying “there is nothing to fear,” ask “how is your body telling you that you are nervous?”

A 90-second pre-match routine

This routine is not meant to erase nerves. It moves attention back toward what the athlete can control.

20 sec

NOTICE THE BODY

Feel your feet, shoulders and natural breathing.

20 sec

NAME THE FEELING

"Nerves are here." Name it without judgement.

20 sec

CHOOSE ONE TARGET

Set one task for the first shift.

20 sec

USE A SHORT CUE

"First play." "Stay with the team."

10 sec

TEAM CONTACT

Eye contact or one brief cue with a teammate.

When practised in the same order during training, the routine is easier to recall on match day.

Turning thoughts into tasks

Trying to force an anxious thought away often fails. A more useful method is to notice it and convert it into a small task.

ANXIOUS THOUGHT	RETURN TO TASK
<i>"What if I lose the ball?"</i>	Find the first passing lane.
<i>"What if I run out of breath?"</i>	Monitor body signals and make a timely safe ascent.
<i>"Everyone is watching me."</i>	Watch the ball and your teammate.
<i>"The coach will be angry."</i>	Play your role; review comes later.
<i>"Everyone is better than me."</i>	Return to your first task.
<i>"I cannot control my nerves."</i>	Choose the behaviour, not the feeling.

Brief question: "What is the smallest correct action I can control right now?"

Language for parents and coaches

Adult language can either regulate or intensify a young athlete's nerves. Some well-meant phrases may unintentionally create pressure.

MAY INCREASE PRESSURE

MORE SUPPORTIVE

"There is nothing to be nervous about."

"I can see you are nervous; what is your first task?"

"Make us proud."

"We will value your effort regardless of the result."

"Do not make mistakes."

"If an error happens, return to the next play."

"Stay down longer."

"Listen to your body and make a safe decision."

"You trained so hard, you must win."

"You prepared; now play your role."

"Look how calm everyone else is."

"Every athlete experiences nerves differently."

Acknowledge the feeling, avoid magnifying the result and make safety a non-negotiable priority.

When anxiety rises during the match

Anxiety can rise after the match has started. The aim is not to hide it, but to reconnect with the task within a few seconds.

1

NOTICE IT

"Anxiety is rising."

2

SOFTEN THE BODY

Release shoulders and jaw.

3

CHOOSE ONE CUE

Ball, opponent or teammate.

4

TAKE ONE ACTION

Pass, defend or surface.

5

RESET

Move to the next play.

A brief team cue agreed in advance can reduce a young athlete's sense of being alone.

When to seek support

Pre-match nerves are often temporary. In some situations, a performance routine alone may not be enough.

CONSIDER ASSESSMENT

- Anxiety lasts for weeks
- Avoidance of training or matches begins
- Sleep, school or friendships are affected
- Panic symptoms recur
- Frequent stomach aches or headaches occur

URGENT SUPPORT

- Thoughts of self-harm
- Fainting or loss of consciousness
- New serious chest pain
- Severe breathlessness
- Marked low mood or hopelessness

IMPORTANT

Assessment in children and adolescents should involve the athlete, family, coach and health professionals when appropriate.

Seeking support is not weakness; it shows that the athlete's health and development matter.

Seven-day practice plan

Five to eight minutes of brief daily practice can make the pre-match routine feel more natural.

DAY 1

Know the body

Write down three physical signs of nerves.

DAY 2

Notice the thought

Identify the most common “what if...” thought.

DAY 3

Turn it into a task

Write one task for that thought.

DAY 4

90 seconds

Use the routine before training.

DAY 5

Team cue

Agree on a brief support cue with a teammate.

DAY 6

Adult language

Choose one supportive phrase with a parent or coach.

DAY 7

Review

What worked, what was difficult and what comes next?

NOTE: The goal is not to make a child perfectly calm. It is to help them act safely and effectively while nerves are present.

Final note

Pre-match nerves may show that a young athlete cares about the sport. A racing heart, a tight stomach or catastrophic thoughts do not by themselves indicate weakness. When children and adolescents learn to recognise rather than hide these signs, nerves become more manageable.

The adult role is not limited to motivation. A safe environment that does not magnify results or dismiss emotions is also part of performance. Language such as “return to your first task” is more useful than “you must win” because it directs the athlete toward what can be controlled.

One of the most useful questions is: “The nerves are here; what is the smallest correct action you can take now?”

Selected references

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This guide is for general information and does not replace individual medical assessment or treatment.