

Mental training - The core

a OnePageBook™



The one essential ability

Geir Isene & Brendan Martin

There are a wide range of mental training methods¹. From cognitive training² and visualization³ to memory training⁴ and cognitive therapy⁵. There are many excellent methods to improve your mental abilities. But they tend to disregard the one basic ability that forms the core of mental training: The ability to be mentally present. Here and now.

The opposite would be “there” or “then”. Examples: Thinking about yesterday, your last failure, what to have for dinner tomorrow or planning your wedding or your next funny comment are all examples of not being fully present. When a biathlon⁶ champion thinks about the target she just missed, her chances of missing the next target she is aiming at increases. If she starts thinking “I’m doing good”, her chances of hitting the next target decreases. Any thought or emotion can interfere with her chances of hitting a target.

Almost no coach or mental trainer focuses on exercising the core ability of staying present in the here & now. Most take for granted that the person they help is already mentally present so they just jump ahead to the more involved exercises. Usually with less than optimum results. To get the most out of any mental training, you should practice the basic ability of staying present. But how exactly is that ability fostered?

Sit on a chair. Close your eyes. Sit still and practice being here and now for 1 minute. Thoughts and feelings will crop up. Tiredness may start to get a hold. Keep practicing. Stay present. Just be. It’s hard work, but it pays off. This is not meditation. There is no mental tricks. Don’t think. Don’t visualize. Don’t resist thoughts or emotions. That would be doing *something*. Practice doing *nothing*. You will hear sounds. You will notice your breath. But let all that be as it may. Don’t create a bad conscience or feelings when you struggle with this exercise. Just let all that go. Continue the exercise and practice being present. A coach may help you by correcting you when he sees you getting tired or wandering off into your land of thoughts and emotions. A good coach will notice when you are not fully present, even while your eyes stay closed.

You will discover that it is quite hard to do this simple exercise. You will start thinking about your botched date, a slight pain in the back, last night’s movie or if you will pass the exam next week. We have seen people start crying or burst into laughter. We have seen people get upset. Shit happens when you try to do nothing. But just like physical training, you will get better with practice. And it does require a lot of practice to master the art of being present.

This art goes by many names – “In the zone”, “Peak performance”, “Going nuclear”, “Skywalking”, “In the flow”, “Riding the wave” or “Reacting spontaneously”. Whatever you call it, it is the core. All other mental abilities are built upon this foundation – your ability to just be.

We have seen gains from exercising this ability in a wide range of sports, from football to biathlon and from weight-lifting to running. We have seen gains in stage presence with performing artists, with parenting and children in schools, in solving marital problems or with teenagers not coping in life.

The more aware you are, the more you will learn from any training. The more mentally present you are, the more you will get out of your physical or other mental training. The more you are here and now, the more of life you will experience. Removing expectations, which is focusing on the future, will help you appreciate what *is*. It is in the here and now we can reach top performance.

When you can do the exercise for 5 minutes straight, do it for 10, then 15, then 30 minutes. Do it until you can comfortably stay present and focused in the here and now. Then you can start doing the exercise in a noisy place. Then with your eyes open. Looking at a spot on the wall or looking at another person in front of you. Or looking at an ant. Or looking at a spot in a busy square with lots of commotion and noise. You may find it hardest to practice being present when your eyes are closed and with no sound around. Because then you have no aids to help keep you here and now.

A coach can up the ante by trying to distract you while you keep practicing sitting still and doing nothing. Or the coach can train your concentration by trying to distract you while you say your line on the stage, try to hit that golf ball or lift to your maximum capacity.

We have done these exercise with athletes, executives, artists and random people off the street. They uniformly report better ability to be present, concentrated and undisturbed. It can relieve stress and help you “simmer down”. It can help you enjoy the present. Even when it’s not Christmas.

¹Mental Training: <http://www.amazon.com/Training-Performance-Revised-Updated-Edition/dp/1594860289>

²Cognitive training: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_training

³Creative visualization: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_visualization

⁴Working memory training: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_memory_training

⁵Cognitive therapy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_therapy

⁶Biathlon: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biathlon>

This OnePageBook™ cuts straight to the core of mental training: The art of being present.

The authors have helped Olympic and World Champion athletes, performing artists and executives through the simplest of mental training exercises with amazing results. But medals, top performances on stages, companies and teams boosted doesn't match helping people struggling to regain their enjoyment and fun in life.

The author's company "Å" (A-Circle AS) carries the apt slogan, "Boosting performance".

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"Don't waste today by talking about yesterday
until it's finally tomorrow." (Tim Fargo)

"Mental training sounds so easy, but it is remarkably hard to do.
It's about being here and now. Being present.
This is the difference between winning and losing.
This is one of the great recipes to my success. Being in the moment."
(Tiril Eckhoff, World Champion and Olympic Champion, Biathlon)

Publisher: A-Circle AS, Oslo 2016-04-01, first edition
<http://boostingperformance.no>

