

TRIATHLETEEQ

By Heather Gollnick, 5X Ironman Champion, & Dr. Izzy Justice, Sports Neuropsychologist

The goal of most professional triathletes is to look for that edge that would allow them to perform at a very high level to beat the competition. Having now worked with many professional athletes from a myriad of sports, we are convinced that what they are actually looking for is to merely perform at their best when it counts the most, not necessarily to uncover the hidden secret of their swimming, biking or running. This means to either simply duplicate what in fact they

have done hundreds of times in training, or better yet, beat it. Put another way, a key goal is to not allow any situation to beat them. This is especially true for amateur triathletes.

In triathlons, once the race starts, they are not looking to develop new skills. What they seem to be looking for is how to use the hours invested in training and skills they already have without succumbing to the pressure of the moment. In other words, it's not a technical skill of the sport

that is in question, it is something else.

Triathlete Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is a term we have coined and it is exactly what that something else is that allows you to perform at your best in a race situation. In this article, we will explore what happens to our bodies under the proverbial pressure, and begin to understand what it takes to be able to manage the variables which cause that pressure.

Neuroscience of “pressure”

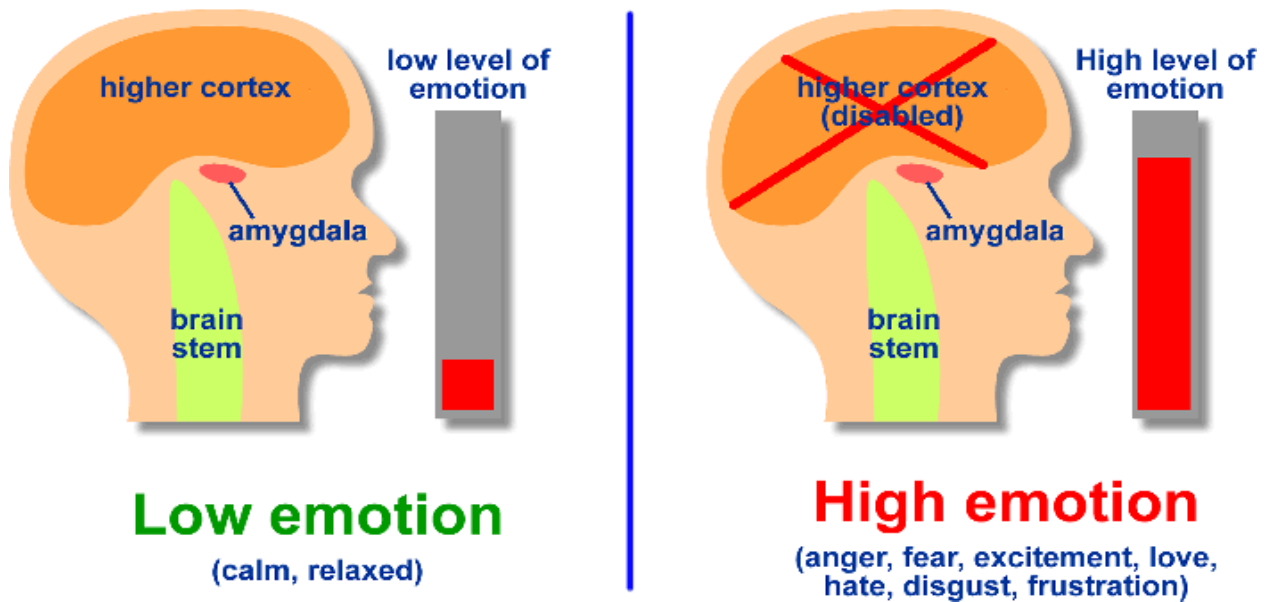
The terms anxiety, nerves, pressure, stress, heat-of-battle, choking, being-in-the-zone, and the like are used in all sports. Let's see if we can understand these very abstract terms from a neuroscience perspective so you know exactly what is happening to you.

Let's look at how our body works physiologically. Our brain is the only place where all our cognitive functions reside. Cognitive functions include our long-term, short-term, and working memory—together comprising a

collection of abilities that allow us to logically piece together different data points. Put simply, the brain is our filing cabinet and command center.

From the command center, all orders are sent to different parts of the body. The body itself cannot do anything without commands from the brain. Your hand, for example, cannot decide on its own to wave at someone. Your brain has to decipher an experience and instruct the hand to respond. If you learn something—say a new way to

enter your arms into the water—the memory of that skill resides in your brain, not in any other part of your body. To enable us to use this new skill and others we previously learned, the brain sends all its instructions through the spinal cord. In other words, the spinal cord is like a bundle of cables for that critical information to be sent to parts of your body. Now, as shown in the graphic on the next page, conveniently located between the spinal cord and the brain—between the command center and cables—is the amygdala.



The Instinctive Emotional Response

The amygdala is a gland that secretes hormones in your body. It is situated there because its job is to identify danger.

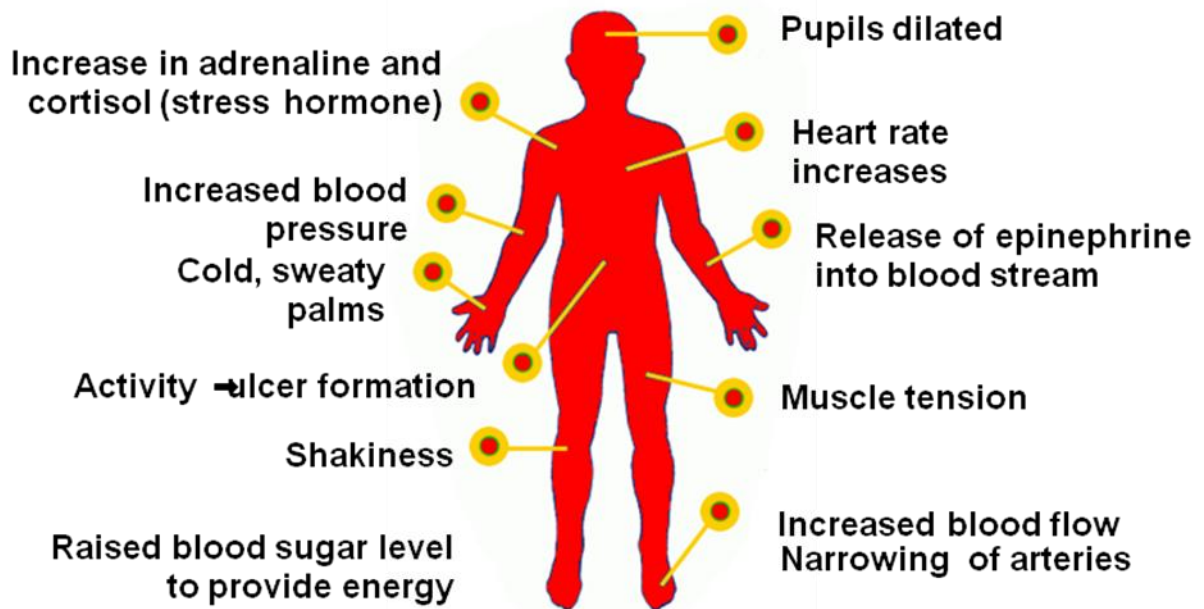
Microseconds within sensing a potential threat, it releases hormones in your body that either partially or entirely disables your brain. The disabling of cognitive functions enables your body to respond quickly and instinctively to that danger. This is essentially a safety mechanism, which is triggered as a reaction to every threat, no matter whether the danger is perceived or real. Our bodies have spent thousands of years morphing into this state so that we can perform our primary function – recognize danger and react to survive. Although there are some universal physical dangers, such as someone pointing a gun at you, most emotional dangers have no standards. It is different

for everyone and based entirely on our past experiences, often times from our childhood.

For example, if you're crossing a road and you see a car coming at you from the corner of your eye, you would—without thinking—instinctively jump or run to get the heck out of the way. You would not think about it; you would not analyze, "I wonder how fast the car is going. What are my options here?" If you did that—if you used the cognitive functions of your brain—you wouldn't be able to respond fast enough and you would be hit.

Similarly, cognitive functions are disabled when triathletes get into situations that they perceive as danger, such as getting pushed at the beginning of a mass swim start. The physiological response in the body after that push is

virtually identical to that of a car coming at us. In other words, the amygdala does not make the distinction between the threat of a car coming at us, and the threat of the consequences of a bad start or mistake on the race or falling behind on your targeted pace. Look at the body's physiological automatic and instinctive response, depicted in the image on the next page. In this state, no athlete can perform at their best. In any competition, by default, the triathlete starts in this state. In Triathlons, especially beyond the sprint level, the chances of something going wrong are inevitable, which means that our bodies will be in this state guaranteed. And even if something does not go wrong, body fatigue, hydration and nutrition issues all force the amygdala to do its instinctive job.



This physiological state leads to a “high alert state” where the brain is operating in “lock down mode.” The following consequences apply in this state:

- Decreased cognitive performance
- Less oxygen available for critical brain functions
- Over generalize
- Respond with defensive action

- Perceive small stressors as worse than they actually are
- Easily aggravated
- Will struggle to get along with others
- Cannot perform at your best

This state leads to those negative monologues – where we doubt our training, question our will, and recall past negative

situations unintentionally. At that point, access to our rational ability and skill memory has been disabled and we are in the instinctive fight-or-flight mode. Again, no triathlete can perform their best at this stage. They simply are hijacked by their own bodies in the most natural and instinctive of ways.

Developing Your Triathlete EQ

Heather’s Tip - Anxiety

The biggest challenge before a race is anxiety. To combat this, Heather has her students draw 2 circles—an inner and an outer circle. Within the inner circle she has them write down all the things that they have control over. Gear, hydration, nutrition,

electrolyte intake and heart rate to name a few. Athletes can also control their pacing – preparing ahead of time, knowing what pace they will go out at (and sticking to it), all of which allows for less anxiety. In the outer circle she has them list the circumstances beyond their control. They cannot control the

weather – if it is windy, raining or extremely hot. They cannot control other athletes, a flat tire or random acts. Take the outer circle away from the inner circle and you have significantly narrowed down the potential for anxiety. Why worry about what you cannot control? That would take away from what you *can*

control. Less anxiety links to a better performance.

Dr. Izzy's Explanation

What Heather is doing here with her triathletes is teaching their brains to redefine instinctive danger. Weather is an instinctive danger. But because you have created a new neuropathway (thinking process) for defining what you can control, the amygdala will still respond but not nearly as severely (shutting memory off) as before.

Heather's Tip – Have a Plan

Heather will have her students talk about the possibilities for issues during a race. She will have them make lists. By having identified these potential issues you have reduced their impact. You have thought through them and now have a plan. If something does go wrong during the race, be mentally armed with previous thoughts of affirmation. Recall your last successful swim. Did you overcome adversity to win that time? Did you overcome an obstacle just like the one confronting you right now? In retrospect, it wasn't so bad, was it?

Dr. Izzy's Explanation

What Heather is doing here is very powerful because endurance athletes are guaranteed for something to go wrong. Evoking positive experiences to help dilute the negative ones is the best way to impact the amygdala. All triathletes should practice recalling their best swim, T1, bike, T2, run, and example of overcoming a negative situation successfully either in training or previous competition. I often have athletes write these down on their arms or gear (a letter or word that can instantly evoke that memory) and use them to manage the powerful amygdala.

Heather's Tip - Recovery

The psychology of training needs to be considered too. This includes the weeks *before* and *after* a race. Anxiety doesn't let up simply because a race is over. It manifests itself in new ways. "If I don't work out 3 days in a row, I'm going to gain weight." That feeling of *more is better* takes over. Social media does not help with this apprehension. Everyone posts their times, their workouts—to the point that there is a need to *keep up with the Joneses*. The nature of racing often caters to a "Type A" personality, where an ever-

increasing workload and obligation to overachieve become common traits. To this, Heather teaches that "More is not necessarily better." Since most triathletes are middle-aged or older, recovery days are critical for performance days. Many triathletes simply do not respect recovery training.

Dr. Izzy's Explanation

What Heather is suggesting here is indeed entirely based on those deeply established neuropathways that correlate to our past. Not respecting recovery days is entirely an emotional response based on what our perception of health and self worth is. In other words, it is dependent on our perception of danger. For some, the idea of not working out leads to very low feeling of worth, an emotional danger, which translates to often ignoring recovery or over training or poor training. Understanding and being self aware of what your specific emotional dangers are is essential to your physical performance. These same emotional dangers are guaranteed to come into play during the race since it is what the amygdala relies on instinctively.

General Tips

Here are some tips to increasing your self-awareness. First, come up with an imaginary tool called an *Emotional Thermometer* which shows only three temperatures, similar to that of a

traffic light. *Green* indicates that you are comfortable, happy, stress-free, and can think clearly and perform well. The race is going smooth. You can remember your swim, bike or run

pre-race thoughts and are following your game plan. *Yellow* indicates that you are a little stressed and anxious. Something goes wrong in the race. In the heat of competition you can get

your goggles kicked off, swallow lake or sea water, drop a water bottle, get a leg cramp or blister – the list goes on and on of things that can go wrong that can take us off “green” to “yellow”. *Red* is when you are implicitly or explicitly out of control, filled with anger and rage, or disappointment and frustration.

Take your emotional temperature every 15 to 30 minutes both in training and during the race. Based on your reading (green, yellow or red) – have a specific positive memory or pre-determined thought or action that you can take to get yourself back to green from either Yellow or Red. Be specific with what you need to do if your temperature reading is yellow

and it must be different than what you need to do if it is red. Since you are guaranteed to be in all 3 states, and you now understand what is happening to your body and brain, use your EQ to allow yourself access to your memory (training) so that you can perform at your best. A great example of this was in the 2007 Arizona Ironman where Heather was not favored to win. Even with the odds stacked against her, she felt very confident that day. Confident enough, that when someone asked her if she thought that she was going to win, she looked them dead in the eye and declared, “Yes. Yes I do.” Despite this confidence, from the very beginning of the race, Joanna Zeiger took the lead out of the

water and extended that lead on the bike, pulling five or six miles ahead. Still, Heather kept telling herself the mantra of “Yes I can”. Even as she was being passed by others it was one of those odd days where she kept saying it to herself. Heather got off the bike and she was in 5th place. Slowly, mile after mile she started to catch up with Joanna until she passed her close to mile 25 on the run. It proved to be one of the most rewarding wins for Heather because she had to work so hard to achieve it. This was a great example of constantly taking her temperature and affirming the positive, not allowing the amygdala to compromise her ability.

About the Authors

Heather Gollnick is a 5 Time Ironman champion who has also finished top five 14 other times. As a busy mom of 3 (Ironmom) she still competes and coaches triathletes of all levels through IronEdge Coaching. She can be reached at Gollnick3@aol.com. Follow her on Facebook or on Twitter @heathergollnick. (www.ironedgecoaching.com) (www.ironmom.bodybyvi.com)

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