

A guide to inner strength for the athletic client:
relax, activate, focus, image and, ultimately, flow.

Moving the Mind

By Tom Seabourne, PhD

Take a good, hard look at your clients. Do you consider them athletes? Although their athleticism may be hidden under layers of unused muscle or fat, they are athletes nonetheless. Of course your clients may not be of Olympic caliber, but try to treat them as such. Olympic athletes warm up, work out, cool down and stretch—just like your clients. They also strive to improve strength, flexibility and endurance—as do your clients. Olympians mentally prepare for their training and performances—and so should your clients.

When it comes to conditioning for sports, the mind is as important as the body. How well an athlete is prepared psychologically will directly impact the individual's physical performance. We have all watched Olympians succeed as their strength, dexterity and perseverance propelled them to perform optimally. We have also watched them fail when their mind-set operated at not-so-optimal levels.

This article will help personal fitness trainers understand how to better prepare their clients mentally for training and athletic performances. It will address sports psychology techniques and terminology that can greatly influence the outcome of your clients' physical goals. In addition to serving as a guide for tapping the inner strength of your athletes, it will highlight how to help them gain peak performance in 15 days.

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Relaxation Vs. Activation

Learning to relax may be the single most important lesson your clients can accomplish in reaching toward their athletic goals (Weinberg, Seabourne & Jackson 1981). **Relaxation** is recognizing the muscles are tense and allowing them to relax (Jones & Hardy 1989). Your clients may perceive themselves as experts in relaxation—they already know how to plop down on a cozy couch and watch television in a stupor. We're talking about a different type of relaxation, though.

Say you have a tennis playing client who wants to increase her strength so she can hit a better backhand. As she performs a bench press, notice how her face and neck muscles contract. You suggest she relax, yet her muscles remain stiff. When she does attempt to relax, she is unsuccessful due to trying too hard

(Murphy, Woolfolk & Budney 1988). How do you help her? Here are some cues:

- Ask her to breathe slowly from her belly.
- Suggest that she repeat calming words to herself, such as “relax.”
- Remind her to use the proper cues for her activity.
- Tell her to slow down. There is no rush.

Relaxation is, well, *relaxing!* Still, there are times your client needs to get pumped up. During the recent Olympics in Sidney, Australia, shot-putters and weight lifters growled and snarled before, during and after events. It was their way of becoming activated.

Activation is the act of getting excited, psyched and mentally prepared. It is synonymous with the sports psychology term **arousal**. Activation is not anxiety. Although anxiety involves increased arousal, anxiety grows from worry and

negative thoughts and feelings (Morgan & Pollack 1977). How do you help a client increase activation? Here are some tips:

- Be sure she warms up.
- Suggest that she increase her breathing cadence.
- Tell her to concentrate on speed and power instead of feeling tired.
- Allow her to listen to some favorite music.
- Ask her to imagine herself as fast and explosive.
- Have her pretend she has a crowd watching and draw energy from it.

If your clients are too relaxed or too activated, they will not enjoy their workouts. The jitters (overactivation) can cause them to lose concentration. Taking a quick nap (underactivation) on the decline bench, however, can have a similar outcome.

15-Day Peak Performance Program

Once you understand how to use relaxation, activation, focus, imagery and flow with your clients, the next step is designing an effective program. Remember that clients need to benefit from these sports psychology techniques both in the gym and during athletic performances.

Begin by introducing these techniques during normal workouts. Have your clients spend just one minute during each session training themselves mentally for the physical tasks ahead. Here is a step-by-step, 15-day program. Encourage your clients to incorporate these techniques into their regular programs so the mindful benefits become routine.

Day 1: Relaxation. Before your client jumps on the treadmill to begin conditioning, teach her this **diaphragmatic breathing technique** to help her make the transition from work to workout. Have her place her right hand on her chest and her left hand on the abdomen muscles. When she breathes, only her left hand should move. Advise your client to take this technique onto the treadmill, into the weight room, onto the basketball court *and* into the boardroom at work. This technique will enhance oxygen uptake and help her relax.

Day 2: Focus. Ask your client to close her eyes and focus on her diaphragmatic breath for one minute. Tell her that whenever any distracting thoughts enter her mind (“Hmm, what am I having for dinner?”), let them enter one ear and exit the other. Continue for one minute. This exercise helps the client learn how to better focus.

Day 3: Association. Ask your client to monitor her exhalations. Every time she exhales, have her verbalize the word “relax” (if she's self-conscious speaking aloud in a public setting, she can whisper “relax” under her breath). Continue this exercise for one minute.

If she were pressing a barbell, she might replace the word relax with

“control” or “power.” This self-statement procedure helps your client connect her purpose to her actions.

Day 4: Progressive Relaxation. Pretend you are about to hit your client in the stomach. Watch his abdominals contract. Ask your client to maintain this perfect posture throughout his workout and for the rest of the day. When your client learns to progressively relax and contract certain muscles, his fitness and sports performance will improve dramatically.

Day 5: Tension Vs. Relaxation. Ask your client to shrug his shoulders toward his ears. Teach him to release his trapezius muscle and to keep his scapula depressed. Suggest that he contract and relax muscle groups until he can feel the difference between tension and relaxation.

Day 6: Tension Vs. Relaxation, Part II. Have your client sit in a comfortable chair. Ask him to close his eyes and breathe from his diaphragm. Suggest that he press his feet into the floor—one, two, three, relax. Ask if he can feel the difference between tension and relaxation. Tell him to press his knees together—one, two, three, relax. Can he feel the difference now?

Suggest that your client contract his abdominal muscles by pressing his lower back into the chair—one, two, three, relax. Remind him to notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Finally, have him retract and depress his scapula—one, two, three, relax. This last exercise teaches your client to maintain perfect posture by differentiating between contracted and relaxed muscles.

Day 7: Imagery. Ask your client to close his eyes and breathe from the diaphragm for 30 seconds. Then instruct him to visualize himself performing an athletic movement for 30 seconds. This practice is your client's first step toward learning and performing imagery.

Day 8: External Imagery. Ask your client to close his eyes and breathe from his diaphragm. Ask him to perform a 30-second, full-body relaxation exercise. Then ask him to visualize himself weight training,

The key to great workouts is finding your clients' optimum levels of activation (Jones & Hardy 1989). In general, higher activation leads to better performances with strength and anaerobic endurance tasks, especially when clients are confident about their performance. As a trainer, you must experiment to find the activation level that works best for each client (Rotella et al. 1980).

Progressive Relaxation

Have you ever watched a weekend warrior train on the bench press? He may strain so hard to extend his elbows that the back of his head creates a semipermanent indentation on the bench pad. And then he wonders why his neck hurts the next day!

Progressive relaxation is one solution to prevent your client from contracting unnec-

essary muscles during his lift. It teaches your client the difference between tension and relaxation (Weinberg, Seabourne & Jackson 1983). Progressively contracting and relaxing certain muscle groups helps him control muscle tension. This strategy works both in and out of the gym.

During progressive relaxation, the client contracts and relaxes muscle groups separately. Then, with practice, he contracts a specific muscle group or combines groups so he can contract a certain body part or relax his whole body at once. Upon achieving this technique, your client will be better able to recruit the proper muscle groups for any fitness activity (Seabourne, et al. 1985). Whether your client is serving a tennis ball, racquet ball or volleyball, he must relax his entire body, then uncoil like a whip to power an ace past his opponent.

Focus

Have you ever watched a dog chase a cat? The canine's movement is pure, unadulterated concentration. It may be for just a brief moment, but it is intense and true. The dog has a will to achieve its goal at all costs. It did not set a long-term goal, yet its focus was all encompassing. **Focus** is directed attention. Focus is what your clients need to achieve athletically.

Let's not forget about the other end of the dog's pursuit. The cat reacted instinctively to get away from the canine by running a course of retreat, perhaps even a 90-degree turn up a tree. It too concentrated on a single goal—in this case, survival. Animals can be wonderful inspirations for greater levels of focus.

Each day an endless array of stimuli bombard your client, such as thoughts

as if he were watching himself on television. Tell him to hold this scene in his mind for 30 seconds, and then relax. This exercise teaches your client how to use external imagery.

Day 9: Internal Imagery. Ask your client to close his eyes and breathe from his diaphragm. Ask him to perform a 30-second, full-body relaxation exercise. Next, tell him to visualize for 30 seconds each detail of pedaling a bike along a path next to a beach. Encourage him to see, feel and experience every imaginary pedal stroke with as many senses as possible. Suggest that he feel the breeze, hear the waves and smell the salt air. Prompt him to see an image of himself as crystal clear as possible. Ask him the color of his shoes. This exercise teaches your client to create vivid and controllable internal imagery.

Day 10: Activation. Ask your client to sit comfortably in a chair and close her eyes. Have her breathe from her diaphragm, conducting a 30-second, full-body relaxation exercise. Ask her to take another 30 seconds to imagine doing one exercise in her weight-training routine. Tell her that focus and activation are very important. She should pay attention to over- and underactivation. Prompt her to visualize herself at the perfect level of activation. This exercise teaches your client to control her activation level during external imagery.

Day 11: Activation, Part II. Ask your client to sit comfortably in a chair and close her eyes. Have her breathe from her diaphragm, doing a 30-second, full-body relaxation exercise. Ask her to take 30 seconds to imagine doing one exercise in her weight-training routine. This time have her use as many senses as possible. She should feel the steel bar, hear the clang of the weights and see the bar moving in a perfect range of motion. Allow her time to develop a vivid and controllable image of her exercise. Remind her to remain at the optimum level of activation for a peak strength training workout. This exercise teaches your client to remain at the optimum level of activation during internal imagery.

Day 12: Advanced Association. Ask your client to sit comfortably in a chair and close her eyes. She should breathe from her diaphragm and do a 30-second, full-body relaxation exercise. Suggest that she take 30 seconds to imagine doing one exercise in her weight-training routine. Remind her to make the imagery seem as realistic as possible by including all of her senses. Prompt her to visualize in full color and detail. Let her emotions become involved ("I lifted 10 pounds more than I ever have before!"). Teach her to constantly be mindful of her level of activation. This exercise helps your client associate by integrating activation, internal imagery and emotional control into her exercise program.

Day 13: Flow. Ask your client to move through his workout with a mindful focus. That means, when he is lifting weights, he is concentrating on muscle recruitment and his range of motion. If he is on the treadmill, his attention is drawn to his stride length, breath rate and cadence. He feels in control and self-confident. There is no competition. This exercise teaches your client to flow through an entire workout.

Day 14: Flow, Part II. Ask your client to move through his workout and manipulate his emotions to pump up or relax according to the nature of the activity (for example, he should be highly activated while weight training and relaxed while stretching). Your client should feel challenged but not overwhelmed. This exercise teaches your client to adjust his activation level and emotions to remain in a state of flow.

Day 15: Flow, Part III. Ask your client to move through his entire workout with a sense of balance, flexibility and control. Tell him that his body can handle the physical effort. Although things may not go as planned, he can handle any unexpected glitches or emergencies. He will handle success and failure the same. Overreaction is not an option. He will remain confident, no matter what. This exercise teaches your client to put all aspects of activation and focus into his workout. He is *striving for flow*. He is letting flow happen.

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about work, emotions about relationships and multimedia outlets badgering them nonstop. With all these distractions, it is difficult for clients to focus on their workouts. Their minds tend to shift to new stimuli. Teach your clients to be mindful of what's important and to discard the irrelevant. Selectively attend to relevant stimuli, and let the rest go in one ear and out the other (Privette 1981).

Some trainers crank up the music so clients are distracted from discomfort. They are enticed to ignore their bodies. This practice is called **disassociation** (Morgan & Pollack 1977). Other trainers turn off the music. The client listens to her body instead of chaos. Nothing is present to dull her sensations, so the client is mindful of her movements without distraction. This practice is called **association**—she is associating with her body (Morgan & Pollack 1977). Here are some ways to improve client focus and association:

- Help your client change negative feelings and thoughts that distract from her goals. If she indicates being too tired to work out, take her through a guided imagery session (see “Imagery” section) of the workout, and then let her begin to warm up. If she still feels too tired, tell her to take the day off.
- Ask your client to stay in the present. If something goes wrong, she should note it, adjust, and then go on. If she misses a lift, for example, tell her to get it next time.
- Remind her to *associate* with her workout. Use key words such as “smooth,” “control” and “power.”
- Suggest that she add a ritual or a routine to her regimen. For example, before her bench press, she checks the amount of weight on the bar, sits on the bench and adjusts her feet. After reclining on the bench, she adjusts her hands on the bar. Finally, she performs an inhalation and simultaneous scapular retraction before attempting the lift. *Note:* When she is tired, remind her to be especially vigilant to minimize lapses in concentration to prevent injury.
- Activation is very important. Tell her to be careful of over- or underactivation.

Imagery

Imagery is a mental technique that programs your client's mind to focus by using his senses to create or recreate an experience (Hardy & Callow 1999). For example, when your client imagines himself performing a golf swing, he is using imagery. Imagery helps your client rehearse his backswing, downswing and follow-through. Imagery can lower your client's anxiety and increase his self-confidence (Bakker, Boschker & Chung 1996).

There are two types of imagery: external and internal. Your client is using **external imagery** when he visualizes a distant image of himself training or performing—almost like watching himself conduct the activity on a television screen. **Internal imagery** is when your client mentally goes through the actual performance in his mind, using as many of his senses as possible. Internal imagery is more effective than external imagery for improving physical performance (Hardy & Callow 1999). Regardless, your client should always imagine himself performing well. This will boost his confidence and improve his performance.

Have your client practice imagery for as little as three seconds or as long as three hours. Imagery is a skill that improves with training (Weinberg, Seabourne & Jackson 1983). If your client has difficulty performing imagery, ask him try the following techniques:

- Tell him to practice thinking in pictures. For example, have him imagine grabbing the golf club and hearing the “swoosh” sound as he performs the downswing and follow-through.
- Ask him to look at photos or videos prior to using imagery—for example, a photo of the perfect golf swing. This procedure will help him stimulate the practice of imaging. Suggest that he practice in a quiet and calm environment.
- Remind your client to visualize in full color and detail. Tell him to let his emotions become involved. Cue him to create crystal clear mental pictures during imagery.
- Explain to your client why he should practice imagery regularly. Show him

studies that prove how imagery works. If he believes in imagery, the placebo effect can be a powerful tool.

- Prompt your client to stay relaxed and focused on the proper cues when practicing imagery. Negative imagery—such as visualizing a slice or a missed swing—can actually impede performance (Rotella et al. 1980).

Flow

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes **flow** as the feeling of being activated, focused, jazzed, pumped up, ready, alert and mindful. Flow is also undistracted attention, which might seem impossible, but it is not. Real focus is effortless. Some call it “the zone” or “being absorbed in the present.”

Flow is all of the feelings and attitudes your client associates with her best workouts and performances. Flow feels right. When your client is in flow, she knows it is the place to be. When out of flow, she wants to climb back in. Once your client understands the characteristics of flow, the easier it will be for her to relive it.

Like imagery, flow is a skill that gets better with practice. Help individualize your client's activation and focus to enable her to improve the ability to flow. Use activation and focus strategies during the warm-up, workout and cool-down segments of her sessions. Here are some tips:

- Help your client adjust to and regulate her activation level. She should strive not to become too excited, bored or tired.
- Remind your client to actively focus on the proper cues for the workout or athletic performance.
- Teach your client to possess a non-competitive attitude so she is focused on the task and not worried about winning or losing.
- Watch that your client does not try too hard. Allow your client to expend effort that increases, not decreases, her energy.
- Ask your client to maintain her individual focus of attention, such as the range of motion of the weights or connecting with the racquetball on the court.

- Cue your client to exist “in the moment.” Your client should not worry about the past or wonder about the future.
- Suggest that your client not judge her activity. Help her understand that workouts or racquetball matches may not always go exactly as planned. Teach your client to handle success and failure the same—overreaction is not an option.
- Teach your client to focus on her breath. Her breath might become the focal point of her training.
- Use a mirror to adjust your client’s posture. Are her shoulders back? Is her spine neutral? Is the chest region open during her entire activity?
- Encourage your client to use her emotions to help pump up or relax.
- Tell your client to cultivate a sense of kinesthetic balance—that is, she should remain in control during every phase of her workout.
- Support your client and help her remain confident and strong, no matter the challenge.

All clients are athletes to a degree. Treat tennis, racquet, golf and volleyball players as if they were Olympians. Help your running clients reach the finish line. As a trainer, you want your clients to succeed. When they understand how to relax, activate, focus and image, flow will follow. Flow requires a constant state of mindfulness and a continuous sense of self-reflection.

Once your clients realize how to reach flow, they will be able to summon it at will. Flow is a conscious movement that can be reached by all athletes. Teach your clients how to move their minds—and their bodies will follow.

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