

Anyone for tennis- it's all in the mind?

Cognitive hypnotherapist Trevor Silvester explains how mental preparation can make the difference between becoming Wimbledon champion and going out in the first round

To watch a truly talented sportsperson at work is an awe inspiring sight. It's no coincidence that at the same time every year I feel inspired to dust off my racquet – having watched two weeks of astonishing physical feats and mental stamina at Wimbledon. If you have ever been fortunate enough to see an elite athlete perform up close: on the tennis court, the running track or the football field you will inevitably have been struck by their fantastic physique, speed and grace. It obviously takes many, many hours of intense physical preparation to get that way. What is less obvious however is the significance of their mental attitude - which can make the difference between a gold medal at the Olympics and failing to make the final. Whilst still a magnificent achievement from the perspective of the enthusiastic amateur, this mental strength and conviction is crucial to success at the highest level any sport.



Harness your brain's power

The brain is a complex and powerful organ. As a cognitive hypnotherapist, I deal in the realities our brains create in response to a range of situations. In simple terms, I work out why a person responds to a specific situation in a completely different way to another individual. What makes someone fear the water whilst others happily dive straight in, why is someone able to speak confidently in one context, but is crippled by self consciousness in another? If we are able to uncover the pattern behind the behaviour, it then becomes possible to exert control and help effect real change.

Many highly skilled sportspeople are let down by their mental processes. Tim Henman, instead of being hailed at as a great sportsman, is actually more famous for being a 'choker' – someone who simply doesn't have the mental strength to play those championship winning points. A more recent example is John Terry, an experienced and talented footballer who missed a crucial penalty in the European Cup Final from a position that most 12 years olds could score from. So, what goes wrong in these situations? These people have trained and prepared for years for such moments – what lets them down and turns a superb athlete into a choker - and what can be done about it?

The fight or flight response



In any situation, your brain (in simplistic terms your unconscious thought) is working out the likely consequences of the actions you are about to take. It then selects the one most likely to bring you the result it believes is most beneficial to you. If the calculation your brain makes is negative, it releases chemicals into your body that were originally intended to protect you from sabre-toothed tigers. They increase your heart rate, your respiration, stop digestion and, if strong enough, shut down those parts of your brain responsible for logical, considered thinking.

This puts you into a state best described as a trance. Not one that will make you dance like a chicken, but which may cause you to sky the ball over the cross bar, or forget your name in an interview. Anyone who's ever felt 'hijacked' at such moments will know what I'm describing, a loss of feeling in control – truly, strong emotions make us stupid. It's this fight or flight response that causes someone to shake in front of an interview panel, or fluff

a shot at match point, all because our brain looks at the present situation and calculates the likely consequence. As you stand ready to make your serve, do you foresee an ace, or the laughter of your friends as you hit yourself on the head? As you stand to make a sales pitch do you foresee an enthusiastic reception, or a mass of shaking heads?

Context is highly significant: you may be cool as a cucumber serving for the championship at Wimbledon, but a nervous wreck at the prospect of speaking at the press conference afterwards. This is because the meaning of the present situation you're in (whether it's good or bad), and its anticipated outcome is determined by calculations the brain makes based on your past.

So if your brain creates a version of reality that makes you underperform, what you can do about it? Most people try to take control back from the brain by repeatedly practising that skill - consciously performing an action that is so practised it's almost completely unconscious. Unfortunately, all we are often achieving is repeating, and thereby reinforcing, the same mistakes when we should actually allow our unconscious to perform the actions we've practised and give reign to the power of imagination.

1. Use your imagination

Imagination is one of your most powerful tools for change and there are many examples of evidence to support this theory. Researchers found that when a group of elderly people imagined doing bench presses every day, they actually got stronger – and even put on muscle. The idea that you can change your body shape just by thinking is further supported by an experiment in which basketball players of equal ability were separated into three groups. One group practised shooting hoops, one imagined shooting hoops and one sat around reading magazines. When their ability was reassessed those who only imagined shooting had improved most. This is because they sat and rehearsed shooting perfect baskets and their mirror neurons – neurons which imitate the actions of others (and in our imagination we trick the brain into treating ourselves as an 'other') stored this 'map' of shooting a hoop and used it when it was next performed physically. Those who'd physically practised failed on some of their efforts, so the map was more flawed. Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes permanent, so make sure that what is being made permanent in your muscle memory is the best possible representation of your skill. Set aside 10 minutes a day to mentally rehearse key aspects of your game. As before, see yourself doing it – you have to represent yourself to your brain as an 'other' – and really focus for no more than 10 minutes – any longer and you won't be able to sustain the necessary concentration.



2. Anchoring.

Music is a powerful emotive stimulus: just hearing a record on the radio can take you back to a past event and stir strong emotions. These are called anchors and work on the stimulus-response mechanism first identified by Pavlov. Basically, the principle works by pairing a stimulus with a strong emotion as you are experiencing it. This way, the two become wired together in your neurology and one will trigger the other off in you. By pairing a powerful stimulus or trigger such as smell with a positive emotion relevant to your performance, you can actually enhance it. .

British athletes have used this technique for some time. During training, whenever they get into a good performance state – run a personal best, feel full of energy or confidence – they'll focus on their feeling and inhale a smell that's impregnated on a wrist band. The smell itself is usually just something they like, although some natural products have been shown to have particular effects. They continue to 'stack' these states over a period of time so the smell becomes strongly evocative of the emotional state that accompanies a good performance. On the big day, before serving, settling into the blocks or approaching the high jump, they take a deep breath and reaccess the positive state. Songs are a good trigger as well as a physical pressure like squeezing a finger and thumb – try it and see! .

3. Think positive.

If I tell you not to think of a red door what happens? If I tell you not to think of missing that serve...the problem is that the brain has to process a negative; it has to think of the red door to not think of a red door. A key maxim in any situation where you want to perform well is to think it how you want it. Before a match, rehearse how you want it to go, see yourself performing well – make it a picture where you see yourself in it, rather than through your own eyes - research shows this technique makes it more compelling. Fall asleep thinking of a positive aspect of your performance because it will prime you to notice your qualities and not your faults. If you play a sport where you have a moment to prepare, like tennis, golf or set pieces in football or rugby, then 'play forward' the next thing you're going to do in your mind – while firing your performance anchor – precisely the way you want it. So, as Roger Federer is about to take his serve, he pauses, takes a deep breath of his wrist band, and sees himself placing the ball in a precise part of the court. Whatever your chosen sport, try repeating the relevant rehearsal until the effect of the anchor feels strong and then take the shot, make the swing or sprint off the blocks.

Whilst you may not be aiming to enter Wimbledon or qualify for the Olympic 100 metre final, you may well aspire to improve on the physical skills that you already have. If so, there are many other things that modern psychology can teach us about how the mind can have a powerful effect upon your body and its performance. So, open your mind to what the brain can do for you. Whilst you may never become Wimbledon champion – with the right mental attitude you may achieve more than you ever thought possible.



Trevor Silvester runs the Quest Institute (www.questinstitute.co.uk) which specialises in cognitive hypnotherapy and NLP, offering accredited training courses to people from all walks of life, as well as running a practice in Harley Street.

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