

17 Things That Mental Training Will Do for Your Swimming

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May 04th, 2018

Mental training can seem confusing and overwhelming when approached for the first time...

Does it mean something is wrong with me?

Does it mean my brain is busted?

This stuff all sounds kind of hokey—just sit around, close my eyes and focus on my breathing type stuff?

No, you don't need mental training because your brain is broken.

And no, it's not some *The Secret*-type stuff where you sit around wishing on the universe to give you what you need.

This stuff is backed by decades of research that has consistently shown that mental training, with its various techniques and tools, including visualization, self-talk, and [even a bigger focus on “the process”](#), can help you straight-up donkey kick your personal best times in the pool.

Mental training, at its heart, is a user manual for your brain; not a first aid kit.

Here's a selection of the ways that working on your mindset even just a little bit each day will help you become the swimmer you've always dreamt of:

1. You'll enjoy your practices more.

I know, I know, that sounds *unpossible*. But it's true. Wanna know what the secret to enjoying hard or mundane tasks?

Not letting your mind wander.

Being "present" and engaged with whatever you are doing, [whether it's a long Fartlek set](#), or a round of 100s off the blocks, is one of the secrets to enjoying hard work.

2. You'll redefine how tough you are.

One of the peak moments in swimming comes when we surpass a limit or break past a plateau. These incidents are rarely by accident, and often come via bargaining with ourselves to push just a little longer ("Okay little buddy, let's do one more rep!").

Improvement comes via slowly inching the line of what we think is possible each day in practice, and this is difficult to do without the willingness to have the mindset necessary to do it.

3. You'll be less of a Debbie Downer when things don't go your way.

How do you react when a race goes belly-up on you? Or when you have a really bad practice? Does it linger, leading you to swim poorly in the days and races still to come?

An improved mindset means you have the perspective to bounce back—and seize the opportunities still before you.

4. You will learn to focus on the right things in training.

When you have a bad practice, does your thinking go immediately to: “*Ohmagod, I’m never going to achieve any of my goals*” or does it go to, “*Okay, somewhere along the way my process fell off the rails.*”

Don’t know the difference? Mental training will show you.

5. Identify good and bad emotions pre-race.

It’s always interesting to see watch how different swimmers prepare and amp themselves up before competition. Some go the chest-slapping silver back gorilla route, others prefer the calm, stoic posture.

In the course of becoming more aware of your mindset you’ll figure out exactly what works for you and what doesn’t.

6. Be better positioned to deal with injury.

The sad reality is that it’s going to happen: at some point over the course of a long season you’ll tweak a shoulder, a knee, your back, or getting really sick.

For most swimmers, it’s a time where they withdraw in frustration, not completing the recovery protocol properly, extending their injury and leaving themselves vulnerable to being injured again down the road.

Approaching the inevitable injury with a better mindset not only helps you heal faster, but it also gives you some powerful ammo to bounce back stronger (“I am going to make this the best thing to ever happen to me!”).

7. How to set ambitious yet doable goals.

We all have dreams in the pool—whether or not we say them aloud is another matter. We daydream about swimming in the Olympics, about crushing our PB’s, and of swimming ever faster.

Even though big dreams are common, the ability to parse through the ambitious and the ridiculous is something those swimmers who achieve big things understand.

Big goals matter, but a realization that ambition must be matched with realistic effort is key.

8. How to make perfectionism work for you.

At some point we all confront perfectionism: either we get down on ourselves because we don't match our high standards (and give up), or we create such lofty expectations that we never give ourselves a chance to make meaningful progress (and give up some more).

There is a form of perfectionism that allows for high standards without the crushing anxiety and stress that comes with the all-or-nothing outlook perfectionists tend to fall for.

9. How to make the voice in your head work for you.

Each day in practice you are telling yourself a story: *I feel great in the water. I feel like crap in the water. I can do this set. There's no way I can do this.*

Back and forth goes your self-talk, usually unattended, driving the way you end up performing in the water. **Self-talk is the key to your mindset.**

Decide what to tell yourself, and your body will generally follow (as long as it's realistic and relevant: I can tell myself that I am ten feet tall, but that doesn't make it so).

Mental training includes a heap of ways to reframe your self-talk so that you can get more from your swimming each and every day in practice.

10. How to manage pre-race stress.

Choking. It's perhaps every swimmer's worst nightmare. (That and having your suit fly off on the start of the Big Race...) Training your butt off for months on end, putting the work in, hitting the race pace times—and then tensing up when getting up on the block is the worst.

Been there.

There are things you can do—you don't need to forever identify yourself as the kind of swimmer who chokes every time the pressure goes up.

Mental training gives you the tools to help deal with the tension and excess anxiety before big races so that you can reliably swim to the best of your ability.

11. Learn performance cues for faster swimming, more often.

One of my favorite mental training tools to use with swimmers is to have them describe the way they felt in the water over the course of an epic set or race.

Taking those same cues—“Easy speed”, for instance—we use them in future sets and to help build smarter race plans.

This little trickeroo keeps you focused on the right things in training and competition.

12. Better deal with distractions.

Swim meets (and practice) can be loud, busy and shiny affairs. Your friends are there. Parents in the stands. There is that cutie lifeguard.

With all the hustle and bustle and fast swimming going on it can be easy to get distracted.

A clearer mindset allows you to stay focused on the things you need to do today to kick some chlorinated butt even while surrounded by the mayhem of a double-ended, 3,000 swimmer competition.

13. You'll do the *right* kind of comparison making.

How many times have your coaches told you to keep your eyes in your own lane? Probably lots, right?

Comparison-making—whether it’s to the swimmer in the next lane, or the performance from your last competition when you swam out of your mind—can often times be debilitating.

But it can also be profoundly motivating when used in the right manner. Mental training will help you to decode the difference.

14. You learn to focus and build your process.

“The process” is something that mystifies a lot of swimmers that I talk to.

It seems to imply that by focusing on what you can control and influence in your preparation that it means they somehow care less about the results. That by focusing on the process of executing the result, and not obsessing on the outcome, that they don’t deserve to perform.

Which is weird.

But mental training helps you lean your focus on the process of being successful, and away from fixating predominantly on the outcome.

The difference may seem meaningless from the outside, but a process-oriented swimmer is far less stressed and far more productive than the swimmer who gets solely wrapped up in the results.

15. Confidence, supercharged.

Confidence is typically treated as an innate skill. Something we have, or we don't.

But confidence—the real, hot-blooded kind that keeps you training your brains off day after day—comes from action.

There are proven things that you can do to be more confident, more often, that have nothing to do with the things we tend to assume represent confidence: bravado, talking a big game, etc.

When you spend some time on your mindset, you learn that confidence is something you can regularly build and deploy when necessary.

16. Build race and competition plans that work for you.

Do you show up at the big meet with a plan for your preparation, or do you just kind of wing it?

By having a race plan, as well as a pre-race routine, you give yourself a powerful sense of familiarity and comfort, which can be a massive performance boost when you are competing far from home and under pressure.

Mental training means taking control of your preparation, and this extends to what you do on the day of the big race.

17. Makes for a better training environment.

When the swimmers in the group are focused on the right things at practice, are better dealing with setbacks and problems when they arise, and have a more focused and optimistic approach to the sets, what kind of effect do you think this has on the overall training atmosphere?

When the environment is less stressful, but still challenging, when there are high expectations, and a focus on dealing productively with failures, great things tend to happen.

One swimmer with a better mindset is powerful, a whole group of swimmers with a better mindset is unstoppable.