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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## The Mind Game

The fastest, strongest athlete can be undone by a weak mind. Use positive beliefs, mental preparation and mental toughness to help your mind drive your body to new PRs.

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By Steven Shrago

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

CrossFit's 10 domains of fitness cover the full range of physical and neurological components, but do they tell the full story of fitness?

We measure fitness as "work capacity across broad time and modal domains," which implies a necessary element of performance: you are only as fit as you are able to actually demonstrate your work capacity. Talking a good game doesn't cut it.

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But performance varies on a daily, hourly and minute-by-minute basis. Sure, we might only be talking about a couple of seconds here and there, but in competition or indeed in combat, these seconds count. Rest and nutrition can affect one's ability to perform, but so can another aspect of fitness: the mental game.

### Psychological Readiness

A wide variety of components go toward making someone mentally ready. For the CrossFit athlete, three are especially important:

**Positive beliefs**—programming your mind to expect success.

**Mental preparation**—focusing your mind on the challenge ahead.

**Mental toughness**—overcoming fear, pressure and adversity.

Why these three? Because when elite athletes—especially those who win the highest honors within their respective disciplines—are asked to explain their approach to achieving the greatest success, these three aspects are consistently mentioned.

### Positive beliefs

On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister broke the world record for the mile by nearly two seconds, becoming the first man to run the distance in under four minutes. The previous world record had lasted for nine years. Within 46 days, Australian Jim Landry broke Bannister's record by a further 1.5 seconds.

Psychologically, the remarkable thing about this story—and the stories of many hundreds of people who have run sub-four miles since—is the role belief played in the outcome.

A year before the “miracle mile,” Bannister ran 4:03.6. He was subsequently quoted as saying, “This race made me realize that the four-minute mile was not out of reach.” What an interesting choice of words: he didn't say, “think,” “feel” or even “hope.” He said “realize,” implying a shift in his belief system from perceiving an “impossible” goal to perceiving one that was attainable.

And then there was Landry and all who followed him. Did Bannister's athletic feat shift their belief systems, too? The record books would seem to suggest so.



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*The CrossFit Games are a physical test, but they are also an incredible mental challenge.*

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Negative beliefs will screw you over every time.

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What about negative beliefs? Have you ever been in the set position of a heavy Olympic lift and thought, "What if I don't make this lift?" or perhaps, "There's no way this one is going up," or even, "This is going to be difficult." Honestly, how many of those lifts did you make? And the same goes for putting in golf, shooting free throws in basketball and taking penalties in football (soccer). Negative beliefs will screw you over every time.

Think of beliefs, and to an extent confidence, as programming your brain to expect a certain outcome. Your pre-conscious mind works like the world's most powerful spam filter: it continually deals with a huge array of information presented through all your senses and tries to allow through only what it thinks will be of most value to you at the time.

Try this: the next time you are out on the road, pay careful attention to the number of drivers who wear hats while piloting a vehicle. It's probably something you have never given much thought or attention to in the past. But now you will spot them everywhere. "Were there always this many?" you'll ask yourself.

What happened? You gave your mind a new target—something to focus on—and it got to work.

Think of beliefs as filters at the very core of personality. They are the prime filters that cover what we pay attention to and deem important. They guide our behavior and are for the most part self-reinforcing. Ever tried to challenge someone else's beliefs? It is not fun.

Our beliefs work the same way in the CrossFit box. If a Crossfitter believes getting upside down in a handstand is scary, then guess what? His mind is going to find all the scary bits of that experience, put them in the spotlight and turn the volume up to 11.

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If I believe completing Fran or Murph as RX'd is going to kick my butt in a most unpleasant way, I create an expectation of a miserable experience and start to live it even before I have started. The toll can be felt both emotionally (dread, worry, stress) and physically (butterflies, sickness, hyper-awareness of aches and pains).

Beliefs are self-fulfilling, both in terms of enhancing our performance as well as placing limits on it.



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**Positive beliefs and mental toughness can get you through moments like this. Negative thinking won't help you at all.**

### Dealing With Performance-Limiting Beliefs

Much of the really important work on dealing with negative beliefs comes from the field of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), an approach to addressing emotional and behavioral issues by focusing on the way people think.

Beliefs form the link between an event, situation or trigger (e.g., Fran) and the emotional consequences or physical sensations you may feel as a result. If the belief is unhealthy, then the individual will feel and behave in a sub-optimal manner. Obviously the converse is also true.

Step 1: Think about a situation or event or skill (trigger) you really struggle with.

Step 2: Listen carefully to your own self-talk and write down what you think and feel about this trigger. It is important to actually write it down. Be very honest with yourself.

Step 3: Consider what you have written down. Do you recognize any of the following patterns in what you have written?

- All-or-nothing thinking: black-or-white thinking with no shades of grey. For example, a single mistake makes you a complete failure.
- Generalizing: words like "always," "never" and "can't." For example, "I can't resist eating bread."
- Selective focus: picking out a single, unpleasant detail and using it to color your feelings about the whole. For example, "My hands hurt when doing pull-ups. I hate pull-ups."
- Jumping to conclusions: anticipating the worst outcome and convincing yourself that what you predict is a fact. For example, "That last lift was hard. I'm not strong enough to deadlift my body weight."
- Selective memory: exaggerating the importance of insignificant events (a missed snatch) and shrinking achievements (first kipping pull-up).

Step 4: Read your written thoughts out loud. How do they sound to you? What would you say to someone else if he or she had said the same things? Is what you heard reasonable or realistic? Is there a way of expressing it in a more positive way? Dig into the statement to understand where it comes from.

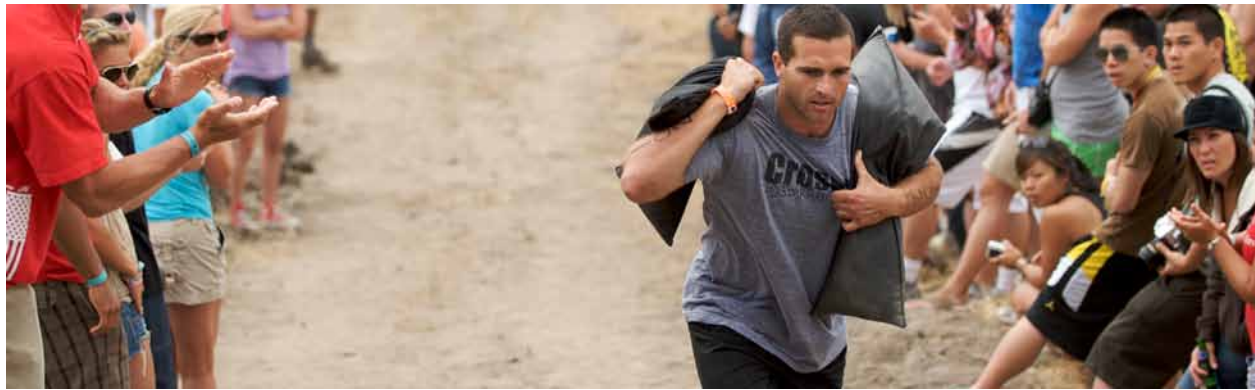
Step 5: Consider how you can reframe these statements to focus on the positive. For example, exchange the first thought for the second: "I'll never be able to do a full dead-hang pull-up without the bands" vs. "I'm getting stronger every day. I have moved from the green band to the blue to the red. I will achieve a full dead-hang very soon."

Step 6: Read these reframed statements to yourself *aloud*. You need to hear them. Remind yourself of these statements as you prepare to face your next challenge.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***Distorted thinking can limit performance.  
Prepare for challenges by training your mind to  
help you rather than hinder you.***



*Things won't always go as planned, but a well-prepared mind can save you from failure.*

### **Mental preparation**

I really enjoy watching athletes prepare for a workout. The activity that takes place before the class even starts tells me a lot about the individual's mental preparation.

What is mental preparation? In short, getting your mindset, your focus and your mood aligned to help you deliver your best performance. Why? Because your mind can be your biggest ally, as well as your greatest opponent—especially when you are exhausted.

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A great example of mental preparation is the pre-movement routine golfers, kickers, runners, weight-lifters and many other sportsmen go through. Have a look at some international-level Oly-lifting videos on YouTube. Pay close attention to everything that happens before the lift. What these athletes are doing is linking the physical action (of say, gripping the bar, settling their feet, managing their breathing) with specific thoughts or images (e.g., visualizing the perfect lift, focusing on the first pull or mental cues to trigger the start of the movement).

Why does this work? It focuses the mind of the athlete on the immediate task at hand—the next actions. In doing so, it protects the mind from drifting toward negative thoughts or emotions. It also provides a consistent preparation for each action, instills confidence in the athlete's own ability to perform, and encourages the athlete to trust his preparation and not over-think his actions.

How can this relate to better numbers in WODs? Two ways: On max-lift days, establish a routine to focus the mind on 100 percent effort and technique. On met-con days, use pre-game preparation to reduce nerves and create focus on maximal effort.

So how can you better prepare your mind for max-effort and met-con WODs?

Step 1: Identify what sort of mood you need in order to perform at your best. Relaxed, focused, angry—everyone is different. Find what works for you.

Step 2: Think back to the last time you felt like that. Where were you? What was going on around you? What could you see and hear? Make this memory as rich as possible (sights, sounds, feelings) and start to relive it in your mind.

Step 3: Find a physical cue or cues you can attach to this feeling (e.g., gripping the bar, clenching your fists, running hands through your hair, taking a deep belly breath, etc.). Again, everyone is different.

Step 4: Now move your focus to the immediate task at hand. Create a plan in your mind of how you are going to approach the challenge. Plan for the best possible outcome. Create an image in your mind of what this will look, sound and feel like.

Step 5: Rehearse your successful performance for the movement or workout in your mind.

Step 6: Think about the technique cues you will use to achieve this success. For example you may choose to think “head and chest forward” for kipping pull-ups, or “jump to full extension” for the snatch. Keep the cues positive and focused on what you want to do rather than what you don’t want to do.

Step 7: Physically rehearse these cues while thinking about them. Feel the physical sensation of the cues (e.g., tightening hamstrings as you settle into the deadlift position) while thinking about the cues for proper technique.

### **Mental toughness**

“Well that’s all very well, Steven. But what happens when I get two rounds into Fight Gone Bad and lose the ability to think rationally? What of your precious psychology, then?”

Mental toughness, for the purposes of CrossFit, therefore becomes the capacity of the athlete to maintain the confidence-enhancing positive beliefs and laser focus on the immediate task while being physically overwhelmed by the workout.

Sir Clive Woodward, coach of the 2003 Rugby World Cup-winning England side, attributed much of the success of the team to the ability of its members to think correctly under pressure—T-CUP, as it became known. It was derived from the research of Yehuda Shinar, an Israeli “life coach.” The model is fascinating and has proven merit in team sports.

Underpinning the model is this: Concentration

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**Your mind can be your biggest ally, as well as your greatest opponent—especially when you are exhausted.**

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

The most successful teams and individuals are able keep concentration and focus on the task even when presented with huge physical and psychological pressure.

But how to concentrate when there are so many distractions? The clock, other people, my coach, the crowd, the burning in my muscles, the lack of breath, my fear of failure ...

Under pressure, the inner voice suddenly gets louder and starts becoming a distraction. It may tell you to quit, that you’re too slow, to cheat the range of motion, and so on. Then beliefs crumble, doubts set in and concentration goes. This is why you’ll often see last-gasp winners in a variety of sports.

Dissociation, association and self-talk are three strategies for building mental toughness.

### **Dissociation**

Here you deliberately focus (concentrate your mind) on one thing to draw its attention away from a preoccupation with pain or discomfort. A common CrossFit example is counting the reps, especially when breaking them down into more manageable chunks. I read somewhere the basis for the 21-15-9 rep scheme is that it is easily divisible into threes. Counting down from 21 in threes is much more palatable than sevens. Counting burpees in six steps is another example.

Music is a commonly used aid. The lyrics and melody can occupy the mind. Furthermore, if the music is loud enough to mask the noise of your own breathing and heart rate without damaging your hearing, then music removes the biofeedback the mind relies on to tell you how tired you are.

Another dissociative tactic would be to go back to the focus on technique as per the mental preparation section above. Focusing on “hip thrust” during the kettlebell swing keeps the mind busy on the task at hand and away from the pain.

Of course, the best dissociative technique is to listen to your coach!

### Association

The opposite of disassociation, association is where the focus is put purely on the physical sensations of the body during exercise, using these sensations to occupy the mind. For example, you can choose to focus on breathing rhythm, fatigue in the muscles, recovery speed.

In a strength workout, the associative thought process allows you to recognize where you were or were not applying enough tension to the movement. For example, association would allow you to discern whether or not your abs were locked out during a press. In a met-con workout, the associative process has you listening to heart rate, breathing and lactic-acid build-up to identify the “again, faster” moments.

### Self-Talk

Self-talk has been covered recently in another *CrossFit Journal* article ([Performance Psychology: Taming Your Inner Voice](#) by Wendy Swift) and is a key way to stay mentally tough.

Repeating your positive beliefs, shouting your own encouragement, counting your reps and giving yourself positive technique cues all keep your mind focused and concentrated on the task at hand. Keeping up a running commentary of positive self-chatter will greatly enhance your capacity to go faster for longer.

### Mental Strength: Inside and Outside the Box

Developing psychological readiness has proven benefits across the field of sport and athletic endeavor. Examining the post-game performance of champions reveals the same picture: they spend a great deal of time aligning their thoughts and emotions to enhance their game-day

achievements. Furthermore, a casual examination of on-pitch failures, especially in clinch situations, tends to demonstrate the importance of mental belief, toughness and concentration to the final whistle.

In CrossFit, where performance (reinforced with the best technique) is everything, the difference between a good time and a great time can come down to the ability to maintain belief and concentration. Concentration is arguably even more important for max-effort strength days.

More than this, the capacity to build, hold and reinforce positive beliefs helps new athletes get over their fears, maintain motivation and progress faster. Think of those new clients who have walked into your box worried about past or current injuries, a lack of a previous athletic background, or even a fear of jumping onto a box. Helping these people positively reframe their beliefs and develop a new mental toughness will provide as much carry-over into their life as their newfound enhanced work capacity.

Best of all, just like the other 10 components of fitness, psychological readiness can be trained and developed.



Courtesy of Steven Shrago

### About the Author

Steven Shrago is a Paleo-eating, CrossFitting organizational psychologist from London, England. He has worked with a wide range of organizations, including the BBC and law-enforcement agencies.