Handling Uncertainty, Stress, and Anxiety

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Either Vanderbilt or I receive **consulting fees, honoraria, and/or expense reimbursements** from: Nashville Predators, Tennessee Titans, Tennessee Tech Athletics, University of Tennessee Athletics, ImPACT

**12.58% of my annual income is derived from sports organizations**

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This presentation is not endorsed by any organization with which I am affiliated

Blame me for anything I say. It’s all my fault.
Last year in San Antonio we talked about depression, anxiety, and suicide.

We reviewed the signs, symptoms, and treatments.

Today we will talk about handling uncertainty, stress, and anxiety, and I’d like to introduce you to a way that might help you achieve better coping.

Let’s start with uncertainty…
What are Anxiety, Stress, and Uncertainty?

- They are words that we all use, but they don’t always mean the same thing to each person.

- People experience anxiety/ stress/ uncertainty in different ways. There are both Physical and Mental aspects to anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. What are they?
Do you have any of these symptoms?

We all have some stress/anxiety/uncertainty

Let’s look at an example of no stress, anxiety, or uncertainty
PET Scan of the Brain: Relaxed vs. Anxious

Brighter color means burning more glucose

Relaxed

Anxious
Not all Anxiety, Stress, and Uncertainty are bad...

• Without anxiety/stress or uncertainty, you’d never study for a test, look both ways before you cross the street, be on time for practice, have sex, drive carefully, prepare yourself for the complaints of that pain in the ass player, or deal effectively with coaches and management.

• Too much anxiety/stress/uncertainty, however, can lead to poor focus, tense muscles, blurry vision, inability to concentrate, loss of drive and ambition, stomach problems, apathy, and psychological paralysis.

• So some anxiety/stress/uncertainty is good, too much is bad.

• Like most things in life, balance and moderation are key.
Anxiety, Stress, Uncertainty, and Fear

What's the difference between Anxiety-Stress-Uncertainty and Fear?

If you're walking in the woods by yourself and think you hear a grizzly bear behind you, and you turn around and there's no bear, that's Anxiety-Stress-Uncertainty.

But if you're walking in the woods by yourself and you think you hear a grizzly bear behind you and you turn around and the bear is staring you in the face, that's Fear.
Anxiety, Stress, Uncertainty, and Fear

But if you’re walking in the woods by yourself and you think you hear a grizzly bear behind you and you turn around and the bear is staring you in the face, that’s Fear.
• **Anxiety, Stress, and Uncertainty** are what we feel when the threat *might* be there, when something *might* be wrong. In other words, the bear *might* be there. The other possibility, of course, is that the bear is not there.

• **Fear** is what we feel when the threat *is* there. In other words, the bear *is* there.
Most human anxiety, stress, and worry are self-generated. It comes from within. We create most of own anxiety, stress, and worry. How can that be?

Let’s try an exercise to show you how most of your anxiety, stress, and uncertainty are created by YOU.

**QUESTION:**
What is your greatest worry?

Think about your greatest worry. Get it clear in your mind. In a minute I’ll probably pick one or more of you from the audience to come up here and tell your greatest worry to your colleagues.
Managing Anxiety, Stress, and Uncertainty...

• Most anxiety, stress, and uncertainty comes from how we see and think about things, and those thoughts that begin with the two words “What if…”

• Some of you may have thought “What if he picks me…What if have to go up there and tell everyone my greatest fear…What if I look stupid…What if they think I’m an asshole…Why do I have to do this dumb crap…”

• People generate anxiety when they think “What if I make a mistake?” or “What if I lose my job?” or “What if I piss him off?” or “What if he complains about me?” etc. etc. etc.

• But how do you develop this mental toughness?
Most people believe that events and other people cause us to say, feel, and do things, and we blame them for how we act and feel.

For example, we think and say things like “The coach pissed me off”, “Management upset me”, “That player stressed me out”, and “my spouse makes me crazy”. These people may have said or done something to you, but thinking in this manner gives the power to control your feelings and actions to other people and external events.

We are not puppets controlled by other people (unless we give them that power). We are thinking creatures. Things happen, and we think about them prior to reacting.

We actually think about things and make choices (at about 275 mph, which is the estimated speed of thinking) almost every time we deal with a situation.

Whether we realize it or not, we choose our responses to almost every circumstance. Many of these responses seem automatic (after all, we’ve had years of practicing them), and we think we have little control over them. But we do.
For example, let’s say you were walking along in a field, you look down, and you see…
How would you feel and what would you do? Most people would react with...

- **Emotions (how you feel):** scared, worried, anxious, afraid, panic
- **Behaviors (what you do):** scream, run, heart rate increases, breathing gets rapid, sweating, shaking
- **This is how most people would feel and act**
But what if you were with Animal Planet, a reptile specialist, or just someone who likes snakes? How would these people react?

Emotions (feelings): Calm, Curious, Interested

Behaviors (actions): Freeze, Check it out, Pick it Up, Play with It
So what caused the fear?

• Most people would say that the snake caused the fear (it scared me, it made me run)

• But if the snake caused the fear, then why isn’t everyone afraid of the snake? If the snake caused the fear, then everyone would be afraid of a snake, and everyone would react with fear. But this is not how it is. Snakes don’t discriminate against people. Not everyone reacts the same way. Why are some people afraid of snakes and others not?
Did the snake cause our feelings and actions? No, it was our beliefs and attitudes toward the snake.

The person who reacts with fear is probably thinking, “Oh shit, it’s a snake, it’ll bite me, it’s poisonous, and I’ll die”. Remember, these beliefs happen very quickly and we are not even aware of them sometimes. A baby will not show an inherent fear of snakes. The fear of snakes is learned, and what you learn are the thoughts in your head. These beliefs lead to the emotions of fear and panic, the behaviors of running and screaming, the shortness of breath, the increased heart rate, and the sweating.

The person who reacts with curiosity and by freezing is probably thinking, “Be cool, make sure it’s not poisonous, if it is, wait until it goes away. Otherwise, be careful, and all will be fine.” Without the “awful” thoughts, there are no major negative feelings and actions.
Beliefs

• **Beliefs, Thoughts, and Attitudes** are ideas we hold (in our mind) to be true.

• Many of these beliefs were put in our head when we were younger and didn’t have a lot of say-so over what we believed. We may have been taught to be afraid of snakes. These beliefs (not just about snakes) came from teachers, parents and family, friends, school, the government, advertising, religion, and our own experiences.

• We all have beliefs engrained in our brains: political, religious, personal, social, financial, spiritual, etc.

• Even though others may have put some of those beliefs in your head, it’s your responsibility to decide which beliefs to keep and which to discard (which may be harder to do than it sounds).

• Some of the beliefs my coaches told me as a kid in the 1960s…
The ABC Model of Thinking, Feeling, and Behaving for Coping with Anxiety

- **A** = Activating Event (which is the thing that happens)
- **B** = Beliefs (attitudes and thoughts about the event)
- **C** = Consequences, which are of 2 types: Emotional (how we feel about it) and Behavioral (what we do about it)

Most people think the event (A) causes how we feel and act (C).
But it’s usually our beliefs/thoughts/attitudes (B) about the event (A) that causes C.
Thoughts and Feelings

- I do not intend to tell you what to think or what to believe; that’s your right as a free person and your job as a human being. And frankly, I’m not smart enough to know the answers for you.

- What I want to do is to show you how your mind and brain work, how thoughts can lead to self-defeating behaviors and emotional distress, and what steps you can take to make changes if you choose to do so. But remember, just as I can’t cause you to change how you think or what you believe, you can’t do this to others. You can’t tell your partner not be afraid of snakes and make it happen.
So what does this have to do with being a hockey professional?

Attitudes are the **Real Disability**

talk sense to yourself

The Eyes are Useless When the Mind is Blind.

~Unknown

MENTAL TOUGHNESS
Dealing with a Star Hockey Player/Complainer

- **A** = **Activating Event:** Super star player complains to you about his equipment being “not right”

- **B** = **Beliefs:** He’s an asshole; He should appreciate all that I do for him; I knock myself out getting this jerk’s equipment the way he likes it and all he does is complain; He’s got crap for brains; It’s never enough for this guy; He shouldn’t complain so much

- **C** = **Consequences**
  
  **Emotional:** Angry, Upset, Pissed off, Seething inside
  
  **Behavioral:** Tell him to go see the shrink, Pout, Argue with him, Tell the other equipment pros what a jerk this guy is, that he is high maintenance

This will make you feel better in the short run, but won’t solve the problem because you will just keep getting upset when it happens again.
Dealing with a Star Hockey Player/Complainer

- **A** = Activating Event: Super star player complains to you about his equipment being “not right”

- **B** = Beliefs: He’s at it again; This guy is the biggest blamer and complainer ever; this usually happens when he’s not playing well or his girlfriend is giving him hell; How can I expect a selfish, self-centered, egotistical bastard to appreciate anything I do for him?

- **C** = Consequences:
  - Emotional: Frustrated
  - Behavioral: “Let’s see, what have we tried before… and what can we do differently to make things better for you?

Frustrated is the best we can do; there’s no way I can get you happy with this one...
Neither set of Beliefs will change the player; All you can control is how you respond

• B = Beliefs: He’s an asshole; He should appreciate all that I do for him; I knock myself out getting this jerk’s equipment the way he likes it and all he does is complain; He’s got doodoofor brains; It’s never enough for this guy; He shouldn’t complain so much

• B = Beliefs: He’s at it again; This guy is the biggest blamer and complainer ever; this usually happens when he’s not playing well or his girlfriend is giving him hell; How can I expect a selfish, self-centered, egotistical bastard to appreciate anything I do for him?

This will make you feel better in the short run, but won’t solve the problem because you will just keep getting upset when it happens again (which it will, because he’s not going to change)

This will defuse the situation. You will show him that you have tried to solve this before and he will feel you have listened; He probably just wants some attention
• A = **Activating Event:** You apply for a better job and get rejected

• B = **Beliefs:** Those assholes should have given me the job; I deserved it, they’re screwed up---or---I’m worthless and no good because they didn’t pick me

• C = **Consequences**

  **Emotional:** Angry, Upset, Pissed off, Depressed

  **Behavioral:** Talk bad about the organization to others, Trash them, Trash yourself, Get trashed, Stop trying to get a better job
**A** = **Activating Event:** You apply for a better job and get rejected

**B** = **Beliefs:** Maybe this job was already wired for someone else; Perhaps I need to increase my skill set or my presentation to be more impressive

**C** = **Consequences**

**Emotional:** Frustrated

**Behavioral:** Motivated to improve, Set goals to enhance your professional skills

Frustrated and Motivated is better than Pissed off and Pissy
This is not just a matter of “positive thinking”

Positive thinking can be as dangerous as negative thinking

This is rational, realistic thinking---
not irrational, unrealistic thinking
Not everything you think is true; your thoughts are not always right. When in doubt, check them out....
Get to know your team psychologist…
You can think of him/her as a "spare tire"
Not always essential, but critical when you really need it

Psychologists fix emotional flats
Thanks to: Pete Rogers for inviting me, SPHEM for having me, the Nashville and Milwaukee boys for all that you have taught me, and to all of you for your attention.