

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF STRENGTH



By Josh Hewett

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“True strength comes from within”.



We've all heard similar sayings. Most successful athletes know that their mentality plays a strong role in their performance. Many recreational athletes and trainees also realize on some level that their thoughts and moods affect their workouts. But very few actually dedicate sufficient time to “train their brain”. The fact is that the mind actually has INCREDIBLE power that many don't acknowledge. Your mind has the ability to make you stronger, more muscular, more athletic, more powerful, even wealthier and happier! Sound unbelievable? As this article will explain, your *inner world creates* your *outer world*.

The intention of this article is to share some of the **basics** of exercise and sport psychology and to illustrate the importance of our thoughts and emotions relative to our physical goals. I will also describe some simple techniques that you can use regularly to improve your performance. This information is directed to those readers who are already participating in a sport or strength training program and are motivated to achieve greater results.

The truth is that it's our mind that determines what results we will achieve. The process goes something like this: Your **thoughts** and **beliefs** lead to your **emotions**, which in turn lead to your **actions**, which cause your **results**. Unfortunately, most of us put up our own psychological barriers that interfere with our performance and limit our success.

The four-minute mile was a famous example of a psychological barrier. For years runners were *apparently* not able to run a mile in under four minutes, although many came close. That led to the common belief that this was physically impossible. Incredibly, within a year and a half after Roger Bannister's famous breakthrough, 16 other athletes accomplished it! It wasn't because these athletes were suddenly training harder. They were no longer limited by their beliefs once Bannister had demonstrated what was possible.

What I'm saying is that with a bit of mental conditioning you can expect far superior results from your training, and in many cases it's all that's holding you back.

The three basic mental conditioning techniques you will learn in this article are as follows:

1. **SMART Goal Setting.**
2. **Visualization:** Create a strong, clear mental picture of these goals using visualization and imagery training.
3. **Affirmations:** Reinforce these ideas often using positive statements called affirmations.

The field of **exercise and sport psychology** is significantly more involved than this, but these principles provide a great starting point for developing a mental training program.

Setting SMART Goals

Studies have shown that appropriate goal setting leads to performance enhancement, with moderate to strong effects. To remember the key principles of effective goal setting, think SMARTER; your goals should be:

Specific –Indicate precisely what is to be done. Avoid vague alternatives.

Measurable –You should be able to quantify your goal.

Actionable –Develop concrete plan of actions required to move toward your goals.

Realistic –Start with moderately difficult goals, rather than too easy or difficult to reach.

Time-Constrained –Set specific time limits for both short term and long term goals.



Take some time right now to write down your short term goals as well as your long term “dream” goals (the ones that may seem a long way off and harder to achieve). Writing your goals down is the basis of a contract with yourself. It also helps to publicly acknowledge your goals.

Short-term or daily goals are the most important because they provide a focus for our training in each and every session. Past research on elite athletes found that setting daily training goals was one factor that distinguished the successful performers from the less successful.

Relaxation and Visualization

Scientific research has shown the use of Visualization (or Imagery) to be an important adjunct to physical training. This is why world-class, elite level athletes and coaches use imagery techniques regularly. In fact, past studies have demonstrated that athletes using visualization dramatically improved their performance by comparison with those who didn't.



With clear and vivid visualization training, certain parts of our brain can be stimulated to illicit small neuromuscular signals and specific hormonal changes that can lead to real physical changes in your body and your performance. In addition, we can reprogram our subconscious mind to develop stronger neural “connections” that will reinforce those positive thoughts and beliefs that empower us to achieve our goals.

For visualization / imagery training to be most effective you need to be in a relaxed state with as few distractions as possible. The following simple Progressive Relaxation exercise will help achieve this.

Progressive Relaxation:

1. Choose a quiet, relaxing place where you won't be interrupted.
2. Before you start, do a few gentle stretching exercises to relieve muscular tension.
3. Make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying down. Close your eyes.
4. Start to breathe slowly and deeply, in a calm and effortless way.
5. Gently tense, and then relax, each part of your body, starting with your feet and working your way up to your face and head.

6. As you focus on each area, count backwards from 10 to 1, relaxing more deeply with each number. Think of warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
7. Push distracting thoughts to the back of your mind; imagine them floating away with each breath.
8. Don't **try** to relax; simply let go of the tension in your muscles & let them become relaxed on their own.
9. Let your mind go empty. Some people find it helpful to visualize a calm, peaceful place such as a garden or meadow.
10. Stay like this for about 15 minutes, and do your **visualizations** (see below). Then take some deep breaths and open your eyes, but stay sitting or lying for a few moments before you get up.

Visualization:

While you are in this relaxed state it is a perfect time to practice visualization training for a few minutes. This is an important part of your mental conditioning program. The key points to remember when practicing your creative visualization are as follows:

1. Your imagery should be as **vivid** and clear as possible.
2. Always visualize **positive** and **controllable** scenarios.
3. Try to imagine in real time: the visualization of an experience should last as long as the actual event.
4. Visualize both the process of achieving your goal, as well as the positive outcome.



Affirmations

In order to reprogram your subconscious mind, you need to establish a new, positive thought process. You can use verbal affirmations to support you in this process. Here are some examples to consider when creating your own affirmations:

- I respect, admire and model very successful elite athletes in my sport / activity!
- I enjoy training intensely and my body recovers easily and quickly.
- When I train, I train hard. When I rest, I relax deeply.
- I create my reality and I create the exact amount of my success.
- I am an excellent athlete! I have unlimited performance potential!
- I am getting stronger and leaner every day.
- I am grateful for all of my successes so far.
- I am grateful for my health, my strength, my speed, my power, and my abilities!

Try to make a list of your own personalized affirmations and read them aloud first thing in the morning and before sleeping in the evening, or before a training session or competition. Create a feeling of belief in your affirmation statements; don't listen to your doubts. The more frequently you use them the more effective they will be. Psychologists estimate that it takes about a month to overwrite our old negative programming and establish a new positive pattern in your brain. Stick with it.



Conclusion:

Achievements are based not solely on talent and hard physical conditioning, but on mental strength and a clear vision of where you want to go. You need to decide what you want, know why you want it, and develop a strong desire to achieve it.

Once you have done this, to change your results you must overwrite old negative programming and install positive new programming into your subconscious. This is accomplished through techniques such as effective goal setting, positive self-talk (affirmations), and mental imagery (visualization). As you progress you will increase your belief that you will succeed. Because your beliefs shape your reality, you will be surprised at how quickly you achieve results that you thought impossible a few short months ago.

For a complete mental conditioning program for facilitating faster results, check out my ebook “**Get Mental**” at www.GetMentalStrength.com .

Now start using your head!

Josh Hewett

“All we are is the result of what we have thought.” -Buddha

About The Author:



Josh Hewett, BA Kin, is a certified trainer, coach, public speaker, competitive strength athlete, and the author of “**Get Mental**”. He is the owner of www.Top-Form-Fitness.com and the founder of Team Barbarian Strength Athletics (OPA affiliated). Josh has been working in the fitness and physical conditioning industry for over 20 years. His articles have been featured on several popular websites and his programs have helped hundreds of people reach their fitness and performance goals.

Take advantage of his free **comprehensive Fat Loss and Muscle Building** bonuses by signing up at www.StrongerAndLeaner.com.

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