

The power of mental imagery



Preamble

The following psychological resource for participants and athletes, has been developed by sport psychologist Fiona McCarthy on behalf of the NSW Office of Sport, as a key initiative of the NSW Government's Future Champions strategy.

For more information on Future Champions, please visit www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development

Getting to know the author

Fiona McCarthy is a registered psychologist, specialising in sport psychology and is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists. Fiona owns and operates Mind and Body Balance, a business she established 25 years ago.

Fiona is the Hunter Academy of Sport, Sport Psychology Consultant and a New South Wales Institute of Sport, Sport Psychology Service Provider. Over the last twenty-

five years, Fiona has assisted many teams, athletes, parents and coaches in the areas of confidence, concentration, handling pressure, motivation, goal setting, time management, performance preparation and general well-being. Fiona has worked with numerous sports, assisting recreational level athletes to professional, international, Olympic and Paralympic level athletes, reach their full potential.



Background to these resources

The importance of having a mental 'tool kit' to support your learning, performance and engagement on and off the sporting field.

The following resources have been developed by Fiona McCarthy to assist athletes at all levels, in understanding the importance of having a suite of mental 'tools' at their disposal. These 'tools' are practical and multidimensional and will help athletes learn and develop the necessary mental skills they require to help them navigate their way through their sporting journey with a positive mindset and achieve success on and off the field.

It is well recognised that to reach the pinnacle within sport, an athlete needs a superior mindset consisting of strong and effective mental skills and strategies.

Importantly, mental skills are very intertwined and integrated, so it is recommended that you read about and put into regular practice, a number of these resources to strengthen the 'mental tools' in your kit bag!



The power of mental imagery

Mental imagery, also known as mental rehearsal or visualisation, involves creating images in your mind of you performing your sport or a sporting context, such as in competition, ideally using all of your senses.

Mental imagery can be a very useful tool for athletes to rehearse in their mind prior to an upcoming event (e.g., training or competition) or refining a skill they would like to perform well. Many of our finest Australian athletes use mental imagery as a key skill to prepare for their performance.

Below are some tips on how, when and why imagery is an important tool to have in your mental kit bag. Remember -

- Everyone differs in their ability to imagine. Some can create images very vividly in great detail. Others experience very little.
- The ability to use imagery is a learned skill. Like a technical skill, the more you practise, the better you get.
- Imagery is the connecting link between your mind and body in performance. It represents a very effective system of communication between mental desires and physical performance.

Under what conditions will your imagery be most powerful?

- When you are in a quiet, non-distracting environment.
- When you imagine in colour.
- When you imagine in as much detail as possible.
- When you utilise all your senses. For example, a basketballer can try to see the court, feel the basketball in their hands, hear the bounce of the ball. They may even be able to smell the smells associated with playing and taste the water they drink in the breaks.
- When you set aside feelings, thoughts and desires that are unrelated to what you want to imagine.
- Frequent repetition and practise of your mental rehearsal skills.



See it, believe it, achieve it!

The brain cannot distinguish between a real experience/skill or a vividly imagined one. The neural pathways for the real and imagined skill are the same. So that is great news if you want to practise your skills in your mind outside of regularly training sessions. Think of it like 'extra' training!

Thus, it is not uncommon for an athlete who regularly practises imagery to experience muscle twitches and other sensations, which are similar to that produced by actual physical execution.

Under what conditions will your imagery be most powerful?

1. Ensuring positive performance
2. Enhancing your focus on tasks and execution
3. Preparing for a competitive event
4. Developing your confidence
5. Goal Setting
6. Relaxation
7. Your coping strategies



Keys tips on how to imagine effectively

Images can be classified into two distinct categories based on the senses involved and visual perspective utilised. You are probably most familiar with “external” images, or the visual perspective you would experience watching your body performing a skill from outside of it (like a video). On the other hand, in an “internal” image, you would create a visual image of the surroundings as if you were looking through your eyes.

1. Begin any imagery with a relaxation technique. For example you can use centring breathing which involves the diaphragm in between your lungs and abdominal muscles. You could follow the breathing pattern of ‘in for a count of 4’, ‘hold for a count of 2’ and ‘exhale for a count of 4’.

2. Get yourself in a comfortable position, for example laying down, sitting up or maybe even standing.

3. Combine the use of positive-key statements e.g., like smooth and flow or whatever words relate to the skill you are imagining. This can reinforce and strengthen the mental rehearsal.

4. Practising the skill physically before using imagery can allow you to know how a skill ‘feels’ and what is required to execute it.

However, imagery can also be used to learn a skill before doing it in real life. For example, a diver may mentally break a dive that has a high degree of difficulty up into ‘pieces’ and imagine themselves executing those pieces of the skill one piece at a time before physically doing the dive. The mind is getting ‘prepared’ to become familiar with what is required to execute the dive in real life.

5. Imagery is best when it involves positive and correct images. For example, as a swimmer if you fail to turn correctly, imagine, using all your senses, to perform the correct turn.

6. Use all your senses in creating a positive image. For example, see the layout/surroundings of the venue. What you would feel, e.g., your movements, balance, and strength in your body.

Hear what you would hear, smell the smells you would smell, taste the familiar tastes. Imagining the performance perfectly also requires the use of the appropriate time frame where possible, i.e., the speed at which the performance would take.

For example, a 100m runner may try to “picture” themselves running the 100m in the exact timeframe they wish to perform it. So, with the help of their coach, they could use a stopwatch to time the imagined image. Of course, this is not practical for other sports or events where the time frame of playing is much longer, however ‘snippets’ of performance could be timed.

Try to picture the images in colour as this is more accurate to real life.

7. Practise positive imagery consistently and regularly. Use a combination of perspectives, i.e., both internal and external.

Some good times to practise imagery could be at some training sessions, after some training sessions and maybe on some ‘rest’ days. Doing some imagery a couple of times a week is a good start.

It is best not to use imagery before going to sleep as a vivid imagination will evoke experiences similar to that of real life and may cause you to be too ‘energised’ to fall asleep.

Imagery should become an important part of your pre- performance and performance routines, as it assists you in creating the correct skills/technique required to perform well.

Like all skills, imagery requires dedication, commitment and the essential ingredient of regular practise.

We hope you liked our tips

Have FUN building your psychological skills and strategies and put them into practice in and out of sport!

Remember importantly, if you are unsure of any of these tips or require further advice, please talk to your Coach, Parent or consult a Sport Psychologist.

You might like to check out our NEW animated YouTube video, Developing your mental 'tool kit' to support you in and out of sport featured within the NSW Office of Sport's Pathways and Development webpages @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development>.

Check out more tips for Participants @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/social-and-recreational-sport-participants>

And our tips for Emerging and High-Performance Athletes @ <https://www.sport.nsw.gov.au/pathways-and-development/emerging-athletes>



**Future Champions -
Developing your
mental 'tool kit' to
support you in and out
of sport.**

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