

Effective Imagery for Runners - Part II

The April edition of *The Rundown* contained an article I wrote giving a basic overview of muscle relaxation and imagery (visualization), and how these facets of psychological skills training (PST) ultimately link to confidence on race day. The confidence derived from PST is the result of gaining additional "race experience" each time a muscle relaxation or imagery session is performed. To have the ability to instantly rid your muscles of any unwanted tension and your brain of any unwanted chatter is a useful skill, but all skills must be practiced. Therefore, the aim of this article is to lay out a general template you can use in order to practice muscle relaxation and imagery on your own.

Getting Started with Muscle Relaxation

Muscle relaxation sessions typically precede imagery sessions, so that the latter can be more effective, and although it is not a necessity to begin that way, that is where we will begin. Laying down in a quiet, comfortable setting is obviously a good place to start, but you need not be in a dark room with candles lit and a recording of ocean waves in the background. Close your eyes and breathe rhythmically. Take deep breaths and control your breathing—inhale when you want to inhale, exhale when you want to exhale. Focus on this task for a few minutes until you feel totally at ease and ready to begin.

Make a fist with your left hand and create tension in the muscles in your left arm as you take a deep breath... hold it for 5 seconds...feel the tension in your hand, your forearm, your tricep, your bicep...and now exhale and relax your hand and feel the tension flow out of your arm as you exhale. Be aware of the sensation of the muscles in your arm becoming relaxed. Repeat this process for the same arm, then move onto the other arm, and then repeat this process for both legs. The key is to treat this like classical conditioning, so that you learn to associate deep inhales and slow exhales with the sensation of becoming relaxed (defined as tension-free muscles).

When you complete a few rounds of "tense-release" in your limbs, move onto your shoulders and neck. Shrug your shoulders toward your neck, creating tension in the neck and shoulders, and then gently clench the muscles in your jaw as you take a deep breath in...hold it for 5 seconds... feel the tension in your neck, your shoulders, your jaw...and now exhale and drop your shoulders and feel the tension flow out of your body, move your upper

and lower teeth apart and be aware of the sensation of becoming relaxed. By this point (about 10 -15 minutes from when your session initially began) you should not have any tension in your muscles, nor should there be much self-talk going on upstairs.

Describe to yourself how your body feels and be specific with your words. Choose 1 or 2 words (or phrases) that accurately describe how you feel. This is a unique word or phrase just for you. Take a deep breath, hold it for 5 seconds, say that cue word or phrase to yourself, and exhale slowly (repeat). Once again, this is classical conditioning with the goal of associating your cue word(s) or phrase with the sensation of feeling in control and relaxed. These sessions progress by doing the tense-release rounds with more limbs (body parts) at a time, so that eventually you can tense your whole body at once, and then by exhaling slowly and repeating your cue phrase you can relax the whole body at one time, instantaneously.

Visualizing Your Performance

Once you are in a relaxed state, it's time to mentally walk yourself through your pre-competition routine and imagine the race you want to run, or at least imagine how you want to feel at the start line and other points in the race. It is very important that you use 1st-person point of view during imagery, as opposed to watching yourself from a 3rd-person perspective, like watching yourself on a TV screen. See everything happening around you and every move you make as if you were looking out of your own eyes.

Use all of your senses—another often overlooked part of successful imagery. What do you see? Is the sun out? Are there clouds? How clearly can you picture the sky? What do you hear? Are there other people around? If so, what are they saying? Is the wind blowing? Can you hear that? Can you feel the wind on your face? Can you smell the grass? Is there a taste in your mouth? Are you comfortable with the surrounding environment? Bring yourself to a state of mental relaxation and be in control of your body. Talk to yourself, use your cue words.

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The final step is to be able to vividly imagine yourself at the specific race site (it helps if you've been there before), using all of your senses, and being very in-tune with how you want to feel on race morning. From there, imagining the physical act of running should be very easy and you certainly want to picture a very successful performance! Slow-motion replays are a good place to start, but ultimately you want the imagery sessions to be as close to the real thing as possible, hence the claim for enhanced confidence through additional race experience.

Practice makes perfect. Be patient with these sessions and understand you are developing a life-long skill that can be applied to other aspects of your life, like public speaking and overcoming phobias.

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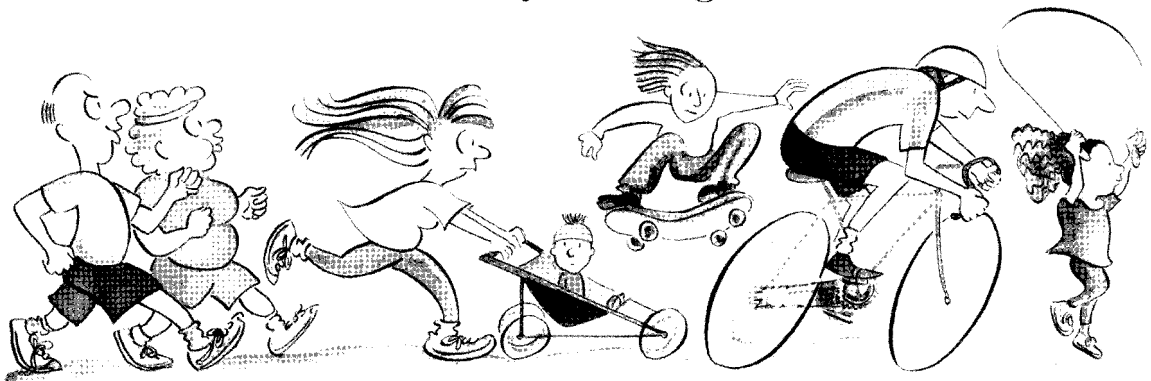
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