

Training your mind as well as your body

You've heard the term before. Maybe you've seen it in connection with the names of top athletes such as Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan. But what exactly is "the zone"? And how can it help you?

Not playing up to your ability? Choking under the pressure? Maybe you aren't in "the zone."

What is the zone?

Being in the zone generally means being in a state in which your mind and body are working in harmony. You're calm yet energized, challenged yet confident, focused yet instinctive.

"The zone really refers to when you're performing automatically," says Aynsley Smith, Ph.D., a sports psychology consultant at the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center, Rochester, Minn. "It's when you're absolutely free of worries, free of inhibitions and so confident and relaxed that your best performance just kind of comes out automatically."

Getting in the zone combines physical and mental training. When your body is conditioned and your skills are well-practiced or "programmed," your mental conditioning then comes into play, making a zone experience possible.

To better understand the concept, think of it this way:

When people have well-honed skills, they stop concentrating on them all the time. For instance, you probably brush your teeth every morning. But have you ever then been on your way to work or school and not been able to remember whether you brushed them or not? Chances are you brushed your teeth, but because you've done it regularly since you were a tot, you didn't have to think about it.

While tooth brushing can be automatic, athletics and skilled activities require more to reach the zone. Physical and mental training are key.

Physical training: Program those muscles

Physical training is necessary because you're programming your muscles to recognize and remember certain movements or skills. This sets the stage for movements to become almost instinctive.

"When you're first learning a skill, the brain determines what muscles are needed and when," says Dr. Smith. "Through practicing the skill, a mental blueprint is created."

Your brain converts this blueprint to a single, complex image. When in the zone, different parts of your brain work together to make the movement or skill come automatically.

Mental training: Keep your focus

Training your mind is an important step toward getting in the zone. Aspects of mental training for some sports include increasing concentration and focus, controlling emotions, trying to feel relaxed but energized, being calm and positive, and aiming to feel challenged and confident.

Mental conditioning is different for everybody. What works for you might not work as well for your teammate. And what works well for you in one activity, such as a team sport, might not work as well in another, such as an individual competition.

Try these techniques

Nevertheless, some core techniques are useful for everyone. You may need to modify them to maintain the levels of excitement or relaxation that work best for you.

- **Relaxation.** Relaxation can help relieve anxiety and tension and improve your concentration and focus. Smile when your nerves start to fray. Enjoy yourself. Remember your love of the game. Stay calm. Rushing things generally results in bad moves. Focus on the present rather than the possible upsets that could happen.

- **Imagery.** Imagery can help you reduce anxiety, increase your concentration and confidence, and serve as mental practice or rehearsal. Imagery works well with relaxation techniques because the relaxation can help you better imagine yourself performing the skill required. It's impossible to feel anxiety and relaxation at the same time. Try picturing yourself doing your sport or activity. Imagine yourself dressed as you would be, hearing what you might hear and smelling what you might smell — feeling your muscles and your emotions. Then envision yourself practicing your skills, running your race — whatever it might be. Imagine yourself doing things correctly, successfully, with confidence and skill, and feeling energetic but relaxed.
- **Goal setting.** Setting goals can increase your motivation, provide you with a sense of challenge and help you determine what you can and can't control — leading to greater confidence. Set some long-term goals but also set some short-term goals. Goals should be challenging but manageable and measurable.

Include performance, outcome and process goals. Performance goals pertain to your personal best, regardless of how well the competition does. Outcome goals pertain to whether you win or lose. Process goals pertain to the actions you must take to accomplish your objectives. Set strategies to meet your goals and measure your progress.

- **Positive thinking.** Negative thoughts can get in the way of concentration and confidence. Telling yourself, "Don't miss the shot" or "Don't strike out" generally causes you to do the exact thing you were trying to avoid. Instead of dwelling on a poor performance, remind yourself that you can do it. Rather than blaming factors you can't control, focus on changes you can make to improve your performance. Positive thinking can lead to confidence, focus and inner calm — qualities that help move you into the zone.

All this talk about relaxation, focus and imagery doesn't mean you should be passive during your sport or activity. In fact, some athletes who experience a rapid heartbeat during competition do better than those with an average resting heart rate.

"We previously thought that if you were tense and your heart was racing, you would not perform well," Dr. Smith says. "We've found instead that athletes can be quite calm in terms of anxiety, but their heart rate may increase substantially when they're in a demanding athletic situation. This higher level of arousal seems to facilitate eye-hand response time."

Be realistic

Although training your mind and body can lead to better, more skillful and enjoyable play, realize that you might not get in the zone. And even if you do, you might not be able to get in the zone every time.

"Getting in the zone doesn't happen nearly as often as people think it does," says Dr. Smith. "But whether you're really in it and for how long doesn't matter much because you'll be coming closer to reaching your zone and being your best."

Beyond the game: Using zone techniques outside the playing field

The same techniques you use to improve your game or performance can also be applied to your daily life. Try relaxation techniques to relieve stress. Try imagery before a big presentation, job interview or meeting. Use goal setting to keep yourself motivated at work or at home.

"Bottom line: The techniques you use to get in the zone athletically can help you in many other aspects of your life," says Dr. Smith. "They make both sport and life much more fun."