

FEAR: TAME THE BEAST



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As a coach, nothing frustrates you more than fear. You know your athletes can do the skill, they are ready, or they have done it before, they have even done it for years, and now they won't do it no matter what you say or how much you jump up and down like a crazy person. Here are some tips to help you tame the beast before you become one.

TIP #1 KNOW THE FEAR BEAST

Is it a simple or complex fear? It's helpful to put fear in two categories: simple and complex. Simple fears are easily explained. Learning a new skill, recovering from a fall or injury, or watching another athlete get injured or fall are all situations where fear is easy to understand. Complex fears are on skills previously mastered, positional (i.e. backwards),

repeating, or you have no idea why it is happening. Complex fears are not very logical and trying to rationalize with the athlete about why they are having the fear is usually not very productive and may result in tears on both sides! Although treatment is virtually the same, it is nice to know what type of beast you are dealing with.

TIP #2 LOCK DOWN THE MIND

Many fears come from out of control thinking. "I'm gonna fall," "What if I stop

in the middle?" or "I can't go, and I don't know why" are all common proclamations of the fear beast. Rhythmic key words or mental choreography, singing, counting and repeating, like "this is easy for me," keeps the mind busy and distracted so the fear beast has less opportunity to rear its ugly head. Be sure your athletes say these words with consistency. Have them say the words or phrases out loud if they seem particularly stuck. Keywords help the mind become more robotic and less emotional. A "more robo; less emo" mind helps to block out the beast.

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TIP #3 GET THE HEART INVOLVED

The sure cure for fear is DESIRE. Have your athletes create a heart statement they say to themselves before every attempt to perform the skill. A heart statement can be their biggest goal, such as 'do it for nationals,' or 'do it for Level 8,' or a personal dedication ('this is for grandma,' 'this is for my team'). The heart statement should be so powerful that it becomes a strong motivator to push through fear and connects to a little discomfort if the statement is activated and still not successful.



TIP #4 BANKRUPT THE BEAST

The mind is a confidence bank with every attempt at the skill serving as a deposit or withdrawal. Increase the amount of deposits by having the athletes create a Confidence

Ladder. Dr. Joe Massimo talks about writing a progressions ladder where an athlete can take full control and responsibility for their performance. Each rung on the ladder is a progression and the number of confidence building repetitions they would like to do at each level. The top rung is completing the skill and the bottom rung is an arm set with keywords standing in place. The ladder has a few rules as well. The athlete must say their words every time, if they balk twice they back down a rung and complete the entire number on the previous rung, and they must complete the skill within 10 seconds. Helping an athlete do the skill and build up repetitions quickly is extremely effective in building the confidence bank. Balking is a withdrawal. The purpose of the confidence ladder is to break the balking cycle and keep the athlete moving forward. Be sure to withdraw attention when they back down a rung (do not be punitive, however) and praise, praise, praise, when they move up.

TIP #5 BE THE SHRINK

Many times a fear beast is simply a symptom of deeper issues. Here is a checklist for you to think about. If one or more of these are present, talk to the athlete and the parents about what you are seeing.

- Feeling too much pressure.
- Worrying about having to be perfect.
- Parents over-involved.
- Moving too

fast on skills without proper progressions.

- Family crisis or changes

If these issues occur, many times it is the coach's job to create the opposite feeling in the athlete. For example, if there is too much pressure from home, the coach might need to reduce pressure or if there is family instability, the coach might have to help the athlete feel safe in the gym environment.

Following these five tips may not entirely stop the Fear Beast taking over your gymnast, but always remember: a joyful gymnast has a better chance of beating fear than a miserable one. Keep inspiring, and keep believing!

Dr. Alison Arnold has been a mental toughness coach to USA Gymnastics since 1997. Her new workbook *Fear: Tame the Beast* is due for release in August of 2014. For more information, go to www.headgames.ws.

