

The Choice Is Yours

Fill your mind with the right stuff, and watch your competitive performance improve

By Melissa Klein

GYMNASTICS is as much a mental workout as it is a physical one. Like the body, the mind must be conditioned into shape. It must be tough, tight and strong. But what does it mean to have a mind with these qualities, and how are they developed?

Consider this common situation: You are next up on the beam at a meet, standing alone, until the judges are ready. You feel as if you're in front of a classroom, about to give a speech, except this time you don't have to speak. You have to flip—and flip perfectly. You look over at your teammates and coaches and give them a smile as they cheer you on. You remind yourself of everything you have to do, but your heart is pounding and your feet are sweating. The judge is taking forever. You feel as if you are almost out of your body, that you might forget how to do everything you've practiced. You remind yourself that you are ready, and to trust your cues. You feel like an hour has passed when you finally get the salute. You take a deep breath, smile at the judge and begin.

The game plan is to follow your cues, but your body feels so foreign that you find it impossible to trust yourself. Your legs are shaky, and when you do your first jump, you are surprised to feel that they have twice their usual energy and power. You recite your cues in your head—even mouth them with your lips—yet they don't seem to be working. When you pause before your series, you keep thinking about the last time you fell.

Just DO IT, you think, but in your heart you still are afraid. In the split second before you take off, a thought flashes into your head, reminding you of all the people who are counting on you. *I have to make this*, you think. But as you go from your back handspring to your layout, you feel crooked. You panic. Before you know it, you're on the ground.

How did it happen? Obviously, there is more to performing well than being physically prepared. In practice, we simulate meet situations in order to create the feeling of high pressure. We have mental cues that we say throughout our routines. The cues may sound something like, "Pose, 1, 2, 3, breathe, see, hips, see, hips, see, arms. Aggressive here. Look, move this forward."



The purpose of the cues is to keep the mind completely focused, so that no other thoughts can interrupt. This is very simple for some people, but not for others. How can focusing on one thing be so complicated and difficult?

You can tell someone until you are blue in the face that she is ready to compete, that she should trust her cues and remain 100% focused. But if that person feels doubtful in her heart, she won't be able to do it. There is a big difference between saying your cues and doing them. Saying your cues is easy, like reciting a bunch of memorized words. Actually getting your body to respond correctly to those words is another matter. Executing your cues takes a different state of being. It takes complete and total focus. How can it be attained?

Many people spend a large portion of their waking hours in what I call "Distraction Mode." They go about their day, thinking about yesterday, their boyfriends, or what they have to do in a few hours or tomorrow. They stress about their obligations, what they have and don't have, and they wonder when they will get a vacation. When they see people they know, they talk about the same things they usually talk about, and react to what the other person says almost automatically. There is no focus in Distraction Mode. We don't really think; our thoughts control us.

To do successful gymnastics, you must completely change your mindset. A distracted mind is the opposite of a totally focused mind. To be focused means to be totally present, awake and aware. This means not thinking about the past or the future, but directing all of your attention to how you *feel* now.

If you are totally focused, you are truly in the present, with a heightened awareness of the body, every muscle, every sensation. You still may have thoughts, but you can let them come and go without reacting to them. Awareness is actually the opposite of thought; it is the space from which thoughts arise. You can try to see this as you read

this. Take a moment, and try to see how you are reacting to these words. Are you confused about what they mean? This is a good thing. While you are sitting there, try to feel where that confusion comes from, where it is located in your body. Try to feel how there is actually a space behind your thoughts, a space of total attention that has no words at all. This awareness exists within us all of the time, yet we hardly ever notice it, as we are distracted by our thoughts.

Let's go back to the meet. You have become aware of the nature of your thoughts as they try to pull you into whirlwinds of doubt and fear. They tell you that you must be afraid, because if you fall, everyone will be angry with you. They tell you that you can't do it, because you fell at the last competition.

In your state of total focus, you can acknowledge each thought and let it go. If you become angry at yourself for feeling doubtful and afraid, you have lost your focus. You have failed to control your thoughts.

Indeed, your thoughts are perfectly logical. A lot of people *are* counting on you. There is a lot of *pressure* on you. But the thing to remember is that you can *choose* how you feel. Accept your feelings and thoughts with understanding and non-judgment. If you can do this, and not get disturbed by your thoughts, you are present, awake and aware enough to choose different thoughts. You have enough peace inside to tell your thoughts of fear and doubt a big "no thank you," and return to your cues.

If you stay completely calm, you can respond to each of your mental cues with your body. You step up to do your series, and your mind says, "Uh oh," accompanied by an intense feeling of doubt. But now you know better. You follow your cue to *breathe*. You smile inwardly and grow still, calm and more focused. Your mind is quiet, and you feel totally confident. You go for your series as if you were on the floor, doing each cue with conviction, as it happens. Amazingly, it is the best series you've ever done. You do another skill, and this time you feel slightly off in the air. Instead of panicking, you simply focus in more, doing your cues with even more determination.

During this beam routine, you chose a space of focus instead of distraction. You didn't just *say* your cues while feeling afraid, you actually made yourself *feel* less afraid. You chose to be confident instead of doubtful.

There is a paradox here. It seems that if we let go of trying to control ourselves, we actually gain some control. I believe this has to do with our nature. If you try to reprimand a child, he/she will rebel. If you try to reprimand yourself, you will rebel, and go into, what I call "Freak-out Mode."

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Freak-out Mode usually occurs on "bad days," which we really should call "learning days." Your body is tired or sore or both, and you feel like you can't push past it. You believe that practice is going to be terrible, that you will never do your skills successfully. Instead of allowing yourself to become angry, you should tune into "Focus Mode."

What most people don't realize is that a response of anger is a choice. You may feel frustrated, but you do not have to let it disturb you. The moment you become disturbed, you get further away from Focus Mode. As you grow more frustrated, your workout turns to disaster.

Is it really possible to choose not to go into Freak-out Mode? If you don't react negatively to your mistakes, won't your coaches and teammates think you don't care? If you smile after you've fallen from the beam, does it mean that it's not important to you?

Quite the contrary. If you choose to accept adversity, you allow yourself to make mistakes—and eventually learn from them. This is what practice is for. If you choose to get stressed out, you are actually doing a disservice to yourself and your teammates. There is rarely a situation in which being angry and stressed is helpful.

Use adversity to learn about how to overcome both your physical and psychological obstacles. Most gymnasts are perfectionists. But by treating yourself with understanding, respect and forgiveness, you enable yourself to improve.

Like physical training, mental training takes time and effort. Can it really be possible to choose confidence instead of fear every time you do gymnastics? That is up to the individual gymnast. But I believe you should not be afraid to fail. Instead, you put everything on the line every time, and see if you can do it. If you really believe in yourself, you might just find that you can.

This line of thinking is not only for the gym. The practice of being present, awake and aware is an ancient art studied in yoga and meditation. It is also a part of many religions. The state of heightened awareness helps us to get out of our normal distracted state. Instead of being absorbed in our thoughts, we are free to feel gratitude, and to see the beauty that exists everywhere around us all of the time. We may even find that we have more energy, feel lighter, and that it is easier to be pleasant and open to the many people we encounter every day.

Though it seems that the norm is to be distracted and disgruntled, I challenge everyone who reads this to ignore the quarrels of their mind, to greet their negativity with a smile, and choose again. **IG**

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