



Does your Goal Give You Anxiety?

Have you ever thought about your goal for the upcoming race and then had your anxiety level increase? Chances are, your goal was an outcome goal, or something that was based on the end result. Your goal may have been, “I want to finish in the top 10 in the race”, or “I need to qualify for next week and finish in the top 3”, or even “I want to beat Mary Jane”. Anxiety increases with uncertainty. Anxiety also increases when you focus on things that are outside of your control. With the example goals mentioned, the runner is looking into the future – and there is always uncertainty in the future. The runner also has a goal based on how others perform – which is something outside of their control.

What to do?

To decrease the level of anxiety you may be feeling by thinking about this goal, you can develop several process goals. A process goal focuses on the actions needed in order to achieve your goal. These goals are both within your control and also are based in the present. A tip on how to write process goals is to start with your outcome goal, and then drill down asking the question, “How can I do this?” at least three times. For example:

Goal: I want to finish in the top 10 in the race.

- *How can I do this?*
I need to stay patient in the first quarter of the race.
- *How can I do this?*
Remind myself to be patient and check in at quarter split for my location, time and placement.
- *How can I do this?*
When I feel myself wanting to make a move or push to the front early, I am going to remind myself to be patient by using the cue word “patient”. This will remind me of my plan and help me to relax physically. To check my quarter split, I know to look for the tree stump just past the parking lot.

Now the athlete has two process goals:

1. remind themselves to be patient
2. check their quarter split

These are two goals that are absolutely within the athlete’s control and will help set themselves up to best achieve their outcome goal.

Should you ditch the outcome goal?

No! An outcome goal is helpful in that it provides motivation and can give you that extra drive and push of effort when needed. The key is knowing when to focus on the outcome goal, and when to focus on the process goal. Research has shown that a focus on an outcome goal prior to a competition can increase the level of anxiety in an athlete. So, take some time to develop a couple of process goals (you may have 2-3 for any one race), and plan to focus on these prior to the start line.