



Many parents ask me for advice on what they can do about their athlete's mental block. I understand the pure frustration of feeling helpless and hopeless because parents do not like seeing their child suffer. As parents, we readily want to jump in and try to save our children when they suffer. We want them to be happy and it is painful to see our children unhappy.

The most frustrating aspect of mental blocks for parents is our children must learn the tools they need to get through on their own. There is no magic pill and there isn't much a parent can do to make their child get over their block. The child must get through this challenge on their own, but there are some things that a parent can do to help.

- When I talk to athletes about mental blocks the first step to overcome their fear is to become aware of self-talk. What is self-talk? Self-Talk is what the athlete says or thinks to themselves. Many times an athlete's self-talk is very negative. They may say things such as: I stink, I am going to hurt myself, I can't do it, or I hate tumbling. These comments are not helpful to overcoming fears and they may be feeding the fear even more. I advised the athlete to become aware of what they are saying to themselves and if the comments are not helpful than to change them.

-The parent's role in self-talk is to become aware of how the parent is talking to the child. When a parent says comments such as: Why aren't you going for it, you are so good at tumbling, there is nothing to be scared of, or you shouldn't be scared. These comments can make the child feel like they are disappointing, frustrating, or embarrassing the parent. This can add more pressure and anxiety. Parents' comments need to stick to comments such as: I love you, you are working very hard and I am proud of you, and stay strong and we are always here for you.

Parents can also be aware of what they say to their child. Be must be careful not to label the child. They can stay away from comments such as “You are lazy, you are an airhead, you are a mental case, ext.” I understand that many of these comments are said in jest, but to a child and especially one that is working through a mental block, these comments are very hurtful. The athletes can think that there is some truth to the comments and they will behave up to these comments. If a parent says their child is an airhead, the child believes they are an airhead, then the child all probably behave in the way an airhead would behave.

- The next step for athletes is about focus. When I ask athlete what they think about during their skill, many of them say they don't know. If they know what they are thinking about during each skill then it is difficult for them to stay focused on the skill they are trying to perform. Performance cues are reminders the athlete tells themselves before and during each skill. For example if the athlete was a gymnast performing a back handspring on beam, they would think about cues that could help them make the skill. Stretching tall on the start, pushing through their legs on the jump, looking at the beam to place their hands, strong legs on the landing, and lunge for the finish. Thinking about “these” cues keep them focused on the back handspring and not on negative thoughts or distractions. The idea is when athletes fill their thoughts with what they want to have happen they are not focused on what they don't want to have happen.

-The parents role in this step is very small. It is not the parent's job to make their child use performance cues, it is only the parent's job to become away of performance cues.

- The next step in overcoming mental blocks is having the athlete trust in themselves. They know what they need to do, but sometimes it is difficult for the athlete to believe they are capable of letting their body perform the skill. Trust is the most difficult part. The athlete will do their skill with a spot from the coach, they may even do it with a slight finger touch, but when the coach steps away or pulls their hand away, the athlete freezes. When the coach backs away, the athlete is left to be 100% responsible for their own skill. They must believe they are able to

perform the skill and their body will do what it needs to do. We work with the athlete on trust by positive self-talk, performance cues, and reminders of times they are independent and strong.

-The parents can have a huge role in trust. The athlete has to convince themselves they can perform the skill. They need to know they are independent, strong, and can overcome challenges. When parents rush in to save their children when they are in challenging situations, they are not teaching them how to be strong on their own. A parent can start to give their child more independence around the house. The child needs to practice situations where they overcame challenges without parental involvement. Parents must guide and give advice, but it is important for the child to figure things out on their own. For example, if the child is having problems with understanding a math problem at school, rather than the parent contacting the teaching on their own or teaching the child the information, maybe the parent can help the child find out how they can fix the problem. Ask the child what they can do to get help on math. Have them ask the teacher, write an email, or find information on a web site. This will teach the child how to find their own answers in the future and will teach them how to trust they are responsible and independent.

Mental blocks are frustrating and parents can feel the range of emotions from anger (You are wasting my money by not doing anything in practice), denial (You don't have a mental block, just do it), despair (I don't know what to do), to compassion (You are my child and I love you regardless of if you throw a skill or not). Mental blocks can take us a lot of the families emotions, money, and time, but it is important for the athlete to KNOW that the parent's love is not dependent on how or what they perform.

Remember that sports will come and go and it is not the medals, trophies, or ribbons, but it is the lessons they learn along the way. A child with a mental block will learn lessons about what they think about, confidence, self-talk, and trust. They will come out of this mental block learning that they are powerful enough to overcome any challenge in the future.

Also know that some children do not get through their mental block. A child that does not want to get through a mental block may not want to do the sport anymore or may be honestly scared and not want to do the skill.

Either way, it is okay for an athlete not want to get over their mental block. They need to know that with or without performing the skill, their life will not change: their parents will still love them unconditionally, they will still have amazing value as a person, and they need not to be embarrassed of something they don't want to do.

Parents must continue to have patience and love and support their athlete. This is a part of a long journey and it is not what the athlete does but how they do it.

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