

The Anxious Athlete

Me VS Myself On & Off The Court

By **Dennis Simsek**

Dedicated to my beautiful mom who has put up with me through everything.....

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1

WHO IS THE ANXIOUS ATHLETE?

“My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure.” - Abraham Lincoln

I was warned by my dad that life throws you a lot of curveballs, but this roller coaster ride I was not ready for. Living with GAD (Generalized Anxiety Disorder), Panic Disorder, Hypochondria and Depression diagnosed by many different doctors, is definitely something that takes its toll on you and can beat you down worse than any opposition you will ever meet. It's sort of a mix of twenty Mike Tyson right hooks, a gigantic wave crashing down on you and brushing you to shore, and The Riddler taunting you mercilessly in any way he can all day wrapped up in a tightly tied box ready for you to open each morning.

My morning routine was usually the same each day: wake up and feel relief that I was still alive. Check if the pounding feeling and pain in my chest was still there . . .

which it was. Stagger to the bathroom by holding on to something due to the dizziness to look in the mirror and notice how God-awful I looked and wonder what the hell my fiancée saw in me. This followed by the morning shower, thinking about how I would ever get through the day, working on my fake smile and attitude so I could stay positive enough to keep my tennis coaching position. Then I would go over how much I dreaded seeing everyone I would have to come into contact with that day and finally the worry and fear process would be going full speed ahead.

Dennis Simsek is my name, and my whole life I have been involved in the sport of tennis, more recently as a professional player playing low-level ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) tournaments or as a teaching pro. It all started at the age of four and progressed from there. My biggest fan and the person who started it all for me was my dad. To give you a mental picture of my dad, imagine this: a 9 year old has just reached the final of his first tennis tournament, comes off the court with a proud smile being hugged by his loving mom, only to be reprimanded on the way home, and told to throw the trophy out of a moving car with the kind of scream a lion would be proud of. The reason? Apparently I hadn't given a hundred and ten percent on the court, and this was followed up by being sent to my room and the door slammed behind me. Yep, my dad had a dream for me and that was to be the next Andre Agassi and whether I wanted this dream or not didn't matter. 6 am practices followed by being home schooled followed by more tennis in the afternoon followed by fitness was my daily life. All the while I just wanted to be a regular kid having fun on the playground and meeting kids my own age. The worst part about my situation as a kid growing up in Vancouver, BC as a junior tennis star was that in this sport you had no partners to shoulder the blame with – unlike team sports where you can blame your goalie or your linebacker. Nope, tennis is two gladiators going head to head and there can only be one winner . . . and one loser. It's even tougher to bring out your best game when you have the father from hell staring you down on the sidelines, ready to verbally give it to you if you lost the match.

Now I am 32 years old and have suffered from extreme anxiety for the past six years and have lived to tell the story (barely). As I look back on my junior years, I realize how early my anxiety started and how year after year I just found different things to attach myself to so that my anxiety would continue to grow. If deep down I had the tools I knew would work to stop the anxiety and if I just had the patience to develop those tools, why couldn't I push through and detach myself from the prison I was feeling each day? I'll tell you why – because from a young age my mind had been programmed to fight everything even if that thing had a positive side to it. It just wasn't good enough, and my mind would find the threatening part only and the anxiety cycle would begin. Over and over I basically treated everything in my life like it was a tennis match and I needed to do what I could to be the victor. A simple walk in the park where someone would look at me a second too long and the anxiety cycle would begin, all of a sudden I would start looking out for people that stared too long from the fear of being judged for something like my clothes or my walk or whatever. Being at a shopping mall where a sales clerk would ask, 'Can I help you with something?' – A normal person would realize this is her job and she gets paid to help customers. I would say, 'No thank you, I'm just looking', but really I would be thinking 'Why am I being pressured to buy something – if I needed her help I would ask for it! Geez I hate pushy people!' This usually started the cycle that people with Anxiety and Panic Disorder deal with and what usually followed was either a slight cough, my usual spitting routine, cracking my knuckles, and the most popular one of them all - nail biting. Quickly thoughts became negative and fearful, which manifested into some kind of physical symptom – extreme dizziness, heart palpitations, and migraines in my case – which leads to leaving the mall a.s.a.p. Oh yes, then comes the shortness of breath which was followed by feeling like I was dying - which is actually the worst feeling I've ever felt in my life and wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. I will cover later on in the book what comes after all that which is usually someone calling emergency and landing me in a bed next to people I was starting to know quite well.

Hmmm I wonder why I avoided shopping malls for the next few years. Agoraphobia is avoiding places that can cause unusual panic and anxiety for a person and boy did I have a long list of places to avoid from my mid 20's to early 30's. Not only would certain places trigger these emotional reactions that led to more panic attacks and chronic anxiety, but it was also food, drinks, people, pets, and even music. To a person that doesn't suffer from GAD or Panic Disorder, having a beer on a warm day on the patio is as relaxing as lying next to the ocean listening to the sound of the waves. However for me, having a glass of beer would bring up memories of another incident where I had found myself in the ER or shaking in uncontrollable fear in bed at home. So I avoided it, but being a tennis coach it was difficult to say no to a client who wanted to share a few beers after a tennis lesson or a group inviting me to their usual weekend tennis social. Of course, thinking it would be rude to say no, I would go to these get-togethers and have a few beers. Sometimes people would ask me if I was alright after my first beer, because I would be so stricken with fear that another deadly scenario would happen that night and my panic would set in. Next thing I knew the physical sensations would come back, I would be extremely dizzy again and around and around and around I would go.

For years this was my daily struggle. I had nights where I would cry and ask 'why me?' and surf the web trying to find solutions to the evil thing that had taken over my life. In my early 20's I remember being free from negative thoughts and having an anxiety level that would match the rest of the world. If someone stepped on my foot on the bus, I would brush it off in a few seconds and move on. But in my late 20's, if the same thing happened it would ruin my whole day. Not only that, if the person who had stepped on my foot was a woman, for example, I would hate all women because of their lack of awareness and therefore generalized women. See how this all works? What I really hope is as we get deeper and deeper through this book, you readers can find similarities with what I have dealt with. I also hope you will use the suggestions I give through the chapters as well as the main steps that I outline at the end to help you get on the right track again and slowly turn these fearful thoughts, feelings,

and reactions around.

Over the six years of my struggle with GAD and Panic Disorder I've read many self-help books that describe so-called 'miracle techniques' that would get rid of my anxiety in an instant. I have also had a cabinet totally full of pills and remedies that doctors and websites recommended that would really help me. I'll tell you something, though - none of those books or websites has been from the perspective of someone who has gone through the levels of anxiety first-hand and for as long as I have and come out of it in the end better than they were before like I have. I am a brand new man, and I hope this will motivate you and if you have the patience to stick to my suggestions, then you will also come through this and be able to look back at the man or woman you were a few months before and realize what a waste of time and energy that cycle of anxiety was.

I remember one day, walking around on my day off from work on a beautiful weekend, feeling absolutely exhausted, even though I had a good eight hours of sleep and a healthy breakfast. I was thinking to myself that something was terribly wrong, why was I feeling as if the world was like a dream? That day I realized that I had been hit with the experience of depersonalization, the sense that the world had become less real and lacking in significance. I dragged myself around in a sort of daze, almost like being on a street drug. People were walking past me but it felt as if I was in a dream and this wasn't real. This off-balance, unreal feeling had kicked in so badly that I would act in ways that I never thought I would. My thoughts spiralled out of control and that day I knew that if I didn't make some drastic changes in my life in every aspect then I was headed down a road that deep down I didn't want to be on. But I was comfortable, GAD was my comfort zone. My mind said if I didn't worry about these things and didn't take care of these threats around me that I would lose control, and if I lost control that would lead to the ultimate fear that being a hypochondriac brings, which is an early death. My mind was in full on fight or flight mode from the minute I woke up to the minute I went to sleep, and on top of all the physical manifestations that anxiety brought,

now I was also stuck in this dreamlike trance all day. Sometimes my fiancée Robyn would be talking to me and mention something that would be important for me to remember, but of course it didn't register because I was too busy keeping an eye on my physical symptoms and how I was feeling. It must have been so frustrating for someone that close to me trying to understand what was really going on and have a regular conversation with and instead this man, this love of your life, has turned into a mute who is clearly miserable and with no end in sight. Yes, those were dark days and I am glad they are over. Do I still experience some dizziness and fatigue? Yes, but compared to the man I used to be I've made a complete turnaround and have regained control of my thoughts and my life, and have stopped the fear from rushing in and overtaking me.

If there was a funny part to all of this it was this: how I could be feeling like I was on my deathbed before going into the ER, and then after being checked out feeling amazing with a sense of being born again? In fact, there was one instance that I can remember when one of my good friends Eric, whom I was living with at the time, took me to the ER around midnight due to the shortness of breath I was feeling. He must have been so confused to see his friend and roommate suffering from panic like this and not knowing what to say or do. He dropped me off there and I came out as the sun was rising, feeling great again, only to suffer from immense chest pains and dizziness later that day.

Through all of these years, I've realized that anxiety is a very tricky thing. Our ancestors needed this fight or flight response in case of danger like some kind of creature chasing after them and becoming their dinner. They needed to be quick and react in an instant, the mind needed to recognize a threat and the body needed to be ready to do battle or run. My mind and body were reacting as if there were a sabretoothed tiger around every corner, but of course there wasn't. Why couldn't I realize that these physical sensations were just a way for my body to prepare itself to fight a threat and they weren't some life threatening illness or heart attack? Especially after doctors of all kinds reassuring me that I was

completely healthy and had nothing to worry about? Because I continued to fear the unknown, my mind kept saying ‘this is it’, ‘this time it will end me’, or ‘maybe the doctor missed something because he hesitated a little when he was explaining something to me’. There was always that ‘what if’ and that was enough to continue to add fuel to my fear and anxiety cycle. During prize money tennis tournaments I remember always getting sick or injured before a match and having to default the match (not play due to an injury). My fearful thoughts of a potential panic attack, and how deep those amazingly fearful physical symptoms of ultra-high levels of anxiety were rooted in me, many times forced me to not even walk on the tennis court even if I was a real underdog with nothing to lose.

Of course, during those dark years there were things that helped me get by and made life enjoyable, for example I didn’t have my dad breathing down my neck during tennis practices and matches anymore. I really started to enjoy training and competing in tournaments again in my early 30’s. I also enjoyed lifting weights if the fatigue and dizziness I felt on a daily basis took a few hours off during the day. Another thing I absolutely loved to do was to DJ. In fact this was the greatest release for me, because for a few hours my thoughts were directed towards synching beautiful music for people to dance and enjoy themselves to instead of indulging in my usual negative and worrisome thinking. It gave me so much freedom whether it was DJing in my own home or in a bar I was hooked to that feeling – no thoughts, just pure positive energy all around me. Eventually I would start my own mobile DJ Company, Sev Productions, and would do weddings, private parties, graduations, and pretty much any event I could get. I really don’t know how I was able to do something I had never done before and run with it the way I did with DJing. I wasn’t in the right place mentally to just pick something up like that because I was already so busy trying to find a diagnosis and eventually a cure for what I was dealing with. I remember House Music being one of the biggest triggers to my anxiety, but shortly after getting my DJ equipment I decided to spin some. I think House Music was a trigger because of the fast tempo that electronic music brings

with it – sort of like when you’re at the peak of your panic and everything is going out of control. This was the beginning of what was to be a real solution to my anxiety problems. I remember a song being played loudly in my place from one turntable and another song about to be mixed in on the other one and I was listening to it through my earphones. I could just feel my body go into the fight or flight mode and that sent my thoughts into a frenzy again, and for the first time I didn’t run. I actually withstood the feeling of losing control of my mind and body and stayed right where I was, sweating profusely, and I continued to mix song after song and for some reason at the top of my lungs I yelled, “Go to hell Anxiety!!!” I was worried and scared to death but I kept going and going, feeling horrible but awesome at the same time, kind of like Mel Gibson in Braveheart at the end of the movie yelling “Freedom!!!”

After another twenty minutes of mixing music and yelling, I was absolutely exhausted but surprisingly alive and for the first time I felt some retreat from my physical sensations. My negative thoughts were still there, but I was too tired to care anymore. How come I didn’t collapse? How come I didn’t run away this time?

2

THE WORLD THROUGH AN OVERLY ANXIOUS MIND

“The source of anxiety lies in the future. If you can keep the future out of mind, you can forget your worries.”

-Milan Kundera

The professional tennis tour can be a lonely place for a competitor. Usually people don't speak to each other much unless they're from the same country, and then it's quite common to see vans packed with six players sleeping practically on top of each other. You also will see competitors having to string tennis racquets on a beat up old machine trying to earn a few bucks to get them through to the next tournament. From the ages of 21 to 26, I tried very hard to

keep up with the pack week to week and earn my elusive ATP tennis point which gives you a professional tennis ranking. Being called a professional tennis player rather than an amateur is much more attractive for tennis club employers to hire you, as well as making it easier to play in professional level tournaments. I was always a workhorse ever since I watched my first 'Rocky' video, and since my parents had separated and my dad wasn't running the show anymore, I felt free and was driven to succeed. Unfortunately, all of the hard work in the world doesn't mean much if you aren't mentally strong enough to handle the pressure of a tennis match, and boy did I crumble each and every time things got difficult. In my early 20's I wasn't a fearful, worrying wreck, even though I had anxiety levels higher in normal situations than the rest of the world. The tennis tour taught me that you need to be equally strong in every aspect - physical, mental, technical, and tactical - to be able to compete with the rest of the pack. Just like in people's everyday lives, taking time to strengthen yourself physically (exercise, sports, working out), mentally (looking at the facts of the past, mental exercises, meditation), technically (doing the activities correctly), and tactically (balancing everything properly throughout your day), can keep up the momentum required to keep fear and worry away. The problem is that in our world there is so much information it is hard to decide which direction to go. People who suffer with Generalized Anxiety Disorder or Panic Disorder often have very little patience so it can be hard to stick to something long enough to see success and become the person they want to be again.

One important thing for anxiety sufferers and something that has worked for my life really well is planning. When I did things at random I never got anywhere. I would read that I needed to change my diet in this way or that way so I would fill up my blender with a bunch of vegetables and gulp it all down, then check in (checking to see if anything was physically wrong with me at that moment) and see if I was feeling better or not. If I didn't have immediate results I would ditch the blender and try something else, giving up on that just as quickly. This kind of randomness is what continued the cycle of high anxiety and worry - constantly

striving for a solution and not finding one. As difficult as it was for me at first, as soon as I started to plan out my days and weeks, picking out the right things that I felt worked well for me whether it was an herb or exercise, as well as doing mental exercises on paper, I started to see noticeable changes in the way I approached certain situations. The most important thing is to have a well thought out plan and stick to that plan if you are going to have any success conquering the unrealistic thoughts that overwhelm you, along with those feelings that can be so exhausting and difficult to deal with.

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults aged 18 or older. Reprogramming the mind just like reprogramming a computer is what we must start to do. The exercises and suggestions throughout this book will be the cure, but only if they are used daily in your plan to balance out your life, conquer your fears, and regain happiness. The transition to completely overcoming GAD and Panic Disorder is best described as coming out of a very long and dark tunnel into the light and realizing the beauty that was around you the whole time, you just never noticed because you were so wrapped up in yourself. You start to think, 'Wow, I never noticed how beautiful everything is' and the world all of a sudden is much more peaceful. Situations that used to drive you crazy are now quickly shrugged off and replaced with thoughts like, 'this problem is not worth getting worked up over, I'm going to turn my focus this way instead,' and the anxiety cycle is broken right then and there before it starts.

Social situations were a huge no-no for me, as I mentioned earlier. Even when the trigger of alcohol wasn't present, I still had a very tough time meeting new people and creating a bond that could eventually lead to a friendship. This was sad, because I realized that once you've come through GAD and Panic Disorder that there really is nothing to fear when you meet someone or a group of new people. It's a little bit tricky to talk about friends, family, and acquaintances, because when I was going through my problems there wasn't anyone I knew that understood what I was going through and could help me along on my road to

recovery. Most of the time, I tried to hide my anxiety and panic issues around people due to the embarrassment and how ridiculous I felt about it all. The rare time I did open up I usually got responses like 'take it easy' or even more popular, 'learn to relax'. These responses are good suggestions for someone with an anxiety level of say four or five out of ten, but when you're talking about someone who is gripping so tightly day by day to stay in control of these physical sensations of worry and fear, they mean nothing. So you can't really blame the Anxiety sufferer for not opening up more to the people around them or going out and meeting new friends. This is why I think that it is really important for people close to the Anxiety sufferer to be well educated on how to treat them. We are very fragile creatures and can take things the wrong way all of the time. A simple comment like, "did you get sunburned yesterday?" Can be an immediate emergency for a hypochondriac to get to the nearest WiFi connection to check what the chances of getting skin cancer can be from having a sunburn. That's why, while in the process of recovery, it's important that people you see often at home and in your daily life read up on what it's like to have GAD or any other issue related to your mental health.

I remember being on a date in my late 20's and trust me, dating wasn't a common thing for me. Even though on the outside I looked confident and dressed the part, on the inside I was at what seemed like the peak of my anxiety, and could rate myself at about a nine out of ten for many years. So, I'm going on this blind date that my tennis clients put together for me, and after trying to think of an excuse to get out of it for hours, I found myself on my way to the restaurant to meet my date. Things started really well because usually in the first few minutes of meeting someone I am very upbeat and energetic which she must have interpreted as being fun and outgoing. We sat down and I could feel the blood rushing to my face in nervousness but I was holding it together pretty well, and was able to keep the conversation going quite well also. The problem was it was dinner time and therefore only a matter of time before my physical sensations like shortness of breath and extreme dizziness would kick in, and I needed to decide between my usual three choices that I had when this

happened. Choice #1 was suck it up, have some alcoholic drinks that would trigger unbearable anxiety for the next few days and probably send me to the emergency room again. Choice #2 was hang in there, do a few bathroom breaks to take deep breaths and start over. Choice #3 was fake an emergency that I had to attend to right then and there and leave the restaurant. Which choice would you have made? I think the most positive choice would be #2 because it would lead to a potential relationship or friendship that could last forever without the embarrassment of seeing me drunk (not a good scene because I get overly energetic and friendly followed by going to sleep in the nearest comfy place I could find). The only thing I could blame going to the washroom that many times on would be all of the water I drank earlier that day at the gym (the gym part would also be a plus because it would be something she would be looking for in a guy, as she was extremely fit). I chose choice #1 because what alcohol does to someone who suffers from high levels of anxiety is it gives them temporary relief from all physical sensations (or at least we stop paying attention to them as much), and it replaces any negative and unproductive thoughts with happy and fearless ones. For the 40 or so minutes just after dinner we had a blast and I was unstoppable and drunk (after four beers). I was the person I wanted to be every minute of every day, I was outgoing, confident, and fearless. Who would have thought that this scared little mouse could turn into a raging lion so quickly? The problem was that a few hours later we were lounging on the sofas near the restaurant at another bar and my invincibility was starting to wear off and I was starting to get tired and sleepy. I was starting to realize that the next couple of days were going to be the most difficult days I could imagine, which led to the usual cycle of worry and fear which turned into physical sensations followed by confusion. The conversation was now at a snail's pace and I could tell I was really starting to rub her the wrong way, the night that had started out so great with a nice meal and conversation and fun had turned into a complete train wreck in only a matter of hours. We said our goodbyes and I ended up having to go and sleep in the back seat of my car, this was a good decision due to all of the alcohol I had in order to make

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