

First Name: _____

Last Name: _____

REC1050-16 – Ideal Performance State (IPS)

Arousal or Activation Level

Activation Level, referred to as *arousal* in psychology, refers to the stimulation of the cerebral cortex into a state of general wakefulness or attention. Certain levels of arousal actually improve your performance, but when you start to become too aroused (overexcited) that you start to feel *pressure*, and your performance suffers.

Pressure begins in the mind. It starts with a negative thought pattern about your performance and then spreads to other things – your muscles become tense, your mind races, you experience worry and fear, and so on.

Some physical indicators can tip you off as to whether or not you've achieved the ideal amount of arousal.

<i>Physical or Mental State</i>	<i>Arousal/Activation Level</i>		
	<i>Too Low</i>	<i>Ideal</i>	<i>Too High</i>
Breathing	Shallow breathing	Comfortable breathing	Hurried breathing
Muscle tension	Too relaxed	Relaxed but ready	Tight and tense
Mental state	Bored	Challenged	Fearful or scared
Motivation	Unmotivated	Motivated	Burned out
Nervousness	No butterflies in stomach	Some butterflies	Too many butterflies
Mental activity	No thoughts	Some thoughts	Racing thoughts

When you're not aroused enough, your body isn't ready to compete. An athlete in this position usually doesn't care about the upcoming competition, hasn't prepared himself well, and is generally not motivated to do well.

In the ideal arousal state, you're feeling motivated and excited, while at the same time relaxed and ready to go. You may have heard this referred to as being in "the zone".

When you're too aroused, you feel too much pressure and aren't able to manage it. An athlete in this position typically feels scared, doubtful, worried, or distracted, and her muscles become tight and tense, increasing the chance of poor performance. She may sweat excessively, have a rapid heart rate and knots in her stomach, breathe shallowly and rapidly, feel jittery, and her mind may be racing.

The ideal arousal level, or ideal performance level, is slightly different for every athlete. One golfer may have a very low level of optimum arousal because it helps him to stay calm and relaxed when competing in a tournament. But another golfer's ideal arousal level may be a bit higher, because he's a higher-energy person, is a more aggressive player, or has a more extroverted or bold personality.

Examples of Performance States

Low arousal and low performance: Dawn is an 18-year old college soccer player who has difficulty getting excited about practice or games. She's burned out because she's played soccer for 15 years and hasn't taken many breaks from the game. She comes into practice and games most of the time feeling unmotivated and lacking the drive to be her best or to perform for her team. Her performance is usually low because her arousal level is low.

High arousal and low performance: Rikard is a 12-year old hockey goalie. He gets extremely anxious and feels tremendous pressure the night before games. He worries about letting in goals, his coach yelling at him, disappointing his teammates, and screwing up in front of others. He has difficulty sleeping, worries all day before the game, frequently has an upset stomach and shaky hands because of nerves, and even throws up once in a while before games because of the intensity of his anxiety. He plays with nervous energy, rapid heart rate, and weak leg muscles. He's exhausted at game time because of all the pressure he's been experiencing and hasn't been able to manage. His lack of focus, tight muscles, and tired body (because of pressure) cause him to let in goals that he would normally have stopped in practice. In fact, in practice, he's very talented – he just can't perform the same way in games. Pressure has created very high arousal levels for Rickard, and a resulting poor performance.

Ideal arousal and optimal performance: Laura is a professional tennis player and has become aware of her ideal mental and emotional state. She describes herself as excited, positive, and focuses on only the things she can control – her tennis, not her opponent's. Sometimes she gets anxious about whether she'll win, but she uses a variety of strategies to keep herself in a mental space of comfort and confidence. She believes in her ability and also is able to think about other things besides tennis. She notices that her muscles are relaxed and ready to go, her mind is clear, and she's enjoying the people around her as she gets ready to compete. She has a simple playing focus and keeps her mind and body in a place of composure, confidence, and concentration. She performs to the best of her ability and is happy with her performance. Even when she loses a match, she's thrilled that she did everything in her control – she knows her performance was great even though it didn't result in a win. She's excited about the next tournament because she's looking forward to continuing to perform well and getting better.

Miscellaneous Definitions

Sport Readiness: The match between a child's level of growth and development (motor, sensory, cognitive, social/emotional) and the tasks/demands of the competitive sport. This is important to set realistic expectations for children and adolescence to feel that they are making progress and maintain their self-esteem.

Anxiety: A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

Energy Management: A multifaceted mental strength skill that involves the ability to relax when too nervous and the ability to activate or "get pumped" when flat or lethargic.