

## Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Peleton? By, Carrie Cheadle

Fear; we've all felt it. When face-to-face with a mountain lion, or riding in the peleton, fear elicits the "fight or flight" response. It's a source of motivation. When humans were a part of the food chain, fear motivated you to run like hell or fight for your life. In a race, it can motivate you to "run" and avoid the situation or "fight" and meet it head on. If you are riding in the pack and your fear response instinct tells you to "run" it may manifest as hesitation and missing an opportunity to move into the right position, fading to the back of the pack, or not sprinting for the finish. If you choose to fight, you will prepare for the challenge and meet it head on.

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*"On scary sections, you need to make your body and mind agree with each other. Both have to say 'Let's go there.'"*  
-Franck Roman, mountain biker

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Fear isn't bad. Fear tells your mind to get your body ready to respond to a threat. Fear is the appropriate response when you are in eminent danger. The problem, however, is that often times the "threat" is a *perceived* threat and not an *actual* threat at all. In this case, fear has become anxiety and can be detrimental to performance. More than likely, the fear you are feeling has manifested into anxiety and is keeping you from performing your best. There are two types of manifestations of anxiety: physiological and psychological.

### Physiological

The physiological response to fear, an actual threat of harm to life and body, prepares you for peak performance. The physiological response to *anxiety* can be detrimental to performance. Feelings of anxiety can produce:

- Racing heart rate
- Increased muscle tension
- Increased fatigue
- Upset stomach
- Shallow breathing
- Shaking
- Decrease in balance
- Tunnel vision

Yikes! How are you going to perform your best when your heart is beating out of your chest, you can't breathe, and feel like you might vomit?

### Psychological

The psychological response to anxiety is worry. Worry is the anticipation of something that MIGHT happen. Try this exercise: grab a piece of paper and draw two identical circles at the top of the page. These are your pie charts. In the 1<sup>st</sup> pie chart, draw the percentage of time throughout your cycling experience that you have crashed. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> pie chart, draw the percentage of time that your mind is occupied with thoughts of crashing. For people who have a fear of crashing, the percentage of time spent worrying about it, far outweighs the percentage of time it actually occurs. Worrying is wasted energy because it is an ineffective coping mechanism for dealing with fear. If it was effective, then the more you worried about something, the less it would bother you! The ability to control your thoughts is a powerful step in taking control of your performance.

## Take Control

The physiological and psychological responses to anxiety intertwine and affect performance. Your own thoughts can become a distraction that causes you to do the very thing you're most afraid of. If you're wrapped up in your head thinking about how scared you are at this moment, you cause your muscles to tense and compromise your balance. As you read this, hold your breath and tense all of the muscles in your body. Now imagine riding your bike as you do this. If you're not relaxed, you won't be able to smoothly absorb any changes in terrain or bumps from riders. Below are tips on taking control of your performance. Think of these tips like food in the cafeteria line; some people like mac 'n cheese and other people just want a salad. But like my Mom always said, "You have to try everything at least once!" So try these out and see which tips work best for you.

### 1. Relax

- Give yourself permission to be afraid: It's OK to feel fear. Sometimes we become so focused on fighting against our fear that we make it even worse. Give yourself permission to be afraid. Fear let's us know that we need to pay attention. There will be times when you will ride with fear. Learn how to control it to the point where you can feel the fear, but not let it distract you or hinder your performance.
- Breathe: When you start to feel that tension creeping in, your breathing is often the first thing to go. The #1 ally we have in dealing with tension and anxiety is to take a deep breath. Taking in several deep breaths can help you relax your muscles and restore energy, balance, and composure.
- Relax your hands and face: Right now as you're reading this, relax the muscles in your face. Now relax your hands. How do you feel? On your bike, this small gesture of relaxing your face and releasing your death grip can send a signal to the other muscles in your body to relax as well. That increase in muscle tension wastes a tremendous amount of energy. Relax and save that energy for the final sprint.

### 2. Reframe

Sometimes feelings of anxiety come from your interpretation of what you are feeling in your body. If you associate a racing heart, shallow breathing, and butterflies as something negative, then you are producing psychological anxiety from your perception of those physical symptoms. One technique for dealing with this type of anxiety is to reframe how these symptoms affect you. Take control of your breathing and imagine that your racing heart and butterflies give your body extra energy to perform. By reframing your associations, you can see these symptoms as something useful.

### 3. Critical Moments

People are much more likely to change their behavior if they have a plan for how they will do it. Make a list of what situations cause you the most anxiety; times when you are likely to become distracted and lose focus. When you've made your list, ask yourself this question:

“What do I need to focus on in that moment in order to perform my best?” Break it down into the smallest component. Give yourself something else to focus on other than your fear. “I need to relax my death grip, and stay on her wheel.” Set out a plan choosing where you need to focus and you will gain more control over your performance.

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*“Fear is your best friend or your worst enemy. It’s like fire. If you can control it, it can cook for you; it can heat your house. If you can’t control it, it will burn everything around you and destroy you.” –Cus D’Amato, boxing trainer*

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#### 4. Control your thoughts

- **Stop feeding the monster:** Negative thoughts feed your fear. Chances are, if you’re afraid of riding in the pack – your thoughts go something like this: “I don’t know if I can do this. We’re packed in too tight. Oh God, please don’t bump me. *What the hell am I doing in here!?*” You have a choice; you can feed the monster or feed the athlete. The one you *choose* to feed is the one that will grow stronger. Oftentimes, the factor that holds people back from performing their best is a lack of confidence; your thoughts and self-talk are the most direct link to your level of confidence. If you are plagued with doubts and negative thoughts, practice using your powers for good instead of evil! Control your thoughts and make them work for you instead of against you.
- **Cue words:** It’s not enough to stop your negative thoughts; you have to choose what you will say in order to take control of your focus. It’s important to have *something to go to* – or your mind and negative thoughts will just take over. One of the most powerful ways of controlling your focus is to come up with focus cue words. Prepare ahead of time so you know exactly what to think when you start to feel that little ball of worry in the pit of your stomach. *Feed the athlete.* Develop your own cue words like “Calm”, “Breathe”, “I’m in control”, to control your focus. By choosing cue words to direct your focus, you are not only taking control of your performance, but of your confidence as well.

Remember how good it felt to ride your bike when you were a kid? The freedom you felt pedaling around and exploring the neighborhood; racing your friends to the end of the street. Riding your bike is supposed to be fun! As we get older, the all encompassing fear begins to take hold, *if you let it.* Whether it’s fear of getting hurt, or making mistakes, or looking like a fool – we let our feeling of fear get in the way of performing to our potential. We let it hold us back. Find a way to push beyond your fear and you’ll not only start to perform better and have more fun, but you’ll have the opportunity to see what you’re capable of.

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