

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

Sample Exercises

I. RELAXATION EXERCISES: used for emotion control (anxiety/arousal control), decreasing muscle tension, and refocusing (“re-centering”) when distracted.

1. Deep Breathing Exercise: The “Big Bad Wolf” - Inhale through your **nose** (and deeply from the diaphragm). Hold briefly. Then SLOWLY & FORCEFULLY EXHALE through your **mouth** (strongly pushing air out using the diaphragm). The exhale should be double the count of the inhale (e.g. inhale to the count of 3, hold for 1 count, then exhale to the count of 6). Repeat 5 times. Remember, nerves are stimulated to slow your heart and relax your muscles not during the inhale, but during the SLOW, FORCEFUL exhale phase.
2. Waist flexion (bending at the waist): The action of bending forward or flexing at the waist (sitting or standing) stimulates the nervous system to slow the heart and relax muscles of the body. While in this position, add deep breathing (i.e. deep inhale, hold, then slowly, forcefully exhale) to enhance relaxation.



II. POSITIVE SELF – TALK

1. To combat negative or self-defeating thinking, improve focus, regulate emotions (anxiety or arousal levels to “psych-up” or “psych-down”), and to boost confidence talk positively to yourself or have positive self-talk written down where you can see it during play. Use a wristband or other cue (i.e. write down positive self-talk on towel or in a journal you can access on the bench).



III. MINDFULNESS

Exercise: “TRASH IT & MOVE ON” - “TRASH CAN” FOR MISTAKES, NEGATIVE MOMENTS, & POOR PERFORMANCES

1. For “trashing” or leaving behind a mistake, poor performance, or frustrating, negative incident, moving on, & shifting your focus back to taking care of your business in the present moment (= separating yourself from negativity, moving on, and getting back to your business).
2. After making a mistake, performing poorly, or getting caught up in a negative incident, imagine “crumpling” the experience up like a piece of paper and throwing it away in the “trash can.”
3. You know you can do better, so move on, refocus on the present moment, and play like you’re capable of playing. It makes no sense and is not useful to hang on to “trash.”



IV. IMAGERY (used for confidence and conditioning yourself to execute play)

1. Use an *Imagery Script* for confidence prior to performance (write down best performance, detailing sights, sounds, physical motions, smells, & tastes; then recall and re-experience it prior to performing)

Example: “I see the field. It’s a sunny, warm, but not scorching hot day. I smell lemon and have the after-taste of the lemon-flavored sports drink in my mouth which feels really refreshing. I see the field and the spot I want to hit to. I’m in the batter’s box. I feel the bat in my hand and the muscles of my body relaxed and in the perfect stance. I see the ball coming at me. It appears large and at a pace that doesn’t intimidate me. I feel my body again relaxed and in the perfect stance. I swing and make perfect contact for a hit. I hear the crowd and my teammates cheering me on wildly. I’m rounding all of the bases after hitting a home run and I feel exhilarated by the cheers. I’m confident. I know I have it in me to hit well. I’ve done it before...I can do it again!”

2. Use *visualization* for rehearsing the execution of skills, plays, or a routine prior to performance.

Example: While in the locker room, prior to a game, a linebacker visualizes (sees in his mind), offenses he is likely to see from his opponent during the game; he rehearses in his mind how he will respond to each.

3. *Visualization* during play: visualizing in your mind what you want to happen in the moment.

Example (Tennis): Prior to serving, a tennis player visualizes (sees in her mind) hitting the ball to a particular spot on the court.

4. *Imagery for rehabilitation from Injury* - helps you manage negative emotions and thoughts related to being injured (e.g. anxiety, frustration, impatience, depression).

A) Pain Management Imagery

- Visualize tight muscle fibers stretching out and lengthening as they relax
- Imagine the sensation of heat or ice on sore body part
- Imagine swelling and pain draining out of an injured body part
- For throbbing pain, image “bubbles” leaving the body with each throbbing beat

B) Healing Imagery

- In general: visualize yourself in a recovered state
- Broken bone: imagine cement filling in a crack in a bone
- Torn muscle: imagine muscle fibers braiding together

V. MENTAL ROUTINES

8-MINUTE BEDTIME MENTAL PRACTICE ROUTINE (practice while in bed prior to falling asleep at night and prior to getting up in the morning):

1. Think about how you may use the “Trash Can” for mistakes made at your next practice or competition.
2. Practice imagery for 5 minutes (e.g. visualize yourself executing a specific skill with excellent technique or executing successfully an important play or routine you are working on currently).
3. Practice rounds of “Big Bad Wolf” deep breathing for relaxation for 1 minute.
4. Practice deep breathing while flexed at the waist to enhance relaxation for 1 minute.

PRE-COMPETITION MENTAL ROUTINE

Example:

1. On the day of competition, before stepping on court/field, be alone and listen to music to relax or to get psyched-up; use imagery to trigger and re-experience the detailed sights, sounds, physical motions, and even tastes & smells from a past best performance to rekindle confidence.
2. Visualize your “trash can” (where you will throw away mistakes or poor play during the competition).
3. Do deep breathing and relaxation exercises.
4. Practice imagery for executing during the game (e.g. visualize successful execution of specific skills, plays, or strategies).

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