

in the

groove

Find the "flow state" used by pros for peak performance at work and play.

You're running through the forest and the only things that exist are you and the trail. The sole sound you hear is the soft, rhythmic thud of your feet as they propel you onward, effortlessly, as if you were on a gigantic treadmill.

Your mind is quiet now, with no thoughts of winning, losing, competing or completing. You're exactly where you want to be, at one with yourself and the universe in a euphoric, still-life silence.

Welcome to the elusive high of sport and life called the "flow state," which enables you to use *all* your senses to reach a higher ground and perform at that level consistently and on command.

How can you enter this elusive state of "automatic pilot" — to silence the hobgoblins of your mind so you can function at peak performance in all areas of your life? Easy. By mastering four mental techniques used by top athletes the world over: visualization, affirmation, nonjudgmental observation and concentration. Together, they will plant you squarely in the "now" so you're using every ounce of your being to engage in what winners call "the precious moment."

VISUALIZATION

They weren't kidding when they said a picture is worth a thousand words — visual images make the fastest imprint in our brains. And research shows that faster learning can occur with mental rehearsal, or visualizing yourself successfully completing the task.

Learn to create positive mental pictures and you can visualize playing the

game you want — and winning.

When you envision a move in your head before you do it, your body sends a neuromuscular signal that can create more efficient movement during the real game. The result is what athletes call "playing the game in your mind."

Because your brain can't distinguish between a vividly imagined picture and reality, mentally rehearsing the right moves

sets the stage for actually doing them.

Playing the game in your mind requires knowledge and mastery of the game's basic skills, so keep your visualizations realistic. Seeing yourself navigating an advanced run before you've conquered the bunny slope will not be enough to get you down the mountain in one piece. Mastering skiing, or any sport, requires more than thinking — it takes skill and practice.

Instead of engaging in unrealistic fantasies, visualize succeeding at something you can realistically accomplish, a step or two beyond your current level.

Remember that visualization is most effective when it's the last thing you do at night or the first thing you do in the morning — when your brain waves are usually slower and you are most suggestible.

At sport: Picture yourself skiing with your legs parallel. When you hit the slopes your legs will follow suit.

At work: Envision the great response you'll receive from your speech. Imagine the anticipatory crowd, picture yourself feeling relaxed and elated to be on stage, then watch as both you and the audience enjoy a command performance. Or imagine yourself resolving a longstanding conflict with a co-worker.

BY DIANA McNAB, M.Ed.

AFFIRMATION

Affirmation is a mental tool that empowers visualization by taking the word picture and setting it to the mind's music.

To be truly empowering, affirmations must be positive, personal statements, phrased in the present tense about the way you want to play, act, think and be in your life. For instance: "I am" or "I have"—not "I try" or "I hope." Try these:

1. "I am a dynamic human being."
2. "I deserve success and good health."
3. "I am a trustworthy friend."
4. "I am a caring mother."
5. "I am a valuable employee."
6. "I am a talented athlete."
7. "I am a loving and beloved wife."

Create short affirmations, or buzzwords, and anchor them to a cue to make an even deeper impression. "Go for it!" "Great!" "Yes!" and "Now!" are a few good examples winning athletes use to propel themselves and their teammates to victory.

At sport: I am a powerful swimmer and deserve to win this race.

At work: I am an excellent listener and can translate this raw information into a dynamic report.

NONJUDGMENTAL OBSERVATION

We've all made a small mistake, ignored it rather than admitted and corrected it, then stood by and watched it snowball until it was bigger than life—it's like driving at high speed in the wrong direction. Instead of turning around and remaining in the *present*, we push on, fretting over past mistakes and wondering where we'll wind up (in the future).

Nonjudgmental observation means looking at what and where you're going, acknowledging a mistake immediately, and, without judging or blaming yourself, taking *immediate corrective action*.

Tennis star Chris Evert was a master at nonjudgmental observation. The moment she erred on the court, she slowed down her tempo and visualized the stroke done correctly.

Denying or judging a mistake, or being defensive, not only distracts you from your original purpose and interrupts the flow, but it also wastes precious time and energy.

Make positive adjustments and go on without looking back, and you'll find yourself moving in the right direction and living in the moment rather than focusing on what went wrong and why.

At sport: For the last hour you've been sailing northwest instead of northeast. Instead of panicking and blaming your-

self, you calmly study the map and see that by tacking slightly east you'll soon be back on course.

At work: You confuse a colleague by using terminology she couldn't possibly understand. You decide to clarify your point by using a few simple examples she can relate to.

Or, your boss asks you to gather research for a speech she'll be giving in two days. You do as much as you can, but the resulting report is not as thorough as the work you normally turn in. Instead of criticizing yourself, you acknowledge the time restraints and tell yourself that next time you'll ask for more preparation time.

CONCENTRATION

Concentration is an uninterrupted connection between two things: a cat chasing a mouse, a child at play, an athlete and her game.

It comes in two forms: "Broad focus" is when you view the entire tennis court and your opponent; "pinpoint focus" is focusing on the white line on the tennis ball as it spins over the net toward you.

The goal of concentration is to be able to move gracefully back and forth from broad and pinpoint focus as the need arises. Sharpen your powers of concentration by practicing these steps:

First, block out all distracting thoughts, sights, sounds and actions by putting yourself 100 percent in the here-and-now. Second, decide what is important information and relevant stimuli and, without judgment, focus *only* on it. Don't worry about past mistakes or the future score.

Last, let your mind process the options creatively, trusting that you'll arrive at a viable solution.

Concentrate on the present moment of every shot and action in your life and you'll soon know instinctively when it's time to scan or read the fine print.

At sport: You're out for a leisurely day of cycling. Use broad focus to survey the route and overall terrain, and pinpoint focus to double-check the map, to brake or swerve to avoid obstructions on the road and to zero in on a good picnic spot. *At work:* Use broad focus to examine long-range goals, and pinpoint focus to tackle what you can do today to get you closer to those goals.

Or, use broad concentration to scan a lengthy report and pinpoint focus to zero in on the actual material you require.

What your mind perceives and you truly believe, you can achieve. By mastering

visualization, affirmation, nonjudgmental observation and concentration, you will live your life in a continual flow state where what you visualize, affirm and focus on will become your everyday reality—one precious moment at a time. ■

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priming up

To clear your mind of all negative thought so it can accept the specific instructions your body will act out, practice these techniques.

controlled abdominal breathing

Inhale through your nose, pause, then use your diaphragm to exhale out of your mouth slowly. Visualize bringing fresh oxygen and energy into the body while forcing out tension, carbon dioxide and negativity.

shaking out tension

Shake out your arms and legs to relax all the major muscle groups. Tense, then relax your shoulders, then arms, then legs to get the body into a relaxed readiness state.