

5 Ways Caregivers Can Reduce Athlete Anxiety and Improve Performance Through Retrieval Cues

Athletic success doesn't happen just because of fast legs or strong muscles. Success is often due to mental strength as well as physical prowess, at any age. That's why retrieval cues can be an athlete's secret weapon when used effectively.

Caregivers can use retrieval cues to help athletes stay calm in critical moments, improving everything from technique to motivation to self-talk. Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, breaks down what a retrieval cue is, how you can help your athlete decide where they need them, and how to create them.

But first, it's important to remember that athletes being nervous or having *some* performance anxiety is both normal and positive, says Chapman. [Your goal as a caregiver isn't to try to eliminate those nerves](#), since they are actually beneficial to performance. "Performance anxiety implies that the athlete cares," he says. "And normalizing some performance anxiety is key. Athletes have to learn to [optimize their anxiety](#) so that it works for them and not against them."

That's where retrieval cues come into play.

Typically, retrieval cues refer to a stimulus or trigger (anything from a smell to a feeling) that makes a person access information they have stored in their brain. If you smell fish and fries, you may be reminded of the boardwalk at the beach. Because the brain likes to use that stored information in new situations, it's possible to use retrieval cues to help athletes in times of stress and anxiety by triggering the recall of useful information or emotions.

Because retrieval cues are fairly complicated psychological stimuli, starting with a simple example often helps both caregivers and athletes understand how they work. If a soccer player is struggling with their penalty kick, for instance, a retrieval cue could involve writing 'deep breath, follow through' on their wrist or the back of their hand so that just before they take the kick, they can be reminded of the prompt.

"Retrieval cues are a great neuroscientific hack, and they're one of my favorite skills to teach athletes," says Chapman. "To simplify it, think about a Labrador retriever, which is a dog that loves to retrieve things. They're excited when they retrieve their favorite ball. A retrieval cue is like the ball that they're fetching, and your brain is the Labrador retriever: The brain is excited to retrieve something familiar."

That familiarity can help calm an anxious athlete, whether it's cuing them to actually lower their feelings of stress or simply reminding them to keep an elbow up while at bat. When the brain feels something familiar, rather than unfamiliar, it automatically reduces anxiety. Chapman helps his athletes create tangible retrieval cues, often in the form of something they wear or see during a competition.

A good retrieval cue should also be very specific. “It should be an athlete-specific statement that is truncated into an object or a phrase that you see on your body to enhance your performance,” Chapman says.

Rather than something like “go fast” or “win,” it should focus on the key moment where your athlete struggles the most. “If the athlete is a mile runner, you may want a retrieval cue to use when you hear the final lap bell, such as a note written on the side of the runner’s hand that says ‘200 fast.’”

Another example Chapman cites is a softball player who was striking out a lot. “We discovered that the reason she was striking out a lot is because she was focused on the last pitch, not the pitch that was coming,” he says. “So, we developed a cue written on a bracelet. It was monogrammed with the inscription WIN, which was a reminder of the outcome goal, but it was also an acronym for What’s Important Now. She would get in the box and look at her bracelet as she loaded up to hit, and that would lock her into that pitch. It helped her reset.”

Chapman adds that the more specific the moment, the easier it is to create a cue that’s actually effective. But some athletes can benefit from more general cues that are focused on motivation or emotional regulation when things aren’t going their way.

He breaks it down into five types of cues:

- Mechanical: A specific technique (e.g., relaxing the knees, driving the hips)
- Motivation: Staying in the moment and invested in the game
- Momentum: Similar to mechanical, but power-focused (e.g., explode, power through)
- Mastery: Mastering one’s emotions with cues that speak directly to the unhelpful emotions your athlete tends to feel in a game
- Mercy: Statements that remind an athlete to be kind to themselves if they have a tendency towards negative self-talk

[Caregivers trying to help athletes access retrieval cues](#) may be tempted to tell their athlete where they see their weak points. But Chapman says that while it’s great to help an athlete come up with a cue, you shouldn’t be the one determining where they need the cue. “You can start a conversation by saying, ‘I know you want to improve and I want you to own it. Is there anything you want to work on, or that your coach would say you need to work on?’”

Takeaway

Retrieval cues can be an incredibly effective way to help your athlete manage their emotions, improve their technique, stay motivated, or simply be kinder to themselves in hard moments. As a caregiver, your job isn’t to tell your athlete where they need to improve, but to instead ask questions that help them decide what skills they want to work on. Once they know where they want to improve, then you can help your athlete create a useful retrieval cue so that the next time they are in that tough moment, they can access their plan for moving through it.



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