Excellence Is No Accident

Mental Skills Training for Performing Artists, Athletes, and Business Professionals

by Glenn S. Brassington, Ph.D.

In dedication to the memory of Dr. Bruce C. Ogilvie: father, mentor, and friend.

Throughout history, human beings have endeavored to enhance their performance in all areas of life by accessing the power of the mind. Countless stories have been told about the importance of the mental dimensions of performance. Audiences around the world marvel at the focus, emotional engagement, and poise of elite performing artists, athletes, and business leaders. In turn, these exceptional performers report experiencing mental calm and feeling "possessed" by a force greater than themselves during breakthrough performances, while less successful performers feel that peak performances have either completely eluded them or are difficult to consistently and reliably reproduce.

For many performers, the hope of one day engaging in a peak performance inspires tireless practice, study, and refinement of their skills. Nevertheless, only a small fraction of performers appear to be able to create the optimal mind-body state associated with peak performances. Why is this state so elusive? Why do so many gifted performing artists, athletes, and business professionals, after exhausting commitment, fail to express their true potential in performance situations?

One reason may be that while performers spend countless hours preparing physically and intellectually to perform, often they spend relatively little time developing the ability to effectively regulate mental and physiological processes necessary for successful and creative performance. As a result, many talented performers experience decrements in their performance when they are in situations that they perceive as high-pressure, such as is common in auditions, concerts, competitions, negotiating, and public speaking. The frustration that many performers experience when they cannot effectively manage their thoughts, emotions, and behavior during performance robs them of the success and enjoyment that they would otherwise experience as a result of long hours of commitment and practice.

Over the past 50 years, researchers in the fields of psychology, somatics, kinesiology, and other mind-body disciplines have developed programs that teach performers how to overcome mental barriers and integrate the power of their mind and body in the pursuit of consistent peak performances. This article will provide the reader an overview of a Mental Skills Training program that is based on extensive outcome research and the author's personal experience working with a broad range of professional and amateur performing artists and athletes as well as business professionals from entry-level managers to chief executive officers.

Goals of Mental Skills Training

Mental Skills Training consists of a series of interventions that teach performers how to create an optimal psychophysiological/mind-body state during practice and performance, which many performers call the Zone. Mental Skills Training derives from the sport and performance psychology literature (Williams, 2001). Athletes have called upon mental health professionals, exercise scientists, and mind-body practitioners (Allison, 1999) to help them more effectively deal with the pressure of athletic performance. Athletes are acutely aware that the mental state they are in during competition greatly affects the quality of their practice and training as well as how they perform during the pressure of competition.

Over the past 40 years, mental health practitioners, researchers, sport scientist, and mind-body practitioners have developed strategies for teaching individuals involved in a variety of performance situations (e.g., performing arts, sport, public speaking, academics, business) three abilities essential to success: (1) the ability to create and sustain the drive and motivation to succeed (e.g., to persist in practice, training, and learning), (2) the ability to create the optimal mental state for competition/performance, and (3) the ability to recover from errors and setbacks that are inevitably associated with striving for higher and higher lev-

els of performance.

Mental Skills Training teaches performers how to focus their attention on the most relevant performance cues, modulate their emotional arousal, and create the optimal level of muscle tension before, during, and after performance situations. The training in focus, emotional control, and tension control results in the performer becoming the master rather than the servant of his/her mental state. Unfortunately, performers frequently spend countless hours learning and training to perfect their physical, intellectual, and creative skills, only to find that they are in a less than optimal mental state during performances. However, this does not have to occur. Figure 1 illustrates the optimal performance state in which focus, energy, and relaxation converge.

Performers talk about this state, the Zone, in almost religious terms, with many feeling that being in the Zone, when it occurs, is bestowed on them by the gods. Conversely, those who teach Mental Skills Training contend that performers, through consistent practice, can learn to harness the power of their minds and consistently create the optimal mental state for performance.

More than ten literature reviews on mental training have been conducted between 1966 and 1999 and overall support the effectiveness of comprehensive mental training programs in enhancing performance (Feltz & Landers, 1983; Gould & Udry, 1994; Greenspan & Feltz, 1989; Kirschenbaum, 1987; Martin, Moritz, & Hall, 1999; Murphy, 1994; Petruzzello, Landers, & Salazar, 1991; Richardson, 1967a, 1967b; Vealey, 1994; Weinberg, 1994).

What follows is a description of a Mental Skills Training program typically taught to performing artists, athletes, and business professionals by the author. Before the mental training program is implemented, the central goal for the training is explained to performers. Performers are told that they will learn techniques to help them use their thoughts, behaviors, and how they respond to the environment to perform at their best during training/practice and under pressure during performances. The ability to control and utilize one's thoughts, behaviors, and environment is the key to consistently achieving peak performances. Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic and reciprocally determined relationship among these three areas of focus for mental training.

Phases of Mental Skills Training

Mental Skills Training interventions are usually conducted in four phases. First, mental attributes that have been shown to be related to successful performance are assessed. Second, performers are aided in increasing their awareness of factors that tend to facilitate and inhibit performance (i.e., thoughts, behaviors, environmental cues). Third, performers are taught a series of exercises designed to increase their awareness and ability to control cognitive and behavioral processes identified as being salient to performance. Fourth, the newly learned self-control abilities are transferred (i.e., generalized) and tested in the performance setting. Interventions are refined based on *in vivo* effects, practice is reinforced and monitored, and a post-training assessment is conducted. Each of these phases of a Mental Skills Training program will be discussed in turn.

Phase 1 of Training

Several questionnaire measures are available for assessing mental attributes related to successful performance (Ostrow, 1996). Some of the measures were created to assess personality attributes in the non-athlete/performer population (e.g., California Personality Inventory, 16PF) or psychopathology (e.g., MMPI, sentence completion). However, recently questionnaire measures have been developed to assess performance-specific mental attributes. For example, one developed by the author of this paper is the Mental Strengths Assessment (MSA) (Brassington, *www.eliteperformers.com*). The MSA assesses 30 mental attributes and skills related to successful performance that are conceptually grouped into five categories: Drive, Attitude, Focus, Self-regulation, and Use of Mental Skills (see Table 1 for a list of scales).

Performers are encouraged to score close to the mean for an elite performers comparison group of 500 performers on each scale. The Mental Strength Assessment provides performers with valuable information and insights about their mental strengths and identifies areas where mental skills training may have a positive effect on performance. Usually performers who are having performance difficulties report using very few of the mental skills (e.g., goal setting, visualization, etc.) and report problems on several scales dealing with drive, attitude, focus, and

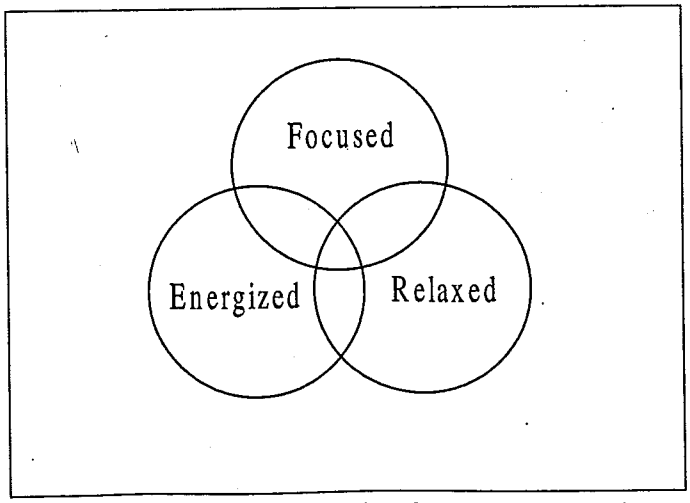


Figure 1. Dimension of the optimal performance state (i.e., the Zone or Flow state).

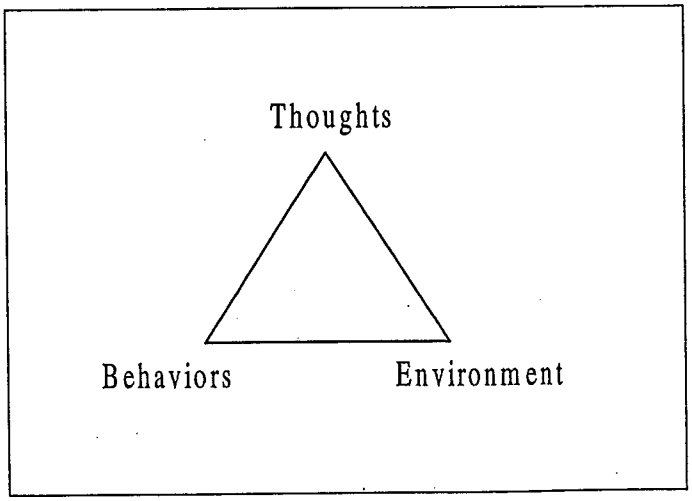


Figure 2. Central factors explored and modified during Mental Skills Training.

DRIVE		
S1	Commitment	The importance a performer places on his/her art/sport in relationship to other life interests
S2	Competitive Orientation	The degree to which a performer enjoys competition
S3	Intrinsic Motivation	The degree to which a performer is motivated by a strong inner drive to succeed
S4	Extrinsic Motivation	The degree to which a performer is motivated by outside sources (e.g., recognition, status)
S5	Will to Win	A performer's desire to win in competition--his/her "killer" instinct
ATTITUDES		
S6	Optimism	A performer's outlook on competition from pessimistic to optimistic
S7	Performance Confidence	A performer's level of confidence in his/her performance abilities
S8	Mental Confidence	The degree to which a performer is confident in his/her mental abilities
S9	Sense of Control	A performer's belief about the level of control he/she has over his/her success (victim/fighter)
S10	Fear of Failure	The level of anxiety associated with the possibility of performing below one's abilities
S11	Fear of Success	The level of anxiety associated with the possibility of performing above one's abilities
FOCUS		
S12	Depth of Focus	A performer's ability to focus intensely during competition
S13	Duration of Focus	A performer's ability to maintain his/her concentration during competition
S14	Temporal Focus	A performer's ability to focus in the present as opposed to the past or future
S15	External Distraction	A performer's tendency to be distracted by external stimuli during competition
S16	Internal Distraction	A performer's tendency to be distracted by inner noises (e.g., thoughts) during competition
SELF- REGULATION		
S17	Optimal Energy	The energy/activation level at which a performer tends to compete most effectively
S18	Negative Thinking	The degree to which a performer engages in negative thinking during competition
S19	Pre-competition anxiety	The level of anxiety a performer typically experiences prior to competition
S20	Emotional Control	The degree to which a performer can maintain emotional control during a competition
S21	Ability to Relax	A performer's ability to relax when he/she notices that he/she is tense during competition
S22	Ability to Energize	A performers ability to increase his/her level of energy/activation during competition
S23	Ability to Recover	A performers ability to recover from errors or set backs during competition
S24	Handling Pressure	A performers ability to perform well under pressure during competition
USE OF MENTAL SKILLS		
S25	Self-talk	The quality and emotional tone of a performer's self-talk during competition
S26	Visualization	The degree to which a performer uses imagery to enhance his/her performance
S27	Goal Setting	The degree to which a performer sets appropriate and effective goals
S28	Social Support	The level of social support a performers feels from friends and family
S29	Relaxation/Breathing	The degree to which a performer uses relaxation and breathing strategies during competition
S30	Pre-event routines	A performer's use of pre-competition mental routines to prepare for a competition
S31	Letting Go	The degree to which a performer can perform without conscious control

Table 1. Mental Strengths Assessment Scale Descriptions

self-regulation. In a study of professional ballet dancers, researchers reported that the soloist and demi-soloist dancers used significantly more mental skills than their less successful corps de ballet peers (Brassington & Adam, 2002).

Phase 2 of Training

After assessing the attributes listed above, performers are asked to reflect on their profiles and a process of exploration is undertaken that helps performers identify factors associated with their best and worst practices and performances. Performers are asked to identify thoughts, behaviors, and the ways they use the environment that are associated with an optimal mental state during performance and with less than optimal mental states. This discovery process is often best facilitated by asking performers to discuss several recent or memorable practice and performance situations in which they performed at their best and felt that they were in an optimal mental state as well as times when they performed sub-optimally.

This process of exploration helps both the performer and the clinician come to a better understanding of the client's mental strengths as well as identifies areas of weakness on which to focus mental training interventions. Other strategies that are often used in this phase include journal writing, discussions with coaches and teachers, and reviewing video tape of significant past auditions, competitions, and performances. The level of awareness of mental and behavioral processes related to performance can vary greatly between performers. Hence, it is not uncommon for one performer to gain valuable insights in as few as one session, while another performer takes weeks or even months to do so.

Phase 3 of Training

After performers and clinicians consensually validate the findings of the Mental Strengths Assessments, explore the performance issues, and gain significant insights about the performers' mental strengths and weakness, performers learn a series of exercises that teach them how to control their focus, control their emotional arousal, and effectively modulate their physical tension. The seven mental skills that performers learn include (1) goal setting, (2) relaxation response training, (3) emotional/arousal control, (4) focusing, (5) environmental management, (6) performance routines, and (7)

cognitive restructuring. Each technique will be briefly described below.

Goal Setting

Goal setting involves the performer learning how to set realistic but challenging goals for succeeding in upcoming performances (Locke, 1991; Locke & Latham, 1985; Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Weinberg, 1994). For goal setting to be effective, performers should be directed to set outcome goals (winning), process goals (focusing attention on important performance cues and strategies), and performance goals (personal best). Performers should also be counseled to set short- and long-term goals, breaking down long-term goals into achievable short-term goals. Other things that should be considered when setting goals include (1) setting specific measurable goals, (2) setting moderately difficult but realistic goals, (3) having a specific timeline for achieving each goal, (4) setting practice and competition goals, (5) recording goals, (6) writing an individual goal statement, (7) arranging for feedback about each goal, and (8) providing support and accountability for achieving each goal. In addition, performers are encouraged to keep their goals in view (e.g., refrigerator, 3x5 cards, bedroom, bathroom) and to read and visualize their goals throughout the day, before going to sleep at night, and upon awakening in the morning.

Relaxation Response Training

After developing and refining goals, performers learn how to voluntarily relax their muscles and reduce sympathetic nervous system activity (i.e., fight or flight response). Mental skills trainers have preferred methods for teaching clients how to create a relaxation response (e.g., meditation and t'ai chi) and no single somatic/mind-body technique works for everyone. A description of many somatic/mind-body techniques and practices can be found in *The Illustrative Encyclopedia of Body-Mind Disciplines* (Allison, 1999).

While a number of effective techniques have been developed to train the relaxation response, the most common methods used with performers are progressive muscle relaxation training, autogenic relaxation training, and diaphragmatic breathing. The technique that is most often used in the United State is progressive muscle relaxation training (Jacobson, 1974). For this technique, performers are asked to lie on the floor for approximately 20 minutes with their legs and arms uncrossed and to systematically tense (5 seconds) and relax (15 seconds) each major muscle group in their bodies, beginning with the muscles of their feet and ending with the muscles of their faces and heads. This technique provides performers an experience of what it feels like to be deeply relaxed. With continued practice, performers learn to create this deep state of relaxation in less and less time, moving from a lying to a sitting to a standing position. Over the course of several months, performers develop the ability to relax the major muscles of their bodies within seconds just by intending to do so.

Many performers report that the progressive muscle relaxation training offers their first experiences with deep relaxation and the understanding that this state of relaxation could be under their conscious control. This increased sense of control often translates into improved performance without the addition of the other mental training techniques. Nevertheless, it should be noted that performers who do not appear to be able to create the relaxation response might benefit from biofeedback training, in which physiological indicators of relaxation (e.g., heart rate, electric activity in muscles, etc.) are fed back to clients to improve their awareness and voluntary control of the relaxation response.

Emotional/Arousal Control

After several weeks, performers are able to create a sufficiently relaxed state that it is possible to teach them the next mental skill: emotional/arousal control (Gould & Udry, 1994). In a deeply relaxed state, performers are asked to imagine a past performance in which they were performing at their very best. They are asked to not only re-experience what they saw, but also what they felt, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. They are asked to incorporate all of their senses as they re-experience this peak performance. For example, a tennis player, while recalling himself serving exceptionally well during a match, re-experiences the feeling of the sun on his body, the taste of sweat in his mouth, the smell of the felt on the ball in his hand, the sound of his feet moving on the court, etc. A musician might recall the feeling of an instrument in her hands, the smell of the wood in the concert hall, and the sensations in her neck and shoulders while playing. A business professional might recall the feel of his clothes, the location of emotions in his body, and the look of the audience when he was presenting to board members. With continued practice, performers are able to create the emotional arousal that they experienced during their peak performance while they are lying down, sitting in a chair, standing, or performing.

In addition to recalling their past peak experiences, performers are asked to recall what they were thinking about and what they were saying to themselves (i.e., self-talk) during their peak performances. The addition of positive self-talk typically increases the positive emotional arousal that the performer experiences. This techniques of re-experiencing one's best performance is not only used to teach the performers how to create an optimal level of emotion/arousal, but also to identify other aspects of the clients' behaviors (e.g., what they were focused on in the environment, how they moved, etc.) that contribute to peak performance.

Focusing

Although learning how to relax and create the optimal level of emotion/arousal is central to mental training, performers also need to learn how to consistently focus their attention on the most salient factors related to success in their particular performance activities (e.g., the ball in tennis, the questions in an examination, etc.). The first step in helping the performer develop the appropriate focus (or what is often termed concentration) during practice and performance is to identify the most important elements of the activity on which performers should focus (Boutcher & Crews, 1987; Ziegler, 1994). This is achieved by discussing where a performer's focus was during each moment of a peak performance.

For example, a musician usually identifies three focal points when discussing a performance: the sheet music, the conductor, and the sound coming from the instrument he or she is playing. After identifying where their attention is during peak performances, performers are aided in identifying where their focus is when they are not in the optimal mental state during performance (e.g., anxious, tense, emo-

and her Ability to Handle Pressure suggested that she lacked sufficient mental resilience to cope with the inevitable setbacks and high-pressure situations associated with international competition and professional auditions. Nina provided consensual validation of the pre-training Mental Strengths Assessment findings. She reported several recent performances in which she made errors early in a performance and was not able to fully recover. She described not being able to "rid her mind of negative thoughts or her body of negative emotions" that arose after a mistake early in her performance, causing further mistakes and an overall lackluster performance.

Implementing the Mental Skills Training Program

During the first training session, I provided Nina feedback on her Mental Strengths Assessment results. I spent time explaining to Nina that her experiences were a normal response to increased performance pressure. I endeavored to instill hope in her that she could learn to effectively manage the increased pressure associated with national competitions and auditions.

I explained that her experience was very common and that I had successfully worked with many young performers who had had experiences similar to hers. I informed Nina that there were mental exercises that she could practice that would help her manage anxiety and worry before and during competitions. I assured Nina that with consistent practice and commitment to Mental Skills Training, she could learn to improve her focus, create positive emotions, and maintain poise before, during, and after performances. I encouraged her to be patient, explaining that these self-regulatory skills would take time and commitment to master.

It is very important at the beginning of Mental Skills Training to build a client's confidence and self-efficacy in the method. This increases the likelihood that the client will approach mental training with positive expectations of success and will engage in the necessary practice to master the skills.

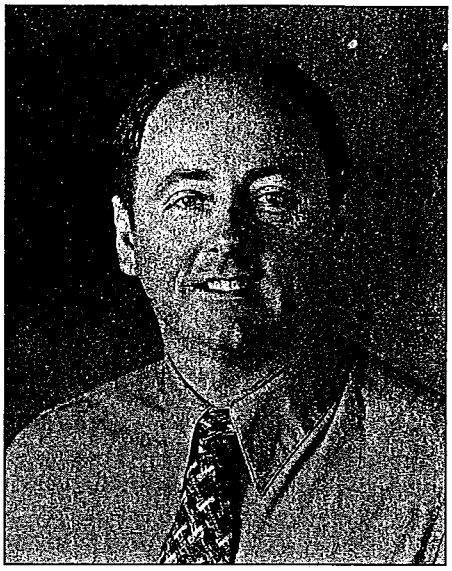
In the sessions that followed, Nina was taught progressive muscle relaxation training and diaphragmatic breathing (Brassington, 2002) to increase her ability to reduce excess physical tension. She was asked to do two 20-minute practice sessions each day.

The records of her practice over the course of 8 weeks indicated that she was able to create a deep state of relaxation. Nina initially needed more than 20 minutes to achieve a deep state of relaxation; however, by the tenth week of practice she was able to create this state in fewer than 5 minutes. Nina was instructed to create a relaxed state lying down, sitting, and standing. She was also taught a series of t'ai chi movements so that she could further refine her body awareness and learn to move her upper body in a relaxed manner.

Nina reported that this type of practice reduce her pre-performance anxiety and helped her stay more relaxed during her piano performances. She said she was able to play with less shoulder tension and a greater sense of flow in her upper body. Further, she noted that the relaxation training not only helped her feel physically less tense but also helped quiet her mind.

After two weeks of practicing relaxation training, Nina was taught how to use visualization to create positive energy and emotions prior to practice and competitions. To do this, she was asked to recall several of her best performances. While recalling these performances, Nina was asked to involve all of her senses in the recollection. She was asked to pay special attention to what she was feelings, how she was using her body, and how she was responding to the environment. Nina recalled a concert performance in which she reported "feeling a profound sense of peace and a swell of emotions related to the piece" she was performing. Upon completing the exercise, she said, "This experience is why I became a musician." She had clearly reconnected with the emotions that she so valued and the sense of satisfaction she so desperately wanted to re-awaken. I explained to her that with practice she would be able to create this level of performance and those feelings of joy and satisfaction whenever she wished, regardless of the performance context. After this practice session, Nina was asked to practice the imagery exercise for a minimum of 10 minutes twice a day after achieving a state of deep relaxation.

In the weeks that followed, through journaling, discussions with me, and reflecting on past peak performances, Nina increasingly identified thoughts/beliefs, behaviors, and environmental cues (e.g., key points of focus during a performance) associated with these successful and creative performances. From these reflections, she developed a script that contained a list of thoughts, behaviors, and environmental cues that she would use to create the optimal psychophysiological state for performance. It was explained to Nina that this process was similar to that undertaken by a stage actor and must be authentically experienced. In other words, Nina was instructed to refine and practice her mental and behavioral script until she could authentically create and experience the optimal mental state for performance.



Glenn S. Brassington, Ph.D.

Based on her increased awareness, relaxation skills, and mental script, Nina developed a pre-competition mental routine that she would follow before each practice session, audition, and competition. Her pre-competition mental routine include the following elements and began approximately 45 minutes before each competition. First, she would engage in 15 minutes of progressive muscle relaxation sitting on a piano bench. Second, she would do approximately 10 minutes of imagery in which she would see herself waiting to be called to perform, walking to the piano, focusing on the keys, taking several breaths, beginning to play, and performing the piece perfectly. She would imagine this sequence of events twice, playing each note in her mind, feeling rich emotions, and experiencing the confidence and satisfaction of

"having trouble with nerves before competition and auditions" and "having difficulties maintaining her focus during performances." She also described the sense that she had recently lost some of her ability to express her feelings during performances. Nina said, "It is as though I am increasingly playing more with my head than my heart." She reported feeling more and more anxious before, during, and after performance as she participated in higher levels of competition and auditioned for more prestigious orchestral positions.

Before our first meeting, Nina completed the Mental Strengths Assessment. As you can see by viewing selected Pre-Training Mental Strengths Assessment Scale scores in Figure 3, Nina has a very strong commitment to her art. She is very intrinsically motivated; that is, she sets her own standards for achievements and has a strong inner desire to perfect her skills. In terms of her drive to succeed, there is very little room for improvement. This suggests that it is not her work ethic that is limiting her success. Rather, her attitudes, focus, and ability to self-regulate under pressure may be less than optimal. Her pre-training scores on the attitudes scales (i.e., optimism, mental confidence, sense of control, fear of failure) reveal that she devotes a considerable amount of mental energy to worries and self-doubts. She confirmed this in our initial interview, stating that she had come to expect problems to arise in her auditions and performances.

During performances, she often thought about failing and became increasingly nervous. She described herself as worrying so much the night before one performance that she was only able to get two hours of sleep. She also reported that her lack of control over her mind and emotions was having a very detrimental effect on her performances.

In terms of focus, Nina's pre-training Mental Strengths Assessment results painted a picture of a young woman who was achieving a less than optimal level of focus during performance (Depth of Focus). This appeared to be due to the presence of intrusive thoughts about the past and future (Temporal Focus). Further, the main distractions for Nina appeared to come from her own mind (Internal Distraction) as opposed to outside influences associated with the performance environment (External Distraction). Nina concurred with this assessment, stating that her mind was often reeling with thoughts of what she had done wrong in earlier parts of a performance or with negative thoughts about how her performance was going to be perceived by her audience. "I can't seem to just be in the present and just let the music flow anymore," she said.

Nina's pre-training scores on the self-regulation scales of the Mental Strengths Assessment indicated that she was clearly having trouble positively regulating her thoughts, emotions, and physiological responses before and during performances. Her scores on Pre-Competition Anxiety were very high, suggesting that she was experiencing considerable anxiety in anticipation of upcoming performances. Further, her low scores on Ability to Relax indicated that when she became overly aroused, she did not have the skills to reduce her arousal, while her low scores on Ability to Energize indicated that when she was not appropriately energized or "up" for a performance, she had trouble creating the necessary physiological arousal and emotional energy to perform at her best.

Finally, her pre-assessment scores on the Ability to Recover (from errors)

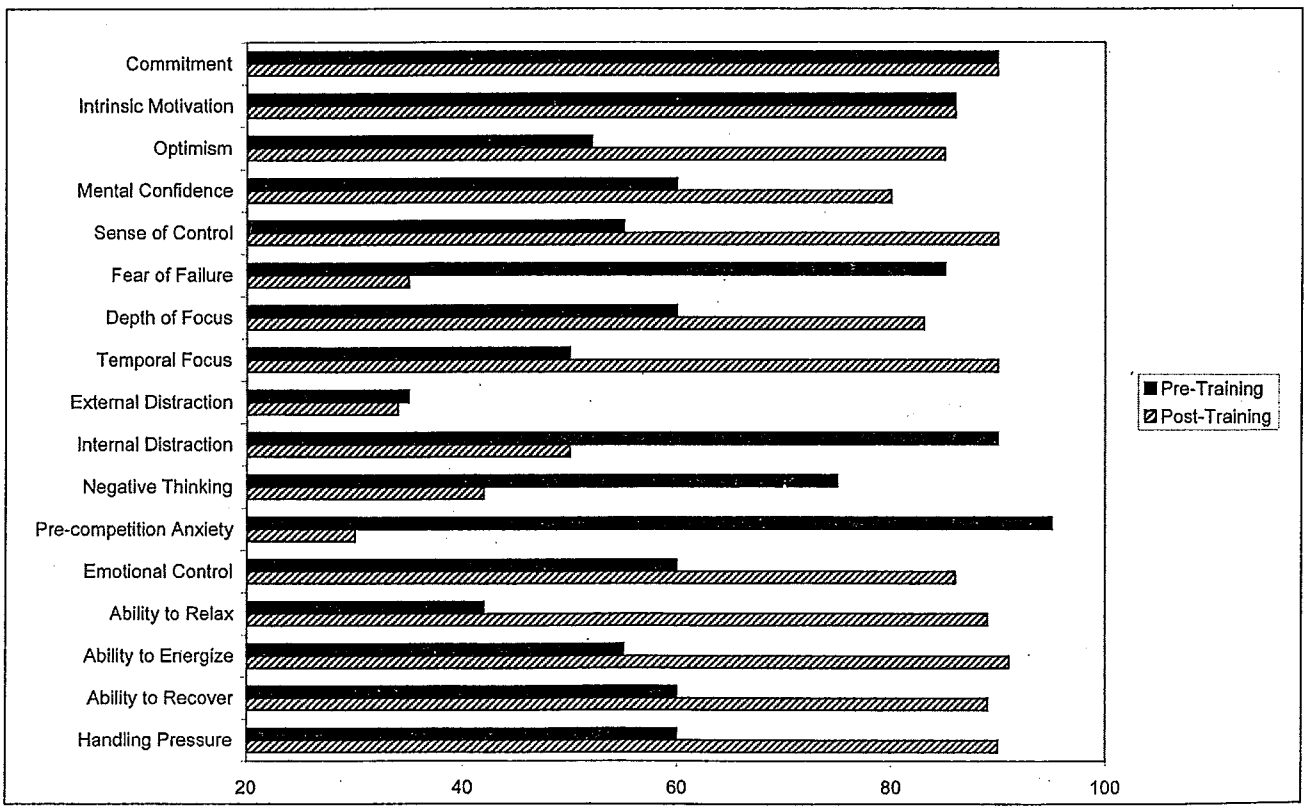


Figure 3. Mental Strengths Assessment results (Nina)

his thoughts, behaviors, and the environment to create the optimal focus, emotion/arousal, and physical tension prior to and during performances as well as following an error or setback.

For example, a musician would develop and write down a script that describes what she is going to do the hour before her audition or competition. The script would include precisely what she would think about, say to herself, and imagine when she is warming up, waiting to perform, and during the moments immediately prior to beginning her performance. The script would also include how she would behave (breathing and relaxation exercises), how she would talk, hold her shoulders, etc., as well as exactly what she would focus on (e.g., her instrument, the conductor, etc.). Over time, performers refine their performance routines, integrating new insights and observations based on each successive performance.

Cognitive Restructuring

The final technique that should be considered in a Mental Training Program is cognitive restructuring. Cognitive restructuring consists of identifying core beliefs that performers have about themselves and the world that are inhibiting their ability to successfully implement the mental training program and harness their mental abilities during practice and performances.

Not every performer needs to work at the level of modifying core beliefs. Rather, it is the performer who is not able to effectively apply the mental skills discussed above who needs to examine core beliefs that maybe inhibiting his or her mastery. Examples of common negative core beliefs include "I am just not as talented as other people, "I am a born 'choker,'" "There is something wrong with me that will not let me succeed," "I don't deserve to win," "Failing would be unbearable," "I must be perfect in every performance," "Losing or making an error is the worse thing that could ever happen to me," "I could not face my friends if I didn't do well," "I am unlucky," and "External factors control my performance."

As you can see, core beliefs that inhibit practice and performance tend to be associated with lack of confidence in oneself as a performer, the catastrophic consequences of failure or making mistakes, perfectionism, and having an external locus of control (i.e., believing that performance outcomes are determined by uncontrollable external factors rather than factors under one's control). Although these negative core beliefs can spur some performers to practice and perform with more intensity to avoid the agony of defeat, they cause most performers to become overly tense, anxious, inhibited, unfocused, and fatalistic, which leads to decrements in performance.

Phase 4

Critical to the success of Mental Skills Training is the generalization of mental skills learned in the consultant's office or in the performer's training environment to the actual performance setting. This process requires a considerable amount of time and energy in order to be successful. As one can imagine, achieving a state of relaxation while lying down in an office is likely to be much easier to do than while one is under the pressure of an important performance.

As mentioned above, the performance routines (e.g., pre-practice, pre-performance, and post-error) routines are a way to integrate the individual mental training techniques and become the focal point for transferring the skills learned in the "lab" to the performance setting. It is important to emphasize to the performer that progress will be made over time but not without setbacks. Performers who are looking for a quick fix with mental training will be disappointed; however, those performers who consistently practice the basic skills and integrate them into performance routines learn that they can create the optimal mental state for performance on demand.

In order to encourage performers to continue to practice their skills and to effectively deal with relapse, it is suggested that traditional behavioral adherence strategies (e.g., assessment of progress, monitoring, reinforcement) be included in all Mental Training Programs (O'Donohue & Krasner, 1997).

In summary and on a more literary note, a story from the Zen tradition of Japan that has been told in various forms by a number of authors illustrates the outcome of a successful Mental Skills Training program (i.e., poise and composure during the pressure of competition and in the midst of an unpredictable and constantly changing performance environment and an unpredictable and often contentious modern world).

A student came to a famous Zen sword master and requested that he teach him to be an expert swordsman. As is common in the Zen tradition, the student was instructed to do mundane chores around the master's house to show that he had sufficient discipline and commitment to deserve receiving the master's training. After several years of cooking and taking care of the master's house, the student asked the master when he was going to start his sword training. The master ignored the question, but that evening when the student was cooking dinner, the master came up behind him and hit the student on the head with a wooden stick and walked quietly away. The student jumped in surprise and didn't understand the master's action.

During the days and weeks that followed, the master would sneak up behind the student and hit him with the stick when he was cooking, cleaning, and even sleeping. The student soon became so preoccupied that he was going to be hit by the master that he could not keep his mind on his work for even a few minutes. He even had dreams of being attacked by the master.

Nevertheless, the master continued to attack the student randomly throughout the day and night until one day when the master was striking the student from behind, the student moved gracefully to the side, evading the stick and returning to his work undisturbed. Seeing his response, the master said,

"Now it is time for you to learn to use the sword because you will not be unsettled by your own mind, your opponent, or the unpredictability of the environment in which you find yourself."

Case Study (Performing Artist)

Pre-Training Mental Strengths Assessment and Interview

This case involved a female performer whom I will call Nina (details about the case, including the client's name, have been changed to protect the client's confidentiality). Nina is a 24-year-old pianist who regularly competes in international piano competitions and recently began auditioning for positions in prominent symphony orchestras across the United States. Nina sought my services because she was

tionally flat, etc.).

It is common for performers to shift from focusing on the essential elements of the performance to focusing on their own thought processes during their performances (i.e., internal distraction) or to non-performance relevant external factors (e.g., external distraction). Common internal distractions include ideas that the performer will make a mistake, fail, or disappoint coaches, teaches, colleagues, family, and friends. Common external distractions include sights and sounds such as those associated with the audience, other performers, or significant others.

Environmental Management

After performers gain some confidence manipulating their physical tension, emotions/arousal, and focus, and begin to see improvements in performance, they are taught how to manage their practice and performance environments. Because the environment in which performers practice and perform has an impact on their performance, performers are taught how to identify and create a performance-enhancing environment. Given that the performers cannot always control what might occur in their environments, they are also taught to prepare for and control their responses to uncontrollable environmental factors. For example, business professionals may arrive early at the place where they are speaking in order to arrange the environment so that there are as few distractions as possible for themselves and the audience.

In addition to controlling the environment as much as possible, a top performing business professional would identify potential performance-inhibiting environmental factors that are beyond his/her control such as additional audience members attending the presentation, poorly functioning audiovisual equipment, antagonistic audience members, etc. The business professional would develop a plan for how to use each of these environmental factors in order to create the optimal focus, emotions/arousal, and physical relaxation during the presentation. Another environmental strategy that is often taught to performers involves encouraging performers to reinterpret environmental cues that typically inhibit their performance.

For example, performers may find themselves getting overly anxious and worried when they have to perform before large audiences because they begin to think, "If I fail, this will be the end of my career. I know they will be bored to death with this performance." However, performers can learn to interpret performance situations in a much more calming, positive, and energizing way, such as, "Look at all of these people eager to see me perform. This audience is really going to be moved by this piece." These latter interpretations would likely lead to a greater sense of confidence, positive arousal, and poise during performance.

Performance Routines

Although each of the techniques described previously greatly enhances the performers' abilities to regulate their psychophysiological states during practice and performances, the technique that integrates all of these individual mental skills is performance routines. Performance routines consist of components of the techniques the performers had been practicing previously. Each performance routine should contain an explicit description of how the performer is going to use her or

a peak performance. After performing this routine, she would sit in the waiting area until she was called to perform, during which time she would monitor her muscle tension and emotions, preparing herself emotionally using several affirmation she had developed, such as, "Creativity is flowing through me" and "I am in a state of trust and flow." When her name was called she would approach the piano as she had rehearsed in her mind many times, releasing control to her rich inner creativity, marveling at the power and beauty of the musical form.

Post-Training Mental Strengths Assessment and Interview

After 12 weeks of Mental Skills Training, Nina again completed a Mental Strengths Assessment and was asked to describe the effect of the Mental Skills Training on her piano performances. As can be seen from viewing the Post-Training Mental Strengths Assessment Scale scores in Figure 3, Nina's drive remained high, and her attitude, focus, and ability to self-regulate improved dramatically. Nina concurred with these findings. After engaging in Mental Skills Training, she reported being better able to reduce her pre-performance anxiety and negative thinking. In addition, she reported having one of her best auditions after 10 weeks of training. She said that for the first time in several years she was able to trust herself enough to let go of her body during a performance, which she said resulted in a moving performance for her audience and a deep sense of satisfaction for her. Nina attributes her success to her ability to control negative mental chatter, regulate her focus, relax her muscles, and create positive emotions, and to her renewed trust in her musical skills and creativity.

Concluding Remarks

It is rarely by accident that elite performing artists, athletes, and business professional achieve excellence in their performances. Whether unwittingly or through conscious training, elite performers learn to exquisitely regulate their focus, emotions, and muscular tensions to achieve peak performances. Fortunately, because of Mental Skills Training techniques, we can confidently assure our clients that they can achieve the success and satisfaction that is commensurate with the long hours of study, training, and practice they have dedicated to their professions. Although Mental Skills Training is not a substitute for dedicated study and practice, it is a way to promote the realization of a performer's true potential. It is my hope that at the end of the day, performers can sleep with the knowledge that they have stood amidst and risen above the fear, doubt, and myriad of mental demons to realize the joy and satisfaction of realizing their true performance potentials.

References

Allison, N. (Ed.). (1999). *The illustrated encyclopedia of body-mind disciplines.* New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc.

Boutcher, S. H., & Crews, D. J. (1987). The effect of a preshot attentional routine on a well-learned skill. *International Journal of Sport Psychology, 18*(1), 30-39.

Brassington, G. S. (2002). Excellence is no accident: Mental training for business leaders, athletes, and performing artists [CD]. Retrieved from www.eliteperformers.com.

Brassington, G. S., & Adam, M. (2002). *Mental skills distinguish elite soloist ballet dancers from corps de ballet dancers.* Paper presented at the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science, New York.

Feltz, D. L., & Landers, D. M. (1983). The effects of mental practice on motor skill learning and performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 5*(1), 25-57.

Gould, D., & Udry, E. (1994). Psychological skills for enhancing performance: arousal regulation strategies. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 26*(4), 478-485.

Greenspan, M. J., & Feltz, D. L. (1989). Psychological interventions with athletes in competitive situations: A review. *Sport Psychologist, 3*(3), 219-236.

Jacobson, E. (1974). *Progressive relaxation: A physiological and clinical investigation of muscular states and their significance in psychology and medical practice.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kirschenbaum, D. S. (1987). Self-regulation of sport performance. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 19*(5, Suppl), 106-113.

Locke, E. A. (1991). Problems with goal-setting research in sports—and their solution. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 13*(3), 311-316.

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1985). The application of goal setting to sports. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 7*(3), 205-222.

Locke, E. A., Shaw, K. N., Saari, L. M., & Latham, G. P. (1981). Goal setting and task performance: 1969-1980. *Psychological Bulletin, 90*(1), 125-152.

Martin, K. A., Moritz, S. E., & Hall, C. R. (1999). Imagery use in sport: A literature review and applied model. *Sport Psychologist, 13,* 245-268.

Murphy, S. M. (1994). Imagery interventions in sport. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 26*(4), 486-494.

O'Donohue, W., & Krasner, L. (Eds.). (1997). *Theories of behavior therapy : Exploring behavior change.* Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Ostrow, A. C. (Ed.). (1996). *Directory of psychological tests in the sport and exercise sciences.* Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology, Inc.

Petruzzello, S. J., Landers, D. M., & Salazar, W. (1991). Biofeedback and sport/exercise performance: Applications and limitations. *Behavior Therapy, 22*(3), 379-392.

Richardson, A. (1967a). Mental practice: A review and discussion: I. *Research Quarterly, 38*(1), 95-107.

Richardson, A. (1967b). Mental practice: A review and discussion: II. *Research Quarterly, 38*(2), 263-273.

Vealey, R. S. (1994). Current status and prominent issues in sport psychology interventions. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 26*(4), 495-502.

Weinberg, R. S. (1994). Goal setting and performance in sport and exercise settings: A synthesis and critique. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise, 26*(4), 469-477.

Williams, J. M. (2001). *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (4th ed.). New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies.

Ziegler, S. G. (1994). The effects of attentional shift training on the execution of soccer skills: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 27*(3), 545-552.