

# Mental Fitness – The Inside Edge



High achievers exist everywhere. In fact, most people are striving to improve themselves throughout their lives.

The mental dimension is a critical component of success yet very little attention is paid to it in our formal education or training.

---

People who choose major challenges in life, i.e. Olympic athletes, have no choice but to develop inner skills. They must be mentally prepared for what they have to accomplish and the pressure that will come with it. Mental fitness, like physical fitness has several skill areas. Mastery over the powerful inventory of skills in each area can make the difference between success and failure, winning and losing, health and burnout. All of us could benefit from the ability to be prepared to handle whatever comes our way while still performing at very high levels.

Mental fitness is really a mind set; a performance state. It might be more formally defined as a person's ability and readiness to meet the psychological demands of high-pressure situations in everyday life. The mastery of this ability is a powerful ally in high performance. In everyday language we might say that it's a way of being on our game more frequently.

Mental fitness helps us access all of who we are at challenging times...to get at those abilities that we know we have and perform more consistently on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis despite the pressures we may be facing.

Following is a description of the various skill sets included in our mental fitness model.

## **Active Awareness**

---

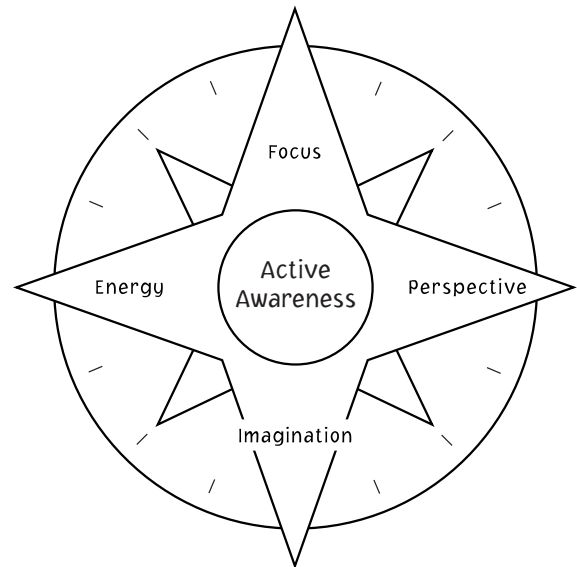
Active awareness is at the centre of all of the skills. It is essential to actively develop awareness if one is to become a consistent high performer. Awareness involves the capacity to consciously move to a place within yourself where you can observe what you are thinking and feeling and yet remain unshaken by it. For example, I may feel angry but I remain calm or I may be thinking critical thoughts, but I express support in order to build someone's confidence. This principle, which runs through all eastern and western thought, is based on the knowledge that even though my personality is reacting and constantly fluctuating,

my capacity to make a wise decision, to choose the right action, is always present. I want to be able to access my own wisdom and abilities even when the pressure is on.

The capacity to move into the role of observer frees up our ability to choose a course of action and activates our will.

- I step back and observe what is happening to me, my reaction.
- I choose how I want to respond.
- I take steps within myself to support my choice, using the skills that follow.

These steps allow us to be in charge of our responses, our development and ultimately, our overall well being.



## Perspective

---

Maintaining an optimistic mindset does not necessarily mean being happy. Some of the most positive decisions and actions we take are no fun at all. Through awareness and action high performers choose to look for opportunity at difficult times. In many ways perspective is the foundation of mental fitness and, like cardiovascular endurance, it involves persistence, commitment and constant vigilance.

### Key skills include:

- reframing
- self-talk
- affirmations
- separation of self from performance
- cognitive restructuring

There is a high correlation between perspective and success. This is particularly true in areas that require self-motivation, persistence and dealing with potential disappointment or rejection.

Holding an optimistic perspective is a life skill and it is learned. It is central to consistent high performance in any setting.



# Energy

---

There are many things that, in the hectic day-to-day of it all, can have a dramatic impact on our energy level. Extreme pace and work overload can elevate our arousal level to a point where the flow goes out of our performance and joy goes out of our life. Trying harder and overcompensating becomes the order of the day and a less than adequate performance, in some aspect of our life, is the result.

Energy levels also impact on how much we can attend to at any given time. When the pressure is on, our arousal level goes up and our attentional focus narrows. That is, the amount of information or number of things we can attend to is reduced. We have no control over this. High arousal can lead to what we call the choker's profile. This is a leading cause of performance related errors.

The key, in high performance moments, is to become aware of your arousal level and maintain it in an optimal range. Sometimes we have to bring our arousal level down, and sometimes we have to energize, raise our energy level up. There are a variety of ways of doing this.

Deep relaxation occupies one end of the continuum in energy management. Deep relaxation is a physiological and psychological state, which calms the body and the mind and promotes creativity. When our arousal level drops, our attentional focus broadens and we can access more. Energizing is on the other end of the continuum in energy management. On occasion, it's necessary to raise energy levels. Energizing is used to increase motivation, commitment and to focus attention on the task at hand. Energy management techniques include:

- monitoring arousal level
- energizing
- deep relaxation
- centering
- acting as if you have time

## The Centering Technique

1. Focus 100% of your attention on your breath as you deeply inhale.
2. Hold your breath for a brief moment.
3. Let the air out slowly, shifting your attention to your shoulders, which fall, and your knees which release (if standing) or your buttocks which relax and let you sink (if sitting).

*Repeat this process for as many times as you need to. Even two or three focused breaths will begin to relax your entire mind/body system.*



## Imagination

---

Imagery is a holistic language that allows us to communicate with all of who we are, physiologically, emotionally and intellectually.

When we formulate images that take a stand for what we need we create the thoughts, actions and strategy in the inner world that we need for successful 'outer' performances.

Numerous studies have shown imagery to be an effective form of practice for improving physical skills and building mental attributes such as confidence. A post-Olympic study of Canadian athletes showed clearly that those who did their personal best at the 1984 Olympics used mental imagery two and a half to three times as frequently as those who did not perform up to their expectations.

There are an infinite number of ways to use imagery but most revolve around: mental rehearsal, letting go, replay/preplay, scenario performing and motivation/acclimatization.

The applications for imagery can vary dramatically from changing behaviour and reactions, rehearsing a presentation or a difficult interaction, creating a vision for the future, coming up with a new solution or creative ideas, improving the performance of any physical skill, through to dealing with illness. It is an incredibly versatile skill and one of the strongest allies we have in improving and changing our ability to respond.

Perspective creates an inner state of readiness and determination; a state in which one is prepared to deliver the best outcome. Monitoring and maintaining optimal arousal level, particularly at key performance times, insures adequate focus and attention to perform the task well. Imagery transforms the mind into a training room where you can take charge of the direction and implementation of your actions and practice perfectly as many times as is needed.

## Focus

---

Now that you have the inner tools to perform at your best, you need to know where you are going and what will get you there. Focus combines personal vision-building, goal setting and consciousness. Building a personal vision involves getting in touch with what matters in life to you, feeling a connection to those things that matter, and moving your life in that direction. Critical to motivation and commitment is the sense that our daily actions and tasks are connected to something bigger.

Clarifying a personal vision, seeing where we want to go, gives us a sense of purpose and direction. Setting goals then becomes a matter of identifying what we need to learn, to change, to acquire and to improve in order to reach our vision. Once our goals are clear we are better able to focus our efforts and move forward with energy on a daily basis.

Imagery skills can be used to translate the vision and the goals into images that communicate to our entire being, at all levels, and program us for action in the desired direction. We call this visioneering.



Daily decisions determine our destiny, therefore we need to bring consciousness, awareness, to our daily decisions and actions. Are we making choices that move us toward the realization of who we want to become and what we want to accomplish on a daily basis or are we caught in the tunnel vision of moment-to-moment demands?

And so we come full circle. Daily decisions are about active awareness; actively choosing on a daily basis actions which support my direction. Another word for this is consciousness; going through life awake.

## **Mental Preparation**

---

Mental preparation is about bringing these skills together in a personalized way that enhances your performance. High performers, people who are out there all of the time and under scrutiny, make mental preparation an integral part of their development. They use a progressive diet of the psychological messages and mental practice rituals they need to get consistent high performance levels.

Visioneering is an example of long-term mental preparation. We can also develop ‘mental habits’ which ensure that we prepare for the moment to moment events we wish to deal with more effectively: a presentation, increased work load, promotion, sick child, etc. We can choose to be creative in our mental preparation, selecting various ingredients for our plan from any or all of the five preceding skill areas and combining them in our own unique way. Individuals can design their own specific programs for:

- daily routines
- managing the unexpected
- preparing for an important event
- targeting long term goals

The results of mental preparation are twofold: the ability to prepare and perform well for a specific, important, single event, and, the ability to handle the pressures of daily life and perform well. Some challenges we choose, and others are dealt to us by life. Whether the challenges you face were your choice or not, life is about meeting those challenges, overcoming them and growing stronger in the process. What we call mental fitness is an essential component for a successful passage through this process. Mental fitness is about performance enhancement, in any realm you deem critical.

