

“Take chances, make mistakes. That’s how you grow. Pain nourishes your courage. You have to fail in order to practice being brave.”

Mary Tyler Moore, actress

“Failures are expected by losers and ignored by winners.”

Joe Gibbs, NFL coach

The **fear of losing** almost always comes from thinking about outcome-based results as opposed to performance-based results. I like to use the following definitions when describing these two types of results.

Outcome-based goals are by definition, things that are not totally under your control. The most common outcome goal is to *win a match*. Another outcome-based goal would be to make all your second serves.

Performance-based goals are by definition things that are totally within your control. A performance-based goal would be to “swing hard” on all of your second serves.

Just by looking at those two examples, it is easy to see that the outcome-based goal is going to cause the player more stress and be more difficult to accomplish.

Over the years I have seen many players that were so struck with fear before a match that they made themselves physically ill. I know they did not *want* to feel that way, but they just had no idea how to get rid of those feelings. Many of these players just resolved in their minds that they were somehow inferior and did not have what it takes to be a tough competitor.

However, just simply ignoring these fears only makes matters worse. Going into a match with fear is like going into a battle against two opponents, the one on the other side of the net and the one *within* you. Your goal should never be to get rid of all the butterflies in your stomach before the match, but rather to get those butterflies to *fly in formation*.

I think the best way to reduce your fear of losing is by resetting what your goal is for each match. I like to use the concept of the **personal promise**. I define a personal promise as a performance-based goal(s) that you set for yourself before each match you are about to play.

If these personal promises are defined and clear in your head, you can measure your success by how well you stick to your promise instead of winning or losing. And since personal promises are all performance-based, there is no way you can fail unless you simply decide not to do it. They are by definition 100 percent within your control.

Logic would say that your personal promise should be something that will give you a better chance to win a certain match and/or to make you better in the long run. For instance, if you know that when things get tight, you tend to ‘push’ your second serve, then a great personal promise would be to “swing hard” on all second serves. That should be the new goal you set for yourself for that match. Even if you lose the match, if you can succeed at keeping your personal promise to yourself, you can find enjoyment in the fact that you have begun to resolve one of your game’s deficiencies.

Once you have a personal promise identified for your match, you will find that as your match unfolds, you will have a greatly reduced fear of losing because you have switched your thoughts away from winning (outcome-based) to keeping your personal promise (performance-based). This technique has worked very well for me as well as many of my students. The very best win I ever had in my career was a direct result of using this technique.

Sometimes you will find that after a match begins, you may begin to feel nervous or experience the fear of losing creeping back into your mind, especially if the match is close. That simply means you have allowed your mind to wander from your personal promise back towards winning. You may have to fight this habit a lot in the beginning, but as you reap the benefits of playing for your personal promise rather than playing just to win, you will begin to master this skill so that it becomes second nature to you.

Your personal promises will fall into two categories:

- 1) Specific to your next match and opponent.
- 2) For your long-term development.

Personal promises can also be:

- **Technical** in nature like swinging low to high on all your forehands or using a certain grip.
- **Mental** in nature like resting your eyes on your strings after a point so your mind does not wander.
- **Strategical** in nature like serving to your opponent's weaker side.
- **Movement** in nature like split stepping every time your opponent strikes the ball.

Below are some examples of the most common personal promises I have used for myself and my players.

- Swing hard on my second serves.
- Come to the net on all short balls (service box)
- Hit all my serves to their weaker side.
- Rip topspin on my backhand. (no slices)
- Take the full amount of time between points.
- Look at my strings between points so my mind & eyes don't wander.

Exercises:

- 1) On a scale of 1-10, how much do you *fear* losing when you play? (circle one)

Not at all
Fearful

Totally
Fearful

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- 2) Describe in the space below what an **outcome-based** goal is.
- 3) Describe in the space below what a **performance-based** goal is.
- 4) Can you list any performance-based goals that you have used in the past?
- 5) Create a list of three possible *personal promises* that are specific to a certain player you want to beat (a rival). These promises should be specifically designed for *you* to use against this specific opponent. Make sure these promises are written as positive and not negative statements.

Insert a rival's name here: _____

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- 6) Create a list of three possible personal promises that are for your long-term development. You may want to consult your coach about what promises he thinks would be best for your long-term development.

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7) List two personal promises that would help you in the area of technique (grips and swing patterns).

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8) List two personal promises that would help you with the mental aspects of tennis.

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9) List two personal promises that would help you in the area of strategy.

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10) List two personal promises that would help you in the area of movement.

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Chapter 4 - Wrap Up

Below write down the top three most helpful ideas that **you** gained from this chapter.

1)

2)

3)