

SPORTS MENTAL EDGE

WINTER EDITION

January 2017

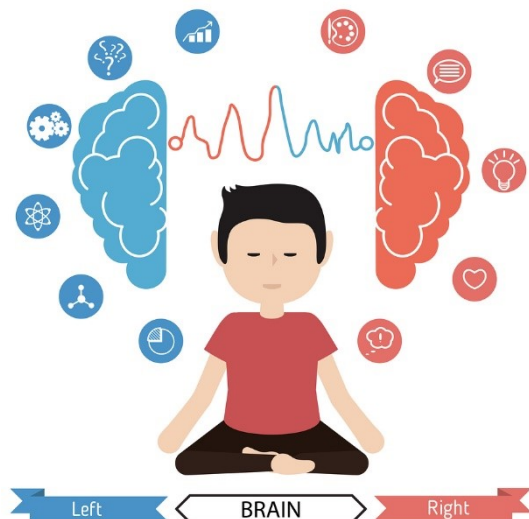
Improving Focus

Focus is the ability to stay in tuned with one's intentions while ignoring distractions. We are often told to remain focused if we want to achieve our best. But, it is not as easy as it sounds. We may have the good intentions to pay full attention to a specific task only to get distracted by not only noises around us, but also by noises inside of us.

Imagine if you could remain focused by just giving yourself such an instruction. Or, tell yourself to stop worrying by providing such a request. If we could do as we told ourselves, life would be sweeter. Our brain, as sophisticated as it is, cannot follow every command and disregard everything else that is happening around it. To achieve continued focus, it requires the orchestration of many moving pieces that take place inside our brain.

First, let's differentiate between two brain functions: a) top-down; b) bottom-up. The top-down brain function is the one responsible for executing orders, voluntary, planner, slower, and able to, when necessary, override emotionally driven impulses. The bottom-up function is super-fast, involuntary, emotionally driven and host of habitual patterns.

What we decide to pay attention to or do is often assumed to be a top-down brain function response. We get up in the morning, get ready to go to work or school, plan our way to get there and walk into the office or classroom. As effective our top-down brain function is, these movements would have been impossible to execute had the bottom-up brain function not previously provided with a "go-ahead" signal. This brain function is continually screening for any information that is coming from anywhere which might be interpreted as a source of potential threat. If the bottom-up brain function sees that the coast is clear, the top-down brain function then goes ahead and focus on what we want to do.



We do not realize it, but this brain function dynamic happens extremely fast. The information that ultimately reaches the top-down function went through a process of screening out by the bottom-up brain function to allow the top-down function to focus on only one task. For example, the squash player focuses on hitting the ball just above the tin on the opposite wall. At the same time, the bottom-up brain function is picking up the sounds of the crowd, the movement of the opponent, the sweaty contact on the racquet, the velocity of the ball, the wanting to win, the expectation from coaches and parents, etc. Ideally, all this information is screened out allowing the fluidity of the arm and wrist movement to effortlessly make the racquet contact the ball and hit it above the tin. This moment is interpreted as a focused experience.

Improved focus rests on strengthening the bottom-up brain function to screen out as many threats as possible. If the squash player's bottom-up function does not screen out the opponent's noises, then the top-down function must deal with wanting to hit the ball above the tin AND the noises. As the famous Yankee baseball player/philosopher, Yogi Berra, used to say: "I cannot think and hit at the same time."



One of the most effective ways to improve the bottom-up function is through meditation. This practice serves as a tool to train the brain to re-gain focus every time the mind gets distracted by ruminating thoughts. The goal is NOT to avoid having ruminating thoughts, but to be aware that thoughts are running through and bring the attention back to the breath. The more we practice meditation, the better the bottom-up brain function

can sustain distractions and screen them out rather than sending that information to the top-down brain function.

Another way to boost bottom-up function is to practice under simulated performance. Tiger Woods conscientiously practiced this technique all the time. He knew he was going to be surrounded by large galleries, which would produce loud noises. He needed to enhance the ability to not allow those distractions interfere with his game. While practicing at the driving range, his father would purposely and unexpectedly yell at the top of Tiger's swing. The goal was for Tiger to stay focused on his golf swing despite hearing his father's unexpected noises. Practicing this strategy helped him to transfer that experience and enhance his focus ability when he played on the course.

To enhance focus, one needs to strengthen the bottom-up brain function to help screen out distractions. Telling the brain what not to do only reinforces the top-down function to focus on that error or mistake, hence increasing the chances it will happen again. A tennis player will not improve his serve by telling himself, "do not hit the net." Instead, the player will be better off imagining where he wants the ball to land and fully trust the bottom-up brain function that the arm, elbow, wrist, and ball toss will be one that produces such a result.

Focus cannot be forced. It can be enhanced, improved, and strengthened. Practice will surely help, especially if done under simulated performance. Meditation will also enhance bottom-up brain function as it will help to re-gain focus when distractions come by. Practice, practice and then practice some more.



UPCOMING TALKS:

Westchester Country Club Squash – January 25

Sport Psychology talk to Bronxville Varsity Squash program on Feb 9

St. Luke's School – March date to be announced



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