

Across the board both the experts in sports psychology and the champion athletes themselves agree that the mental state necessary for optimal performance is best described as "relaxed concentration". Athletes say they do their best and have peak experiences not when they are wildly striving to push ahead, but rather when an almost eerie sense of calm and total control overtakes them which they often describe in what might be interpreted as religious terminology. The words "calm" and "control without effort" keep popping up in many of our greatest athletes' accounts of their own most highly regarded exploits. Of course, there are also other odd accounts of savage battles fought in frenzy or extreme duress, but by far the top players who have achieved feats that defy our belief and ignite our awe and respect seem to hold to the idea that when they had breakthroughs in their sport the predominant feeling was "effortless", "flowing", and "relaxed".

Psychologists tell us about the "motivation curve" which describes how with increased motivation, we see an increase in performance.

This is probably what you would expect because common sense says that the more you want something, the harder you will work for it and the better your results. But the truth about the motivation curve is that it is shaped like an upside-down letter "U". As motivation increases, performance increases UP TO A POINT after which any further increase in motivation results in a DECREASE in performance! This means, of course, that you can try too hard. Over motivation is commonly referred to as "choking" or "tanking". Any Little League will remember the words of their coach ringing in their ears as they walk back to the bench after a strike-out: "Don't try to kill it, just meet the ball." We are all too familiar with over trying.

The goal is to find balance between not trying hard enough (acting as if you don't care) and getting so worked up that you can't seem to do anything right. The consistent champions know how to balance right on the bubble of the inverted "U" and can generate steam if they are flat or cool down if they are frazzled.

KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

The first step to finding the optimal motivation level is self awareness. You must learn (often by the painful trial-and-error method) how to recognize your level of stimulation. NO ONE can teach you this or assess it fully correctly for you. A wise coach

TRAINING

Don't ALWAYS Try Harder as told to Powerlifting USA by J.M. Blakley



J.M. Blakley is a student of all aspects of benching

can often be trusted in the early stages of your development, but after a certain point you must learn to trust only yourself. The better you get, the less you can rely on outside evaluation - you just won't show it like a beginner. You will be the only one who really knows what you need. And that will probably only come after many lessons. But rest assured that the more you pay attention and note the stimulation level with the result the sooner you will learn. Evaluate your condition honestly and frequently. Be aware!

After accurately evaluating your state, decide if you need more or less. This is a real point of blockage for most lifters. They automatically assume they always need more. More is the common logic answer to lifting heavier weights, but it very frequently leads to the drop-off side of the motivation curve. Lifters will consistently make this mistake over and over without ever even considering the alternative - to calm down and focus!

It's always more ephedrine, more desire, more rage, more psyche, more, more, more. They make the false assumption that they don't have enough of whatever. They may need less!

USING ADJUSTMENT TECHNIQUES

Since this discussion deals with over-motivation, I will leave the specific methods of increasing drive for

feel rushed, I can have a tendency to let my thoughts run quickly from one idea to another (e.g., set up higher on my arch - follow the groove of the shirt a little lower - stiffen my arms at the bottom - jump the bar off the chest in the first four inches with all you've got - don't slow the drive in the middle - kick the triceps in earlier - etc., etc.) which can lead to a feeling of being overwhelmed by trying to do everything just right. Or even worse it can lead to centering on negative thoughts that run from one doubt or criticism to another in a destructive downward spiral. Both scenarios are self-defeating and go on right inside your own head. Using music to slow my thought process down and center me, lets me think about one thing I want to correct at a time and really examine it then move steadily to the next, leaving the first behind. This way I don't feel like I'm burdened by all my shortcomings or all the fine details of trying to be perfect. I can focus on a technique that I want to improve or correct each in its own time. All by simply setting the "mood" with music that makes me feel powerful and confident and relentless like waves pounding the rocks at the shore - they won't ever stop and they don't ever rush - they just keep coming! I think music is one of the easiest and most accessible tools you can use to help center you.

One word of caution: be careful not to choose music that is boring or sedative in nature. You can overdo it. You must do this work yourself! But be aware of what feels right to you and don't be afraid to experiment. The calming music I use can put me into a trance-like external appearance, but in my mind the intensity is like a swirling pool of energy building and gathering force at its own pace to be released at the appropriate time! I'm certainly not about to doze off! There must be an underlying intensity to the music no matter what it's speed or meter. March to your own drummer! Feel your way.

BREATH ATTENTION

Another way to center yourself and bring your energy into line is breathing. All martial arts and most forms of theater arts all teach breath control. I will not belabor this point. There are scores of books and probably hundreds of techniques offered by everyone from Buddhist monks to marriage counselors to public speaking coaches. The fact is that every body and their brother knows of the benefits of breath control even if by another name. All the sports psychologists swear by it. Athletes who use it don't know how they ever got by without it. My point is that you need to explore this no matter how far-out it may seem to you. You can bet your competition will.

What breath control actually offers is up to interpretation. I don't suppose to bring spiritual enlightenment to the powerlifting community although some forms of yogic breathing are designed to do just that. My purpose is to exploit the connection between the body and the mind and use breathing to quiet and focus the mind and emotions. This fact (the mind and body are connected) was first popularly entertained by Benson's Progressive Relaxation Method in which he reasoned that if mental stress could make the body tense, could the exact reversal also be true? He designed methods of relaxing the body to relieve mental tension. Thus the idea of using physical techniques to affect mental states gained popular modern attention. For centuries the ancient martial artists and meditation gurus have used similar methods, but for reasons of spiritual significance. Nevertheless the connection is clearly established. We don't have to begin with any religious premise to use these methods for our own reasons - they work even if you just want to use them for such un-pious reasons as getting a few pounds on your total! Don't be put off by the overlap into spiritual connotations - just take it for what it is... a way to use the body to center and focus the mind.

Many techniques exist which work well. I will introduce one of my favorites here. If this doesn't suit you, don't give up on the concept - it's too valuable - just consult another source for another method that may fit your personality better. Try again.

My favorite method deals with concentrating on your breathing so intently that other thoughts have no room in your mind. This is one-point meditation. You think about one thing so clearly and totally that no other thought or concern can occupy your consciousness. This is a brief, welcome escape from the stress and chaos and distraction during a meet. It is very freeing to just for a few minutes or even seconds to simply "drop everything" and re-group. This gives you distance from the situation and helps you to avoid being "caught up" in the frenzy and excitement which can trigger even more adrenaline and just compound the problem of over-motivation. This acts as a time-out and lets you re-start at your correct pace. If things are going wrong, it cuts you away, providing a break in the loop to stop the error. If things are going well, it lets you gather and build your resolve and pool your resources after letting loose and going all out on the prior attempt.

It provides time to make adjustments and above all it promotes clear thinking when you end the technique and get back to business.

This technique was introduced to me as the "Humza Holiday". This is loosely named after a group of nomadic tribesmen who will on occasion simply stop absolutely everything they are doing and take several seconds or minutes to clear their mind of all thoughts. This is part of their culture and religion, so it is not considered rude to just stop talking mid-sentence for a moment or to stop working or cooking or counting a monetary exchange or walking or whatever to perform the rite. The interested party assumes that after a minute the conversation will resume and waits patiently without being irritated. A sharp contrast to our fast paced lifestyle! But the Humza tribesmen recognize the need for concentration and focus in their entire life. They are acutely aware of internal stresses and use this break which is best translated as "vacation" or "holiday". This implies that the world is still going to be there, with all its problems and concerns upon cessation of the rite, and this is not viewed as running away from the world or ignoring it, but only serves to attain proper attitude and mental

perspective for attacking the business of life. Maybe we Americans would call it "getting a grip"!

To perform the technique in its simple form take just 120 seconds and commit to stop thinking about what you are doing. Resolve to not think about what you will do next, either. You must drop the past away as well as let the future remain distanced ahead. You must keep only the present in mind - ONE BREATH AT A TIME! Concentrate so keenly on the inhalation of air that no other thought can penetrate. Breathe in and say "IN" or count the breaths - "ONE", "TWO", etc. Breathe out and say "OUT" or count again. Hold to the thought of the air filling your lungs so lightly that at that moment NOTHING ELSE EXISTS for you. This may sound like it would take a supreme amount of concentration, but, in fact, it is relatively easy. Almost everyone can maintain several seconds of concentration (about 6 seconds) and with practice a full minute is certainly within everyone's reach. The key is to realize that you can be fully centered on your breath. This is different from blocking thoughts out. You don't have to block anything... if you just totally fill your attention with your breathing, you will let other thoughts passively go unnoticed.

This is the simplest method of clearing the mind - to occupy it so strongly that the details and distractions fall away. Have you ever been so engaged in a sporting event or activity that you had cut your hand and not even noticed the cut or the pain until a teammate or friend asked how you did it or remarked that you were bleeding? This is testament that we all have the ability to concentrate on one thing fully enough such that minor disturbances are not noticed until our focus relaxes. We can do it.

During this time of breath attention I also try to sit perfectly still and motionless. This stone-like stillness helps me feel solid and grounded and heavy yet surprisingly relaxed. I let all tension go from all the muscles and act as if I were sort of paralyzed, feeling the weight of my body. This is not a soft jelly-like feeling of helplessness, but rather a firm, solid sense of chosen stillness and rest. It only lasts a moment then I turn my attention to the details of competition, but the adjustment in perspective is startling. I always feel keener and more tuned in, as well as relaxed after, I perform the drill. Chances are you will too.

This technique helps settle the inappropriate adrenaline rush that you don't need between lifts and lets you conserve your power for when you really need it - during the lift! It gets rid of that scattered, hurried feeling and replaces it with a calm purposefulness.

LESS MAY BE MORE

It's very good to have powerful desires and to be driven to excel, but occasionally our overwhelming desire can hinder us from the very object of our wishes. It is a known fact that over-trying can impede performance. A seasoned athlete knows his body and his mental states well. By evaluating the mental state, an aware athlete can either add intensity or quell excess excitement. One easy method of "firing down" is to listen to accommodate music that has an affinity within the particular athletes personality. Another way of adjusting the attitude and refocusing the mind is to concentrate on the breathing so clearly and totally that all other thoughts are by omission excluded. This has the effect of centering the mind and calming the body of the link between them is axiomatic. It is important to remember that there is more than one way to skin a cat and that the maxim that 'more is better

is not always correct. The next time you feel challenged and are sensing that things are getting away from you or that it's just too crazy or you feel like you are trying to talk yourself into doing something you honestly feel you can do, but for some reason can't seem to grip it, try backing off and refocusing. If you think you might choke, that's ok - it just means you really want it, but over-trying probably won't do anything but compound the problem. All athletes face this dilemma at some point or another. Chances are the more driven you are, the more you need to experiment with these techniques. Finding and maintaining the right mental state is one of the most challenging and fascinating aspects of peak performance. Don't be discouraged if at first you can't seem to find your "flow". In time and with practice it will evolve for you. But you must be diligent and disciplined and develop awareness. A wise man once said "Know first thyself."

BENCH Better!

J.M. Blakley's

"Building the Perfect Beast" Competition Bench Press Technique

VIDEO

Improve Technique, Increase Leverage, Generate Stability, Maximize Mechanics

The video is designed to fine tune the biomechanics of competitive bench press technique to maximize stability, safety and pressing efficiency. It covers all aspects of kinesiology and physical mechanics of benching.

"Technique is worth 40 pounds." Stop wasting power through inefficient leverage. Build the beast and load the bar!

\$39

Send certified check or money order for \$39 plus \$5 shipping and handling to: J.M. Blakley, 907 Lake Run Circle, Westerville, Ohio 43081

