


Men's Health



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Think like a sportsman

Athletes use stress as fuel to get better, faster and emerge as winners. Follow their tricks to get more from the sport of life

Words: Dr Samir Parikh Photography: Amit Somvanshi

How often have you seen sports critics complain that some sportsmen—in the ring, on the field, in the pool or on the court—are not as mentally strong as their opponents? Or, worse, that they're incapable of performing under pressure. There's talk about attitude and focus.

There are instances where one player is better than the other—in terms of technique or talent—but the latter performs better in crunch situations. The reason: his ability to handle stress better at that moment. What is most important for any sportsman is the ability to convert his athletic 'talent' into consistency of performance. No matter how stressful the situation or how hard you need to push, there's a better result at the end of it. There's plenty to take

away from a sportsman's struggle for me and you. Not only can you get a better grip on how to handle stress, you will also be able to get more from your workout sessions or from any game you play.

LEARN TO PLAY HARD **Prepare yourself for a tough situation by reading the outcomes, the pitfalls and have a contingency plan**

Herbert James Elliott, one of the world's greatest middle distance runners, famously said, "The more I talk to athletes, the more convinced I become that the method of training is relatively unimportant. The important thing is the attitude of the athlete, the desire to get to the top."

Sure, games can be won and games can be lost. The most important thing is the initiative to be on the field

and to play the game. Four of the five 'Ss' of sports psychology—stamina, speed, strength, skill and spirit—are measurable, but the greatest of them—spirit—is not. The same apply to a man's life in general, and cultivating spirit leads to gains in the other four Ss.

Performance in any endeavour is contingent on mental preparation and psychological strength. Just as you prepare for competition by practising actual physical skill and increasing endurance, you must prepare mentally.

If you are serious about your mental game, you need to go beyond the hype. The key is having valid and reliable information about mind-body processes that drive peak performance. It is also important to recognise what works for you—so identify your strengths.

HIT THE BASICS

Make a note of your daily aggressors—no matter how big or small they are

Think of yourself as a student. You'd like to excel academically and you can't let the pressure of the test or lack of revision get the better of you. It's important to remember that successful performances cannot simply be reduced to superior physical performance. That's because success is not just about winning; it is about fighting hard.

And being labelled or told what to do is not a science-based approach to sport psychology. Most coaches, athletes and even sport psychology practitioners have at best limited insight into key neuropsychological factors that underlie performance tendencies, especially during critical moments during competition. ▶

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Rate your priorities and substitute anything that comes near the bottom for the items at the top of your list

BLAST AWAY

Growing old
Sure, aging is not fun. No doubt about it. Yet it's inevitable. Allow other aspects of your life to bring you pleasure rather than obsessing over small changes. And get those tests done, hit the gym and eat right. Don't grudge what you can't fix. It just adds to your stress.

Feeling victimised
It may feel great to blame everyone else for your problems, but it is just a form of running away. You may feel far more comfortable being stressed out and worried in situations that you could easily have avoided. Only after you start to see your side and take responsibility for your actions can

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► PLUG THE LEAKS

Separate your goals from your dreams—one is immediate, the other long term

Confidence is the realistic expectation of success or of achieving one's goal. It's what athletes reasonably hope to do and not what they dream of achieving. It's confidence that makes a man believe he can give his best performance whenever it is needed. The test: if you work out, hit your maximum weight for those three extra repetitions.

Like every sportsman on earth, you are human. And humans have personal issues that affect productivity. Ensure that you're able to transition and handle difficult personal situations more comfortably by mentally rating your assignment or priorities in order of importance. Anything that comes near the bottom can be substituted for the items at the top of the list.

MEASURE THE FIX

Study your stress points or weakness and before anything else, work on these
Before the benefits of

mental training can be effected, the key measures that affect performance need to be identified first. Improving mentally takes more than just visualising or engaging in self-talk—it is about devising effective strategies that help you cope with difficult situations, problem solving and decision making.

The so-called Athlete's Profile determines to a large extent what mental training method will work best. You—like a sportsman—need to know if an intervention is working.

WORK AND WORKOUT

Add physical activity to cancel out mental stress with adrenaline and endorphins
Yes, it is very important to get the job done. But regular exercise is essential. It helps you maintain concentration for a longer time than if you don't exercise. Using behavioural techniques also tends to work better if used in conjunction with a well-rested and active ('fit!') body.

The first step is fixing the wandering by dealing with

niggling aches and pains. That said, use relaxation techniques and, if required, counselling to better handle pressure. One surefire relaxation method is to sit by yourself, close your eyes and try to clear your mind. Do this for three minutes.

IDENTIFY, THEN EXCEL

Pick your own measure of success and failure

A major part of motivation is observation and concentration—just like a sportsman is observed during practice and monitored during competition. The idea is to think 'long term' and not just about the next obstacle. That's because a myopic view will not lead to an overall development—it will equip you to deal with that immediate hurdle. Instead, look for novel ways of doing things. Answer these four questions: 1. Are you doing more in less time? 2. Can you erase the thought that your neighbour/the next guy is doing better than you? 3. Can you see yourself doing more/better in the next four weeks? and 4. Can you list one

accomplishment in the last three days? If the answer to any of these questions is No, it's time for a tweak.

How you measure yourself will determine your level of self-motivation—this has an inevitable influence at work or in your personal life. Motivation is determined by its direction and intensity.

It is natural that a man's levels of motivation will fluctuate—because there's a lot going on all the time and you can lose concentration in one aspect as compared to another. So, work on strategies that help you determine why something is important for you.

Again, answer these two questions: 1. What has changed and do I worry about it? and 2. Is it possible to get back to 100 per cent in just one week? If the answer to either of these questions is No, then look at boosting other aspects of your game and life.

DO IT AGAIN

Rate yourself regularly to prove to yourself that you've nothing to worry about

Ever wondered why a sportsman puts in so many hours of practice? Doing the task over and over makes it automatic to your mind. This is the foundation of high-level performance.

Solid belief systems are built when crisis hits the system and it fails, and you are forced to revamp and modify. When crisis challenges a belief system, look for a different level of the skill and then take the time to learn it. After you've perfected it, put it to challenges again. And note this: You're playing against yourself and if you fight hard enough, you can overcome any stressor! ■■■

ANY OBSTACLE WITH THESE EASY TIPS

BLAST AWAY ANY OBSTACLE WORDS: RICHARD LEWIS; ADDITIONAL WORDS: WIKI; PHOTOS: STYLING: SHAUN SINGH; MAKEUP: KALIEE BAI; MODEL: DEEP JATLEY

you start to ensure health and enjoyment for yourself. If you feel you aren't in the running for happiness, understand why you became that way, laugh it off, bury your own hatchet and learn to have fun.

Hitting bumps in the road

Regardless of how bad your life might seem today, find time alone to focus on all the good stuff you have going for you. Being grateful is an amazing tool for putting the bad stuff in proper perspective. Say you have your health, a good relationship and enough money to pay the bills. That's good. If, tragically, you're walking

and step into some manure, don't stress out. Laugh it off and watch where you walk next time—because the cows will not stop decorating the streets.

Reaching the top

Life is not just about work and adulation. It really pays to be passionate in all positive aspects of the human experience. You'll lead a healthier existence. Time really does fly by, so, as stupid as it might feel, live your life with enthusiasm, even if you have to pretend sometimes. If you're stuck with something or someone boring for a point of time, don't stress out. It, too, will pass.

Leaving a legacy

Regardless of what impact you think you or your work may have had on anyone (and everyone), the reality is that you will be remembered for being the full person that you are—a decent, principled person who is compassionate in his dealings with people. It may sound like a bunch of sweet little nothings, but remember that legacies are mostly passed on in ways you can't even realise. So, begin by helping out the old neighbour, or organising a community clean-up, or just not succumbing to road rage on a hot, tired day. You'll then stop worrying.