

Mental traps:

You got yourself in...how do you get yourself out?

By April Clay, Psychologist

What are mental traps? They are those little mental glitches you fall into again -and again. They rob you of your learning, pleasure, performance, and let's face it, sometimes what feels like your sanity. There are likely as many mental traps out there as there are athletes. As a start, here are some traps that are common; deep trenches that can lead you off your game.

Keeping your eye (to firmly) on the prize:

Symptoms: With this affliction, you find yourself spending a lot of time thinking about rankings and winning. You've may have been told that great athletes think about winning and nothing else. So you decide to keep winning on the brain at all costs. You carefully monitor your points at competitions, and make sure you compare your progress with other athletes. The problem ensues when too much of your focus and energy goes into this tracking, when it should be on your sport. Even worse, you find your frustration level rising, and emotions interfering, the more you see your accomplishments not quite stacking up the way you would like.



Prescription: Get your focus back on the elements of an effective performance. These are elements that you can control (skill execution, body position etc.) Have faith that the winning part will look after itself if you can keep your mind on your tasks. Every time you find your mind wandering into evaluations of *how you are doing*, bring it back to *what you are doing*. One effective way to do this is to use cue words that help link you to your current focus.

Rigid thinking:

Symptoms: Do you always come to the same conclusion when something goes wrong, or when you are unsure of the situation? Maybe you have a habit of calling yourself names, or blaming your coach. Many athletes suffer reoccurring issues and fail to resolve them solely because of their thinking style. Their rigid thoughts do not allow for any alternate reasons for the problem at hand.

Prescription: Unlock your mind. The next time you run into one of those repeating problems, challenge yourself to think of three different explanations for what happened. Expanding your mind will help you take action and become a better problem solver.

Addicted to Punishment:

Symptoms: Every time you make a mistake you get mad at yourself. Fair enough, but with this affliction you don't know when to shut it off. You go on berating yourself mercilessly in the hope that with enough punishment, you will learn not to do it again. Bad you!

Prescription: Learn to move from mad to action. It is perfectly normal to be disappointed in yourself for making an error. Once you have recognized this, however, make a conscious decision to move onto some form of problem solving. Beating yourself up will only make you feel depressed and lose confidence. It may also frustrate those around you like your coach, and have you labeled as someone with a "poor attitude".

Letting your emotions run the show:

Symptoms: Whether you are sad, mad, feel physically ill or incredibly frustrated- you let it get the better of you. Others may comment how they see you "wearing your emotions". They can always tell what is going on with you, and more than that, how it will come to affect your performance. That is because you let your emotions run the show. If you are happy, great, you will have a good day. But put any other feeling into the mix and you are knocked off track. What's worse, you may really affect your teammates.

Prescription: Start practicing the art of emotional control. There is a reason for the term "get your game face on" in sports. It's about not revealing- and not succumbing to every change in your emotional state. Every emotion is a signal, or sign that something needs to change. Your job is to figure out what that is and make the alteration to your plan. At other times, when feelings of doubt or frustration arise because of a bad performance, then its time to put that game face on. In other words, to "act as if" you are confident and in control. This decision can help you stay focused on your job - tuned to your instructions, not your emotions.

Needing vs. wanting to win:

Symptoms: When you need to win, you place yourself in a very precarious place. Essentially you are saying to yourself "you must win or it means you are not a good athlete, or good person." You need to prove something to yourself, or to someone else. That's a whole lot of pressure to put on your performance. It may feel as though you are literally competing for your life. Not a good recipe for controlling your nerves and staying focused.

Prescription: Don't compete for such high stakes. It's ok to want to win. But if you don't win, don't make it mean something about who you are. Compete to have fun and to learn. To improve your skill and your strength of character. This way, every time you step into competition you can look forward to another experience of growth. This kind of mind set will take conscious developing. You can change your existing approach to winning by deliberately checking your thoughts at the start line.

Mental traps can be tricky landmines, in and out of your sport. Get used to being aware of what tends to derail you. Make a list of your mental traps and know them well. If you become aware of your mental traps ahead of time, you give yourself the opportunity to get through them and not allow them to interfere with your performance.

Copyright April Clay, Registered Psychologist 2009