

What is in your mental
toolbox?



Lazarus and Folkman developed a transactional model theory on stress and coping in 1984. Basically, the theory asks you questions related to your stressor. When you encounter a difficult event known as a stressor, this theory would have you ask yourself if you perceive this stressor as a threat. If there is a threat perceived, then you would determine if you have the coping skills necessary to negate the stressor. The purpose of this article is to allow you to take a quick look inside my mental toolbox to determine which may be helpful for you.

Determine if a threat exists.

Decide if you have the tools to diminish the stressor.



Tools are powerful things in life and sport! I want to ensure that you have the right tools for the job. Sure, you might could change a tire with a curling iron, but a tire iron is much more effective!

Below are a few mental skills that are very beneficial help you perform your very best even when things aren't quite going your way:

1. Managing your attitude

It is important to be able to control your attitude. Jack Canfield teaches that the event plus your response to the event will determine the outcome. Your attitude will determine how you respond.

2. Motivation

Determine if you are operating from internal or external locus of control or motivation.

What is driving you?

What keeps you going when everything is stacked against you?

Why get back up after you have become injured?

Dig deep to determine what is going to keep you going when it feels overwhelming. "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

Friedrich Nietzsche

I believe that he who knows his why for performance can bear almost any how!

3. Goals

It is imperative that you understand how to set effective goals as it pertains to your performance in life and sport. We use S.M.A.R.T. goals to set goals that will be the most comprehensive. Knowing your specific goals will enable you to develop the best game plan.

S - Specific. Are you specific in what you want?

M - Measurable. How will you measure your goal to determine if you have been successful? A numerical measurement such as number of free throws or batting average allows for you to quickly evaluate if you have achieved your goal.

A - Attainable. Is this a goal that can even be attained? You want to position yourself for the best possible results. Unattainable goals will just decrease your confidence.

R- Realistic. Is the goal realistic based on current ability levels? Consider your starting point. Once this goal is attained, you can dream even bigger!

T- Timely or time-based. Give it a deadline. In business, it is common to re-evaluate every quarter. Perhaps you set a short term goal for 1-6 months from now or a longer term goal of 1 year from today. This applies a little positive pressure to put in the work.

4. Self-talk

Self-talk involves the things that we say to ourselves as well as the thoughts that we think.

How are you talking to yourself?

What do you say when you are performing well?

What words or phrases do you use when things aren't going according to plan?

Do you brush it off knowing that you can do better next time, or do you catastrophize the event as if it is the end of the world? Your words matter! Keep a log of the words that you use to determine patterns in self-talk.



5. Mental imagery

This is one of my very favorites! Mental imagery has been used for decades and beyond in every field to improve performance as well as rehabilitate injuries, decrease stress, prepare for new skills, and even as a mental skill to speed healing. Mental imagery or visualization practice is a way to perform an activity when you are physically unable to perform the task. It also helps to visualize the desired outcome. Mental imagery sessions may be longer such as 20 minutes or a quick highlight reel moment to prepare you right before the execution of a task.



How can mental imagery help?

Decrease fear of re-injury

Decrease levels of pre-competition anxiety

Improve adherence to rehabilitation protocols

Increased self-confidence

Control arousal levels

Feeling more in control of his/her recovery from injury

Greater self-efficacy

Promote self-awareness

Rescript negative thinking

Decrease pain

Promote relaxation

Controls stress levels

Enable belief that his/her rehabilitation will result in successful return to sport

Skill mastery

Treat insomnia, thoughts of suicide, and nightmares

Prevention of strength loss

Pretty impressive! Now you may see why it is one of my favorites

Mental imagery: This is one of my very favorites!

So, you may be asking yourself how you start a mental imagery practice of your own. I suggest that you begin with a 3-5 minute practice. This is a quick script that I wrote to better explain how you can include many senses into imagery practice. It may seem a bit silly, but it works:

When life hands you lemons...

Have the client close their eyes and imagine that you have just handed them a lemon.

Imagine the size and shape of the lemon.

Observe the bright yellow color of the fresh lemon.

Feel the peel against your hand.

Hold the lemon to your nose and breathe deeply.

Now, imagine that you have just cut the lemon in half.

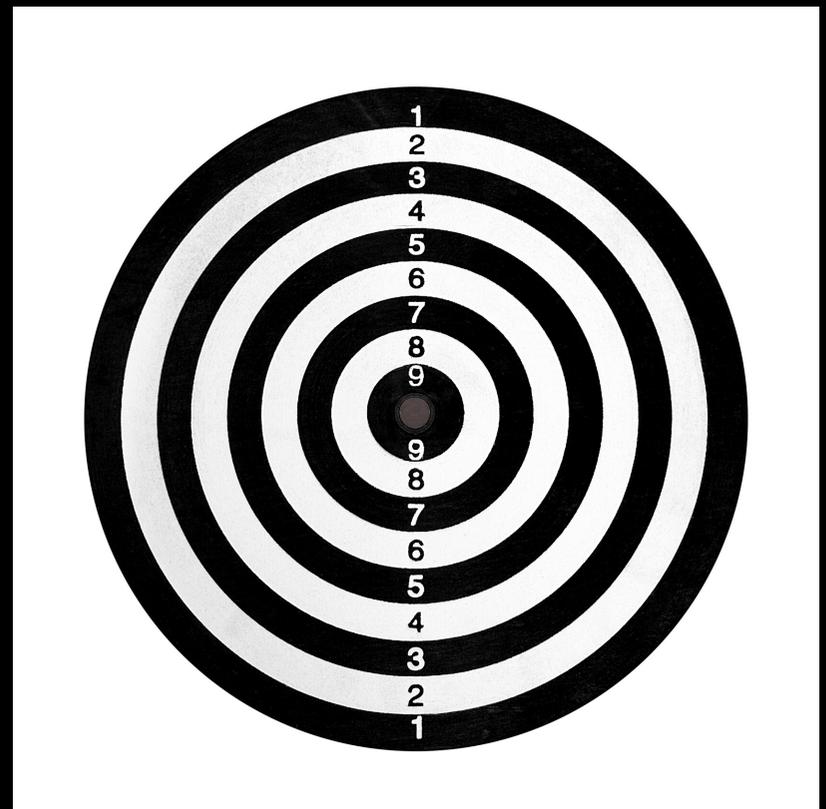
Press the cut lemon to your lips and take a big bite.

Do you see how you included many senses into this one visualization? You “feel” the lemon in your hand. Notice the size and shape. Then you can “see” the bright yellow, bumpy peel. You can imagine the crisp citrus “smell” of the lemon as you bring it to your nose. Sense of taste is present as you take a big bite out of the lemon. Now, how can you apply this to your task?

How can mental imagery help?

I have used mental imagery in many scenarios. Ask yourself what you might see, hear, taste, smell, feel when you are completing your task. Preparing for the task using imagery can prevent anxiety and refocus your mind when things go wrong.

One quick example was my recent certification exam for my concealed carry permit. I had prepared by noticing the sights (target, other participants), the sound (even through the earmuffs the sounds can be startling), the residual smell after firing the weapon, the feel of the weight of the gun in my hand, etc. The slide locked up a couple of times which could have easily removed my focus. However, I had “been” in this scenario of shooting many times mentally and I knew how to refocus when things went awry.



6. Managing anxiety and emotions

There are many strategies to managing anxiety. One of the best is to control your breathing pattern. Changing those breaths will decrease the feelings of anxiety such as rapid heart rate, sweaty palms, shallow breathing, etc. and make you feel more in control. Some refer to this method as box breathing:

Inhale for a count of four

Hold your breath for a count of four

Exhale for a count of four

Hold your breath for a count of four



Give this a try before stepping up to the plate, speaking in front of a class, or even going to the doctor if this causes you anxiety.

Breathwork is so versatile.

7. Concentration

Maintaining focus when there is much going on around you can be frustrating. Even as I am writing this section, I am surrounded by loud noises and constant interruptions. How can I focus on the task ahead?

In the movie *For Love of the Game*, Billy Chapel, MLB pitcher, has a phrase to help him block out the physical and mental noise before a pitch. He simply said, "Clear the mechanism."



You may find that having a certain phrase that you speak aloud or even a point on your body that you touch before performing the task helps to improve concentration. Your mind and body know by this prompting that it is time to get to work!

There are so many more tips and tricks that are beneficial to improving performance in life and sport. However, these seven are the best to create a comprehensive mental toolbox to use in all areas of performance and especially when you encounter stressors. If you find that you need additional assistance in building a “toolbox” that best meets your needs, schedule a consultation today!

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