



# Psychology of Performance

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## Reference Material





National  
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## PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

These four psychological skills are the keys to performing well:

- ❑ Focus
- ❑ Visualization
- ❑ Dealing with distractions
- ❑ Setting effective goals

Focus is THE skill, and all the other psychological skills support focus.

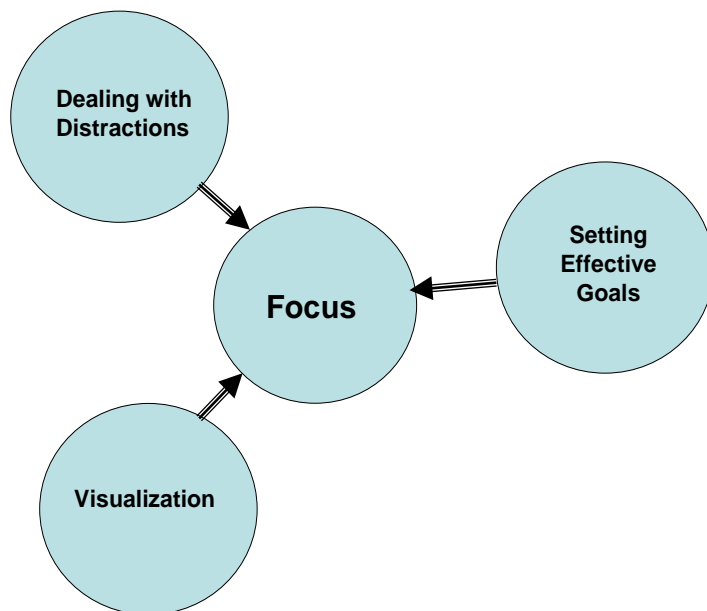
But what is focus, and how do the other skills support it?

### What is Focus?

- ❑ Focus is what you're thinking about and feeling *now, in the moment*.
  - For example, athletes who are in the now think about and feel their warm-up when they warm up, and they key on their position for the current play. They're NOT thinking about what to have for supper or when to study for a mid-term!
- ❑ Focus is *confident, relaxed* thoughts.
  - For instance, athletes with confident, relaxed thoughts tell themselves things like "I can do this" or "I've trained well." They DON'T say "There's no way I can make that jump" or "I wish the wind wasn't blowing so hard." They DON'T dwell on things that might go wrong, stress them, or distract them.

### How Do the Other Psychological Skills Support Focus?

- ❑ **Visualization** is about *imagining* what you need to focus on. This can include, for example, seeing, hearing, and smelling all aspects of a specific competition site. Being able to visualize well strengthens focus.
- ❑ **Dealing with distractions** is about handling *anything* that gets in the way of performance. This strengthens focus, because it frees athletes to focus on things that improve their performance.
- ❑ **Setting effective goals** is about picking goals that are realistic for their time period: today, next week, next month, next year, and the far-off future. This too strengthens focus, because it helps athletes focus on aspects of performance that are relevant and appropriate for their time period.



## TYPES OF FOCUS

There are four main types of focus in sport:

- ❑ *Broad focus* is directed toward perceiving and interpreting many cues at the same time.
- ❑ *Narrow focus* is directed toward perceiving and interpreting only one or two cues at the same time.
- ❑ *Internal focus* is directed inward, toward perceiving and interpreting cues that the performer feels or thinks.
- ❑ *External focus* is directed outward, toward perceiving and interpreting cues in the surrounding environment that the performer can usually see or hear.

These four kinds of focus can also be combined in certain ways, as shown below.

This type of focus...	Is used to...	Example
Broad-External	Rapidly assess a situation	Football quarterback reading the offence and defence before making a pass
Narrow-External	Concentrate exclusively on one or two external cues	Focusing on a golf ball before swinging the club
Broad-Internal	Analyze and plan	Developing a game plan/strategy
Narrow-Internal	Mentally rehearse an upcoming performance or control an emotional state	Mentally rehearsing a discus throw Taking a deep breath

Athletes often have to shuttle between an *internal* and *external* focus and between a *broad* and *narrow* focus. For example, within a single play, a football quarterback may have to shift his or her attention many times to complete a pass:

- ❑ Narrow, external: Receiving the snap from the centre
- ❑ Narrow, external: Stepping back into the pocket
- ❑ Broad, external: Reading the defence, looking for open receivers
- ❑ Narrow, external: Zeroing in on the intended receiver
- ❑ Narrow, internal: Processing how far/fast to throw
- ❑ Narrow, external: Throwing the ball
- ❑ Broad, external: Looking for any defence that may be about to tackle him or her

Some sports require very few shifts in focus, while others call for almost continuous shifts:

- ❑ In general, sports that involve many other athletes or take place in an environment where many changes occur<sup>1</sup> require that athletes shift their focus constantly to be aware of what's going on around them and know what their immediate task is. Basketball and hockey require this kind of shifting.

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<sup>1</sup> This is often referred to as an open environment.

- ❑ In general, sports that require a more singular focus on oneself, with little need for awareness of what other competitors are doing or what the surroundings are like, require few shifts in focus. Swimming, canoe/kayak, rowing, and alpine skiing are like this.

The table below shows the focus shifts involved in a number of individual and team sports.

Few Shifts		Lots of Shifts
<p><b>Individual sports practised/played in a closed environment*</b></p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Archery</li> <li>❑ Bowling</li> <li>❑ Diving</li> <li>❑ Gymnastics</li> <li>❑ Trampoline</li> <li>❑ Triathlon</li> <li>❑ Weightlifting</li> </ul> <p><b>Team sports in which primarily one athlete is performing at any given time</b></p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Lawn bowling</li> </ul>	<p><b>Individual sports practised/played in an open environment**</b></p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Alpine skiing</li> <li>❑ Athletics</li> <li>❑ Badminton</li> <li>❑ Biathlon</li> <li>❑ Bobsleigh</li> <li>❑ Boxing</li> <li>❑ Canoeing/Kayaking</li> <li>❑ Cycling, Sprinting</li> <li>❑ Cross country skiing</li> <li>❑ Equestrian</li> <li>❑ Fencing</li> <li>❑ Figure skating</li> <li>❑ Freestyle skiing</li> <li>❑ 4-wall handball</li> <li>❑ Judo</li> <li>❑ Luge</li> <li>❑ Nordic sports</li> <li>❑ Orienteering</li> <li>❑ Parachuting</li> <li>❑ Racquetball</li> <li>❑ Rowing</li> <li>❑ Sailing/Yachting</li> <li>❑ Snowboarding</li> <li>❑ Speed skating (except short track)</li> <li>❑ Squash</li> <li>❑ Swimming</li> <li>❑ Synchronized swimming</li> <li>❑ Table tennis</li> <li>❑ Taekwondo</li> <li>❑ Tennis</li> <li>❑ Waterskiing</li> </ul>	<p><b>Team sports played in either an open or a closed environment in which more than two athletes are key performers at any given time</b></p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Basketball</li> <li>❑ Broomball</li> <li>❑ Field hockey</li> <li>❑ Football</li> <li>❑ Ice hockey</li> <li>❑ Lacrosse</li> <li>❑ Team handball</li> <li>❑ Road cycling</li> <li>❑ Ringette</li> <li>❑ Rugby</li> <li>❑ Soccer</li> <li>❑ Speed skating (short track)</li> <li>❑ Volleyball</li> <li>❑ Water polo</li> <li>❑ Wheelchair basketball</li> </ul>

Few Shifts		Lots of Shifts
	<div><input type="checkbox"/> Wrestling</div> <p><b><i>Team sports in which two or three athletes are usually the key performers at any given time</i></b></p> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Baseball</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Cricket</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Curling</div> <div><input type="checkbox"/> Softball</div>	

\* A closed environment is one in which few changes occur (usually indoors or in a highly controlled environment).

\*\* An open environment is one in which many changes may occur within a short period of time; usually outdoor sports or sports where there is an opponent.



## INTRODUCING FOCUS PLANS

Focus plans are detailed plans setting out when and how athletes will work on all the things they need to think about and feel to perform well. Focus plans train athletes to focus effectively on each aspect of their sport, as well as on each component of their practices and competitions.

Focus plans help each of your athletes develop the skill of critical reflection: what's happening, how to find some balance between what worked and what was problematic, and how to be better prepared for the next race/game/event/competition.

Focus plans complement training plans for athletic abilities.

### Sample Focus Plans: Thinking and Feeling in Sport

*For a race situation, using canoe/kayak as an example*

Thinking About...	Feeling...
<input type="checkbox"/> At the start: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sit up</li> <li>• Wait for the gun</li> <li>• First 4 strokes deep and powerful</li> <li>• Strong core and legs</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Calm and relaxed
<input type="checkbox"/> Transition: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach and power</li> <li>• Stroke up front</li> <li>• Controlled breathing</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed in the shoulders <input type="checkbox"/> Stretched out
<input type="checkbox"/> Body of race: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong core and legs</li> <li>• Controlled breathing</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Efficient <input type="checkbox"/> In control
<input type="checkbox"/> Pick-ups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Powerful pushes on footboard</li> <li>• Legs down</li> <li>• Finish each stroke</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> Powerful
<input type="checkbox"/> Finish: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lock the legs</li> <li>• Work it all</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> It's good

**For a short-duration event, such as trampoline, diving, or freestyle ski**

Thinking About...	Feeling...
<b>Diving</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Before the dive:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeing a solid dive</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> At the top:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breathing rate and depth</li> <li>• Seeing the dive one more time</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed and in control</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I know how to do this dive</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Calm</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I know how to do this dive</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Intensity building</li> </ul>
<b>Aerials Freestyle Ski</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> At the top:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See the jump</li> <li>• Key words: Lock out, Straight, Tight</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> On the landing:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aggressive</li> <li>• Fight for it</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Breathing is regular and controlled</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Trust of the coach's choice of speed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Calm between jumps</li> </ul>

**For a game sport such as soccer or hockey**

Thinking About...	Feeling...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What my job is... (on the field, ice, etc.)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> What the game plan is...</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Playing my position</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Refocusing after breaks/goals in the game</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> I am playing with intensity and commitment to the game plan</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Confident that I am supporting my teammates</li> </ul>

## Using Focus Plans

Using focus plans effectively involves:

- ❑ **Developing/revising a focus plan.** You and your athlete/team develop/revise a focus plan.
- ❑ **Executing the focus plan.** The athlete/team executes the plan in a competition. Remind your athlete/team to use the focus plan.
- ❑ **Debriefing performance.** You and your athlete/team use the debriefing process to assess how well the focus plan worked in the competition. You and your athlete/team debrief whether things went well or badly in competition. This takes you back to developing/revising a focus plan, and you start the cycle again.

This module deals with developing/revising focus plans and debriefing performance; it does NOT deal with executing the focus plan.



## DEVELOPING/REVISING A FOCUS PLAN

To develop or revise a focus plan, you need to:

- ❑ Work with your athletes
- ❑ Tell athletes about focus
- ❑ Ask athletes good questions

**Remember, a good, well-trained focus plan creates a confident athlete,** because he or she knows and has trained what to be thinking and feeling.

## Work with Your Athletes

You probably know more about focus and psychological skills than most of your athletes, but you *don't* know more than they do about what works and doesn't work for them psychologically. That's why you need to create focus plans *with* your athletes.

Simply put, developing focus plans with your athletes:

- ❑ Makes for more accurate focus plans, because you have athletes' own input
- ❑ Saves everyone time and energy, because the focus plans are more accurate
- ❑ Increases athlete commitment, because athletes helped develop them

The athlete's personality plays a key role in his or her ability to focus and in the kind of focus plan that will work for him or her. For example, athletes who tend to become overanxious need fewer thoughts in their focus plan. For each athlete you coach, you need to know the answers to questions like these:

- ❑ Is the athlete fairly calm and focused in training and competition?
- ❑ Is the athlete more anxious about various aspects of competing?
- ❑ Is the athlete overcoming an injury or concussion?

Before you jump right in and start working on focus plans with your athletes, you need to tell them about focus.

## Tell Athletes about Focus

Communicating openly and telling athletes *about* workouts — the why and how of them, for example — is a key part of coaching well. It increases the trust between coach and athlete, and most athletes are more committed when they know *why* they're doing things.

So take a few minutes before starting to work on a focus plan, and tell athletes about focus: what it is, what a focus plan is, why focus matters, and how athletes will work on focus:

- ❑ Focus is what you're thinking about and feeling *now*, in the moment.
- ❑ A focus plan is a detailed list of all the things athletes need to think about and feel to perform well.
- ❑ Focus matters because it's an essential aspect of performing well in sport. And while focus is a very simple skill, it's also very hard to do. Why? Because so many things, such as distractions and the emphasis on winning, get in the way.

- ❑ To focus well in competition, athletes must have the right focus, or they'll make mistakes.
- ❑ Athletes can't wait for competitions to work on focus. To focus well in competition, they need to train their focus *every day*.
  - Sometimes athletes aren't particularly focused for training sessions. It's an important part of your role as a coach to design and direct practices that get them focused.
  - It often helps to get athletes to think about what they're doing and trying to accomplish, for example, in a particular training session. One simple but effective way to do this is to ask them what they'll work on in training rather than always telling them "Here's what we'll do." This ensures the athlete is actually engaged, thinking, focused.
- ❑ To train their focus, athletes need to follow a plan that will prepare them to think about and feel the things they need to think about and feel to perform well.
- ❑ Being focused is hard work. You're asking athletes to be fully focused in physical training every day, as well as whenever you're discussing training, talking strategy, watching video, training in the gym, visualizing, etc. Outside those times, there are many hours in the day when the athlete should NOT be totally focused on his or her sport but should be resting, eating well, studying, taking classes, etc.

## Ask Athletes Good Questions

To perform at their best, athletes need to be aware of the focus that works for them. It's one of your main jobs as a coach to help them discover this focus.

This involves asking athletes good questions, listening to their answers, asking them even more good questions, and incorporating the answers you develop together into the focus plan.

Start this process by:

- ❑ Asking athletes to reflect on one of their best races/games/performances. What were they thinking and feeling?
- ❑ Asking athletes to do the same for a not-so-great race/game/performance. This will begin to tell you about what focus is best for the individual athlete.
- ❑ Ask them about their preferred focus and strengths. Emphasize the need to:
  - Focus on internal and external cues such as thoughts and feelings that help athletes perform optimally
  - Act in ways that help good performances happen

Then work with your athletes to translate this information into a focus plan. Here are some questions you can ask to call on your athletes' self-awareness and get at THEIR best focus.

- ❑ What do you need to be thinking about to perform well?
- ❑ What do you need to be feeling to perform well?
- ❑ What strategies do you need to execute to perform well?
- ❑ What do you need to do to handle an opponent who performs unusually well?
- ❑ What do you need to do to handle an opponent who performs unusually badly?
- ❑ What distractions do you have to be able to handle to perform well?

- ❑ What skills do you need to be able to apply to perform well?

Asking effective questions is the key to finding out what's happening with your athletes. You need to ask good questions, questions that get at what's really going on, and you have to listen to and probe your athletes' answers. This is an ongoing process of learning and self-discovery for you *and* your athletes, as you learn together what works and what doesn't work.

For information on asking questions in other kinds of situations, see page 26.

## **VISUALIZATION**

We have images, thoughts, and feelings in our mind all the time. To perform well, athletes need to be in control of these images, and they need to “see” and “feel” themselves performing well.

What is visualization?

- ❑ Visualization is a skill that allows athletes to create a blueprint of how they want to be, what they want to be focused on.
- ❑ Visualization is an opportunity to create a positive reality; it also allows athletes to be well prepared for competition.
- ❑ Visualization is closely linked to focus, because we often want athletes to be visualizing their focus plan — what they want to be thinking and feeling while competing.
- ❑ Visualization is a skill that can give athletes the confidence to return to play after an injury or concussion.

How can athletes learn to visualize effectively, and what can you do to help them?

### **General Tips**

- ❑ Visualization is like any other skill — athletes need to practise it regularly to get better at it.
- ❑ Visualization must be positive. This is the **ONLY RULE** about visualization. There is no point visualizing a poor performance, a mistake, bad technique, an injury, etc.
- ❑ Work with your athletes to find out what works best for them. Some athletes can see themselves executing a skill or remembering a past good performance; for others, it's more of a feel.
- ❑ Athletes do **NOT** always need to be lying down when they visualize. It is often useful for athletes to approximate the position they will compete in. For instance, in canoe/kayak or rowing, athletes could sit and create small movements as they visualize their race.
- ❑ Athletes can visualize skills from an internal perspective (doing it) or from an external perspective (as if watching the skills on video). Both perspectives are OK.
- ❑ Athletes can visualize just about anything: specific technical aspects of a skill, tactical plans, race focus plans, past best performances, future competitions, feelings of confidence, etc.
- ❑ It can be hard to know how well an athlete is visualizing — it often helps to sit with an athlete while he or she visualizes and then ask for feedback.

## Practice-specific Tips

- ❑ Integrate visualization into daily training — whenever you make a technical suggestion or correction, ask the athlete to visualize the change/correction in his or her mind before trying it physically.
- ❑ Start with visualizing a skill the athlete is already good at or a past good performance. This ensures that the athlete will be able to see and feel the skill or performance.
- ❑ Start out by having your athletes practise visualizing for 3-5 minutes three times a week.
- ❑ Once you're sure your athletes can visualize effectively, encourage them to start visualizing races or game performances.
- ❑ If an athlete gets stuck on a negative image, for example, falling in practice, go back to visualizing a simpler skill, where the athlete can see himself or herself successfully performing the skill.

## Sample Visualization Activity

The following is an example of an activity to introduce athletes to visualization. It starts with visualizing a daily activity that athletes can relate to and then progresses to a sport-specific application.

- ❑ Ask athletes to visualize something they know well.
- ❑ Ask them questions about their visualization to confirm that all athletes visualize on the same item or in the same way.

### Visualization Exercise

- ❑ Visualize a daily activity:
  - Sit in a relaxed position and close your eyes.
  - Imagine you are walking into your home, through the door and into your kitchen. Hear any sound you might hear in this kitchen, see the colours, smell the smells. Is your mom there? Walk over to the fridge and open it.
  - Feel the cool air that hits you when you open the door and the light comes on. Find out where the lemons are, and pull out a big yellow lemon. Feel the weight of the lemon in your hand, and feel its texture.
  - Close the door, and find a cuttingboard and knife. Cut the lemon in half. See the beads of juice on the knife, and smell the scent of the lemon. Now cut the lemon into quarters. Pick up one of the four quarters, smell it, and bite into it.
- ❑ Reflecting on your visualization, answer each of the following questions with a rating from 1 to 10, with 1 meaning *Not at all* and 10 meaning *Very clearly*:
  - Could you smell the lemon?
  - Could you feel the lemon, door handle, and house?
  - Could you taste the lemon?
  - Could you hear sounds?
  - Did you see in colour or in black and white?
  - Could you feel your body moving?



- ❑ Discuss your visualization with other athletes.
- ❑ Visualize a sport-specific skill. Choose a simple skill in your sport, for example, a shot in basketball. This visualization helps you *feel* movements and enhances the physical skill involved. For basketball:
  - Start by shooting 1 metre from the hoop and making the shot. Then close your eyes and do the same thing. Make the shot with your eyes closed.
  - Then look at the rim, close your eyes, and see the rim. Now see and feel the ball going into the hoop. Then shoot the ball.
  - Do this step by step, and gradually increase the distance from the basket.

## DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

Anything that has the potential to draw the athlete's attention can distract the athlete. Distractions come from a variety of sources: winning, losing, getting a concussion or getting injured, seeing someone else get injured or get a concussion, arguing with a parent, having weather delays, dealing with sponsors, worrying about selection to a team, etc.

Distractions can be:

- ❑ Things athletes can control, such as their thoughts and feelings (although they must train this)
- ❑ Things the coach may be able to control, such as getting boat numbers, knowing lanes in heats and finals, and knowing about delays/changes.
- ❑ Things that cannot really be controlled, such as weather, delay in competition, or getting injured/hurt/sick

Here are some examples of common distractions athletes have to deal with:

### Sources and Examples of Potential Distractions

- ❑ Spectators (e.g., heckling, yelling, cheering, waving objects)
- ❑ Returning to play after an injury or concussion
- ❑ Seeing a teammate suffer an injury or concussion
- ❑ Coach (e.g., calling out instructions, yelling)
- ❑ Other teammates (e.g., chatting, calling out instructions, asking for help)
- ❑ Competitors (e.g., chatting, trash talking, making physical contact, posturing)
- ❑ Officials (e.g., poor calls or bias)
- ❑ Ambient noise (e.g., plane flying overhead, commentary over loudspeakers)
- ❑ Environmental conditions (e.g., flickering light, gusty wind, uneven field, poor visibility)
- ❑ Equipment (e.g., rock in shoe, strap too tight, forgotten piece of equipment, broken or torn piece of equipment)
- ❑ Organization (e.g., poor tournament schedule, late start times)
- ❑ Intensity (e.g., getting too excited before a competition)

## Coping with Emotions after a Concussion Can be a Major Distraction

When coping with a concussion, it is not uncommon for athletes to become overwhelmed by a variety of emotions. Often athletes feel concerned, anxious, and sometimes depressed. The first part of the healing process is to understand that these emotions are normal. After an injury, most people go through an initial stage of denial. Athletes may refuse to believe that they are injured or unable to participate in their selected work, activity, or sport. It is extremely tough for athletes to realize that after sustaining a concussion, their body may not be able to respond as it did before.

Other emotions such as anger and depression are also common when suffering a concussion. Athletes may find themselves being angry, displaced, and blaming others for their injury. It is quite common to become very angry at co-workers, family, and friends. As athletes continue to become more aware about the extent of their injury, depression may set in. This may include self-pity, crying, insomnia, etc. When athletes are unable to work, play, and participate in their normal life, they may become doubtful of their personal abilities and struggle with their personal worth. They may worry that if they are out of the “loop,” somebody will take their spot or permanent position. They may suffer a blow to their ego and it is not uncommon for athletes to isolate or alienate themselves.

With time, most athletes learn to accept the injury. It is important to allow themselves to mourn, be sad, and then move on. Attempting to be mad or tough and assigning blame for an injury is a waste of time. It is important to leave the “should haves” or “would haves” out of the picture and focus on the future. The reality is that the athlete has suffered a concussion and has to deal with it. This may include setting goals for himself or herself and maintaining a positive attitude. A positive, optimistic outlook can help to speed up the healing process and lessen the emotional pain.

Creating a focus plan for these athletes is essential (see pages 5 through 10). Visualization, goal setting, and management of the distraction are all important components of dealing with this effectively.

Source: Modified/adapted from Parachute. *Concussion Questions and Answers*. Available at [parachutecanada.org \(www.parachutecanada.org/active-and-safe/item/concussion-questions-and-answers\)](http://parachutecanada.org/www.parachutecanada.org/active-and-safe/item/concussion-questions-and-answers).

## Skills for Dealing with Distractions

Distractions happen. It's impossible to control for all potential distractions. This is why it's so important to help athletes learn to block out distractions and to refocus if and when they lose their focus.

Here are some tips on how to take care of distractions:

- ❑ Plan how to deal with distractions well in advance of any competition; otherwise, the athlete will be focused on all the things that can go wrong.
- ❑ Start by brainstorming on everything you feel or know distracts your athlete(s)/team and prevents them from focusing well.
- ❑ Develop solutions for each distraction you come up with. This is your back-up plan.

- ❑ Figure out who's in control of the solution, and modify responsibility for the solution as required:
  - For example, if the distraction is forgetting a piece of equipment, the athlete can be responsible for the solution.
  - If the distraction is that start times may change, the coach can be responsible for the solution.
  - And if the distraction is a rain delay, everyone just has to accept it and take a deep breath!

Here are some skills that will help your athletes focus on relevant cues and ignore those that may distract them from their performance:

### ***Focus on a Clock Face #1***

- ❑ Focus on the clock face, and click your fingers every 5 seconds.
- ❑ Now click your fingers at 5, 10, 15, 5, 10, 15 seconds.
- ❑ Now try to maintain your focus and the finger-clicking sequence while faced with a distracting sound such as:
  - Hand clapping by others around you
  - Hand clapping and foot stamping by others around you (increased distractions).

### ***Focus on a Clock Face #2***

- ❑ Focus on the second hand of a watch or clock as it makes one complete revolution. Blink your eyes or snap your fingers every five seconds.
- ❑ After one complete revolution of the second hand, concentrate on the sweep hand as it makes another complete revolution. This time, blink your eyes or snap your fingers every ten seconds.
- ❑ After this second complete revolution of the sweep hand, concentrate on the second hand as it makes a third complete revolution. This time, alternate blinking your eyes and snapping your fingers at five-second intervals.

Practising this exercise a few times a day gradually improves the ability to concentrate.

### ***Focus on an Object***

- ❑ **Choose a concentration word.** For example, if you are in a ball-oriented sport, choose the word *ball*. If you are not in a ball-oriented sport, choose a short, soft, non-distracting word that will help you focus on an object or picture as you concentrate on it, for example, *one*, *run*, *goal*, *lane*, or *arm*. Look at the object, and say your concentration word — repeating a word helps keep the mind from wandering.
- ❑ **Look at the object of concentration.** Now begin to examine every detail of the object you are concentrating on. For example, look at a ball's outline, at its surface. Is it rough or smooth? Does it have seams, dimples, printing on it? Are there scratches or scuff marks? Look at its colours and the way the light and shadows fall on its surface. Don't try to stop yourself from blinking. Relax.
- ❑ **Feel the object.** For instance, pick up a ball; feel its texture; turn it around, and look at it from various angles.

- ❑ **Imagine the object.** With a ball, for example, put it down, and focus your mind and eyes on it. See the ball as fully as you can so that its smallest detail will stand out in your mind. Know the ball. “Marry it.” Don’t try to overpower the object of your concentration. As you relax and keep your eye on the object, you’ll find it will seem to *come to you*. You must maintain something of a passive attitude in this process, allowing the object of your concentration to enter your mind fully and not simply be something external that you are studying. When you concentrate, you will find that this seemingly mysterious process happens quite naturally.
- ❑ **Get the feeling.** When your concentration breaks — as it must — say to yourself, “I have been concentrating on [the name of the object]. This is what it feels like to be concentrating. I am relaxed, I feel good, and my attention is totally focused on [the name of the object]. This is concentration.” Look back at the object.
- ❑ **Say the concentration word again.** Now say the concentration word to yourself. Look at the object. Concentrate.
- ❑ **Relax.** Use the relaxation technique you are most comfortable with.

**Note:** This material is based on Tutko (1976); the exercise should take about 10 minutes.

### ***Learning to Focus on Cues in the Environment***

#### **Baseball Exercise**

**Phase 1** — Take a tennis ball, stand in front of a group, and throw the ball to the person with *one* hand in the air. This person has been designated by the coach or the members of the group, but you don’t know who he or she is. On the coach’s command, all group members but one throw both hands in the air. Throw the ball to the individual with only one hand in the air.

**Phase 2** — Repeat the exercise — this time one person puts both hands in the air but with thumbs tucked in. All other group members also have both arms in the air, their hands are open and facing you, and they sway their arms slowly backward, forward, and side to side. The person instructed to keep thumbs tucked into the hands also sways his or her arms slowly. Throw the ball to the odd person out, but without any cues about the nature of the difference.

#### ***Shuttling (Internal – External Concentration)***

- ❑ Choose a partner.
- ❑ The person who goes first closes his or her eyes; tunes in to some sensation, feeling, or thought; and says something like “Now I am aware of a pain in my leg,” “Now I am aware of my breathing,” or “Now I am feeling silly.”
- ❑ The person then opens his or her eyes and says “Now I am aware of...,” adding something that is happening outside himself or herself. For instance, he or she says “Now I am aware of the sunlight” or “Now I am aware of your eyes.”
- ❑ Repeat the process — first an inside statement, then an outside one — for a few minutes without a break. If the person gets stuck, the partner should help out by asking “Now I am aware of...?”
- ❑ The partner does the concentration exercise.
- ❑ Later, the exercise is repeated with the eyes open all the time.

**Note:** This exercise on shuttling is based on Syer & Connolly (1998).

### **Positive Self-talk and Thought-Stopping**

- ❑ Negative thoughts (e.g., “I may lose this game because...” or “I’m scared I may get hurt again”) are distractions that decrease the ability to concentrate and to focus on important environmental cues.
- ❑ To become aware of negative thoughts, the athlete must first recognize their existence. The thoughts may occur very rapidly and be automatic. Personal awareness of these thoughts and of their nature is essential to stopping and replacing them.
- ❑ Negative thoughts are very natural for both the athlete and teammates after someone has suffered a concussion or an injury of any type. Recognizing these natural thoughts is the first step in replacing them.
- ❑ You may ask the athletes to “listen” to their internal thoughts the next time they have performance-related anxiety and to record them:
  - What are the thoughts?
  - What conditions do they typically occur in?
  - How do these thoughts make you feel?

### **Recognizing, Stopping, and Replacing Thoughts**

- ❑ Sit quietly, close your eyes, relax, and recall any situation that evokes negative thoughts that have affected your sport performance.
- ❑ Sense the feelings and actions that accompany these thoughts.
- ❑ Think *Stop*, and immediately replace negative thoughts with more appropriate ones. *Sense* the feelings and actions accompanying these new thoughts.
- ❑ Think about how the feelings and actions associated with the old thoughts differed from those associated with the new thoughts. Think about how this experience relates to the competitive situation.
- ❑ Record your responses in the following chart.

<b><i>What negative thoughts run through your mind before a performance in which you are anxious you might not do well?</i></b>	<b><i>What words might you use to stop these thoughts?</i></b>	<b><i>Write down positive thoughts to replace the negative thoughts.</i></b>
<b>List them below</b>	<b>List them below</b>	<b>List them below</b>
Example: I'm afraid I'll fall again and get a worse concussion than the first one.	Example: Stop	Example: I am healthy I am strong I am ready to perform
<b><i>What negative thoughts run through your mind when you are experiencing difficulties during sport performance?</i></b>	<b><i>What words might you use to stop these thoughts?</i></b>	<b><i>Write down positive thoughts to replace the negative thoughts.</i></b>
<b>List them below</b>	<b>List them below</b>	<b>List them below</b>
Example: I can't go my hardest because I might get injured	Example: I won't get injured	Example: I can give 100%

### ***Controlling Intensity***

Intensity can both support and distract the athlete. Athletes need an optimal amount of intensity to perform well. Trying too hard or pushing too much often hurts performance. Athletes need to learn *relaxed* intensity, *relaxed* power, *relaxed* focus.

The challenge for you as a coach is to:

- ☐ Determine the level of intensity your sport requires
- ☐ Combine that with the level of intensity that works for each of your athletes

Most athletes tend to get too nervous before competitions and start focusing on the things that can go wrong. These athletes need to calm themselves before a competition and bring themselves back to focusing on what they *can* do. There are, of course, some athletes who become too calm as the competition gets closer, but this is not the norm.

How can you help your athletes find the right level of intensity?

- ❑ Go back to the skill of focus: what do you want your athletes to be focused on during competition, what do you think they need to be feeling, and how activated do they need to be? For example,
  - In basketball, your players need to be high energy and aggressive because it is a game played against another team.
  - In kayak, you may want your athlete energized but calm and focused on the race focus plan, executing well technically in the boat for the entire 500m.
  - In trampoline, where a routine lasts 23 seconds, your athlete requires calm and total focus on the routine.
- ❑ Get athletes to THINK about the right things — it gets them closer to the right intensity.
- ❑ Use the three-part process of plan, execute, and assess.
  - **Plan.** As part of your focus plan, decide how activated/energized you want your athletes to be, and specify how the athlete will achieve the desired level of intensity in the next competition.
  - **Execute.** The athlete follows the focus plan, which specifies how to achieve the right level of intensity in competition.
  - **Assess.** After the competition, sit down with your athlete and discuss how it went, what worked, and what if anything needs to change. Then adjust the plan accordingly for the next competition. Ask questions like these:
    - What helped you maintain focus and your energy?
    - What took you away from your focus?
    - Were you too excited? Nervous?
    - What do you need to change?
- ❑ Consider including some relaxation and breathing exercises in your cool-down sessions. This teaches athletes how to breathe more effectively and helps them better understand how breathing can help calm them when they become too intense.
- ❑ This is one of the toughest aspects of focus to understand and develop.



## SETTING EFFECTIVE GOALS

When we set goals, we often set long-term, far-off goals and don't really focus on the present — what we can and probably should be doing today to achieve that long-term goal. Here are some tips for how you as a coach can bridge that gap:

- ❑ Set goals *with your athletes*. This encourages them to set more effective goals.
- ❑ Talk with your athletes about what they want to achieve.
- ❑ Tell your athletes you will support them as they pursue these goals.
- ❑ Educate your athletes about the training they must do to achieve their goals.
- ❑ Point out to your athletes how goal-setting is related to focus: that athletes will be focusing on small, daily goals.
- ❑ Regularly assess whether your athletes are achieving their goals, and adjust goals as needed for ongoing and long-term success.
- ❑ Assess goals *with your athletes*. It helps them understand that goals are about choices, and it empowers them by getting them to take more responsibility for themselves.
- ❑ Don't be afraid to help athletes set challenging goals — it can inspire them to believe more in themselves.
- ❑ Goals are important for athletes returning to play from an injury or concussion.

## Types of Goals

Setting effective goals involves setting three very different types of goals:

- ❑ Outcome goals
- ❑ Performance goals
- ❑ Process goals

### **Outcome Goals**

- ❑ Outcome goals focus on results, such as winning a competition or medal, or scoring more points than an opponent.
- ❑ Outcome goals are necessary, but they can cause athletes stress on competition day.
- ❑ Outcome goals can act as motivators when competitions are far in the future.
- ❑ Whether athletes achieve these goals depends on their own personal effort, as well their opponent's performance.

### **Performance Goals**

- ❑ Performance goals focus on achieving one's own performance objectives, e.g., running a specific time in a race.
- ❑ These goals are more flexible and give athletes a greater sense of personal control.
- ❑ Focusing on performance goals can be very helpful for athletes returning to play after an injury or concussion.

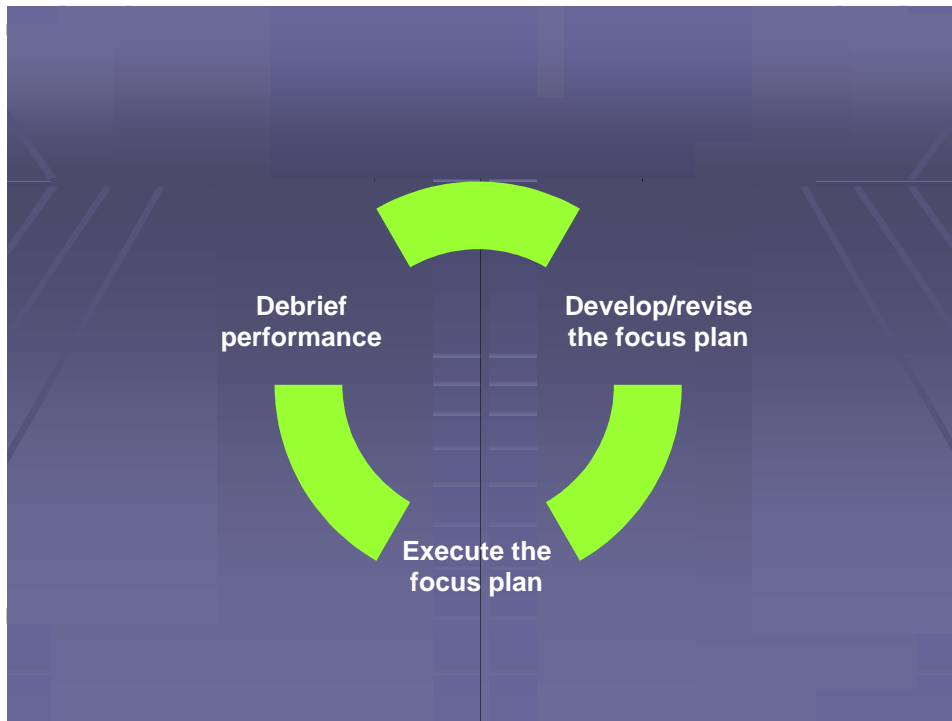
## **Process Goals**

- ❑ Process goals focus on the actions/movements that need to be carried out in a good performance.
- ❑ These are the best kinds of goals to be thinking about on competition day, because they relate most closely to an athlete's best focus.
- ❑ These goals can help athletes returning to play after an injury or concussion.

## DEBRIEFING PERFORMANCE

Debriefing athletes' performance is a key part of using focus plans effectively. Debriefing performance tells you how well athletes are applying their focus plan. You debrief after you develop/revise and execute the focus plan:

- ❑ **Developing/revising a focus plan.** You and your athlete/team develop/revise a focus plan.
- ❑ **Executing the focus plan.** The athlete/team executes the plan in a competition. Remind your athlete/team to use the focus plan.
- ❑ **Debriefing performance.** You and your athlete/team use the debriefing process to assess how well the focus plan worked in the competition. You and your athlete/team debrief whether things went well or badly in competition. This takes you back to developing/revising a focus plan, and you start the cycle again.



So how do you debrief an athlete's or a team's performance? This approach involves asking specific questions after the competition that will help you and your athlete fully understand the athlete's performance in that competition.

When debriefing performance, you discuss, you ask, and you listen. In this process, you:

- ❑ Are clear about your own role. Your role is to facilitate the athlete's discovery of the focus that works best for him or her. Your role is to help lead this process, not to direct it.
- ❑ Discuss with your athlete/team what went well in a competition/event/game and what did not go so well.
- ❑ Encourage athletes to write things down during the discussion.
- ❑ Cover *all* aspects of the performance, not just psychological performance factors.

- ❑ Listen actively in a non-judgemental fashion.
- ❑ Do one of the following:
  - Ask debriefing questions: What?, So What?, and Now What? questions.
  - Facilitate discussions
  - Ask specific questions for specific situations

## **Ask Debriefing Questions**

An important objective of debriefing performance is for athletes to come up with both the positive and the not-so-good aspects of their performance. Athletes are always good at the negative, the things they don't do well; there is a need for a balance between the two, because for most athletes, confidence comes from the positive.

Listed below are some examples of What?, So what?, and Now what? questions that can get at that balance. Note that you would not use all of the questions in one debriefing session.

### ***What? Questions***

These are questions that collect data about what happened and what athletes felt during the performance:

- ❑ What did you feel?
- ❑ What do you think was the outcome of the performance?
- ❑ What were you thinking?
- ❑ What happened during the performance?
- ❑ What important points can you recall in the performance?
- ❑ What strategies did you execute well?
- ❑ What strategies did you execute poorly?
- ❑ What did you do to handle an opponent performing unusually well?
- ❑ What did you do to handle an opponent performing unusually badly?
- ❑ What distractions did you have to handle?

### ***So What? Questions***

So what? questions ask athletes to draw and discuss conclusions, as well as discuss the relevance of the performance in their overall program:

- ❑ So, how well did you follow your focus plan?
- ❑ So, what external factors, for instance, the weather, affected your ability to follow your focus plan?
- ❑ So, what did you do to handle them, and how well did that work?
- ❑ So, how does this relate to your overall performance?
- ❑ So, what should we do differently for the next competition?
- ❑ So, what did you learn?
- ❑ So, what other conclusions might make sense?

- ❑ So, what data supports or doesn't support the conclusions?

### **Now What? Questions**

These questions engage athletes in the planning process by encouraging athletes to apply their insights to other activities or situations.

- ❑ Now, what should we do differently for the next competition?
- ❑ Now, what if ... and how might it affect your performance?
- ❑ Now, what changes will we make as a result of the insights gained from this debriefing process?

### **Facilitate Discussions**

This approach involves guiding athletes in a certain direction by asking them questions or using probing statements with a specific purpose to gather specific additional information or broaden or deepen athletes' thinking and feeling. For example, if you want athletes to think more flexibly about what to do in certain situations, ask them questions like "What if you...?" or "What else might you...?" This is much more effective than simply telling athletes what to do or what else might work. Overall, this approach encourages athletes to reflect on their performance and to self-assess.

Facilitation is effective in almost any situation: before or after practice, before or after a competition, etc. The table below suggests wording you can use, given the direction you want your athletes to take.

<b>When you want to...</b>	<b>Say things like this...</b>
Bring out feelings	"What are your feelings about...?" "How do you feel about...?" "Expand on your reaction to..."
Determine athletes' values/beliefs	"What is important for you in...?" "What do you believe about...?" "This is important because..."
Find out how athletes will apply something	"What will you do with this?" "How will you apply this in another situation?" "Give me an example of when you might...?"
Find out how flexible the athlete is	"What if you...?" "What else might you...?"
Find out what an athlete was thinking	"What were you thinking when...?" "Explain in a little more detail your thoughts on..."
Get athletes to think about data	"How will you use this information?"
Get the athlete to predict	"If you do ..., what do you think will happen?"
Know about timing	Sequence: "What happens first, second...?" Duration: "How long...?" Rhythm: "How often... How frequently...?" "Give me an example of when you might..."

When you want to...	Say things like this...
Know more	"Tell me more about..."
Understand better	"Explain what you mean by..."
Understand purpose/intention	"Why did you...?" "What was your reason for...?" "What was your purpose?" "This is of value to you because..."

## Ask Specific Questions for Specific Situations<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes you want to know how well a specific aspect of focus such as goal-setting or visualization is going. In such cases, you need to ask pointed questions about that aspect of focus.

### **Questions about Goal-setting**

Listed below are examples of questions you can ask about goal-setting.

#### **Before a Performance**

- ☐ What are your goals for...?
- ☐ How do you plan to go about attaining your goals?
- ☐ How will you know that you have attained your goals?
- ☐ What criteria or standard of quality will you use to assess your performance?
- ☐ What new learning goals do you have?

#### **After a Performance**

- ☐ What did you set out to accomplish?
- ☐ Why or how did you achieve what you set out to accomplish?
- ☐ How did you go about meeting your goals?
- ☐ How do you know you achieved your goal? What measure, criteria, or standard did you use?
- ☐ What did you do to achieve your performance goal?
- ☐ What worked? What didn't work? What could you do differently?
- ☐ What have you learned from this performance?
- ☐ What are your new goals?

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<sup>2</sup> The material in this section is adapted from: RTTWorks. Results Through Training, [www.RTTWorks.com](http://www.rttworks.com). Retrieved November 19, 2007 from <http://www.rttworks.com/images/downloads/Debrief.HTML>.

## **Questions for Other Aspects of Focus**

The following types of questions apply to other aspects of focus: visualization, taking care of distractions, finding the right level of intensity, etc.

### **General Questions**

- ☐ How did it work?
- ☐ What happened when you...?
- ☐ What approach did you use to...? How did it work?
- ☐ What information did you consistently want? Why?
- ☐ Where did you disagree with...? Why?
- ☐ How easy or hard was it compared to the last time you...? Why?
- ☐ What was different between this time and the previous time?

### **Questions about Feelings and Reactions**

- ☐ How do you feel about...?
- ☐ How confident are you about the ... that you did?
- ☐ How do you feel about your potential for success?
- ☐ What was your reaction when...? Did you get more or less comfortable?

### **Questions about Learning**

- ☐ What did you learn from the feedback from...?
- ☐ What did you learn?
- ☐ What do you still need to learn?

### **Questions about Applying the Skill**

- ☐ How can understanding this focus skill help you to...?
- ☐ How does this relate to...?
- ☐ What will you do with this information?
- ☐ Why is this ... important to you?

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# How to be a better coach



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