



Mental conditioning: Is your brain in the game?

Whether you're preparing for a marathon or simply hoping to improve your weekly golf game, mental conditioning may be just what you need to enhance your performance. Consider the benefits — improved concentration and focus, controlled emotions, confidence in the face of challenge. Now how do you get there?

Try these techniques

Mental conditioning is often based on four core techniques: relaxation, imagery, goal setting and positive thinking.

Relaxation

Simple relaxation techniques can help you relieve anxiety and tension to improve concentration and focus. Take a few deep breaths before your game or performance to prepare for what you're about to do. Smile when your nerves start to fray. Slow down. Stay calm. Enjoy yourself.

Imagery

Imagery can be a powerful tool for increasing confidence. Picture yourself doing your sport or activity — dressed as you would be, hearing what you might hear and smelling what you might smell. Feel your muscles. Sense your emotions. Imagine yourself playing with confidence and skill. Let distracting thoughts or feelings float away.

Positive thinking

Negative thoughts can get in the way of concentration and confidence. Mantras such as "Don't miss this shot" or "Don't strike out" may only cause you to do the exact thing you were trying to avoid. Instead, remind yourself that you can do it. Repeat positive phrases to yourself as you play. If you make an error, consider it a simple reminder that your focus is off.

Keep your edge

All this talk about relaxation, focus and imagery doesn't mean you should be passive during your sport or activity. Athletes can be quite calm in terms of anxiety even while their heart rate increases during a demanding athletic situation. This higher level of arousal seems to facilitate eye-hand response time.

Beyond the game

You can apply to your daily life the same mental conditioning techniques you use to improve your game or performance. Try relaxation techniques to relieve stress. Practice imagery before a big presentation, job interview or meeting. Use goal setting to maintain motivation at work or at home.

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