

Mental Toughness Training: Training to Keep the Mind Tight (Coaches)

By Alison Arnold Ph.D.

It's a coach's biggest nightmare. One day she or he can do the jump, the next day they can't. Or, your athlete does the single perfectly, but whenever they go into the double they change everything. Then there's the skater who can't control frustration. Banging into the boards, kicking lockers. Your lockers have so many dents in them they look like a truck ran into them.

Fear. Frustration. Negative attitude. Inconsistency. These things can make even the most patient coach want to check him or herself into the psych ward. This article will help you look at these mental qualities in a totally new way. A way so different, so revolutionary, you may just want to write me a thank you note. So.

Are you ready to revolutionize the way you are looking at the mental part of figure skating?

You work all day at the rink on body positions. You do drill after drill to be sure that their bodies are in perfect alignment. You talk at length to each of your athletes of the importance of keeping certain positions to maximize height and rotation. You know full well that skating without alignment is all over the place and not very pretty.

But what about the mind? The mind is a thought factory, creating thought after thought after thought. A mind out of control is the same as a body out of control; all over the place, and mostly in places where it doesn't belong. Loose mind creates fear, frustration, doubt, and negativity. The opposite is also true. Tight mind creates fearlessness, positivity, confidence, and focus. So it's simple, just as you teach athletes how to tighten their bodies through correction, progressions, and drills, you do the same with the mind. Teach athletes how to tighten their minds through mental corrections and drills. Change the way you think about fear, frustration, and anxiety by simply seeing it as loose mind.

Negative thoughts and negative attitudes are simply "loose mind".

You correct improper body position all the time. You would never let an athlete go for more than one turn with tilted shoulders or a loose core. So why is it different for the mind? Begin to correct loose mind just as you would any body position. Correct it non-emotionally. Whenever you see fear, frustration or over-thinking, simply draw your athlete's attention to loose mind with a simple comment. Say something like, "your mind seems loose, what are you thinking?", or "I see fear is creeping in, just focus on the correction over and over." Teach your athletes to identify loose mind in themselves. Without awareness, making a correction is virtually impossible. Teach them to listen to what they are saying to themselves in their heads and anchor their minds on something helpful. Then, teach them to "lock it down" by either saying cue words, corrections, or positive self statements.

Remember, when the mind is loose, negative thoughts have a free for all. They take any opportunity to sneak in and negative feelings. So how can you keep the mind tight? How can you "lock it down"? The following is a list of drills you can do to help athletes anchor the mind. "Anchoring" keeps the mind tight, in proper alignment, so that negative thoughts cannot enter leading to fear, frustration, anxiety, and doubt.

You don't have to be a mind reader

Loose mind is as easy to see as loose body position. What kinds of things do you see in your athletes that can now make you think, "Ah..loose mind"? First of all, look for body cues. Head down, negative facial expressions, rolling eyes, avoiding eye-contact, are just a few of the loose mind indicators

Anchors for loose minds

Mental Choreography (MC)

The mind is simply another part of the body. In skating, you spend countless hours training your body for proper position, alignment, and technique. The mind must also remain in proper alignment in order to achieve success. One of the most important skills for any skater is the ability to pull one's mind back into proper position when it goes off course. Mental choreography is blinders for the mind. It keeps the mind tight and provides a resting place when thinking goes off course. We know that the biggest cause of poor performance is out of control thinking. Keeping the monkey-mind occupied and "out of trouble" is key. Using mental choreography enables the mind to stay focused, centered, and on track.

Mental Choreography words are verbal cues words used to keep the mind tight during performance. These words are used before, during, and after performance, not only during difficult areas of programs, but presentation areas as well. When these words are done during every program, or element, they words serve as a resting place for the mind. This is the secret gift of mental choreography. Once it become second nature and automatic, it will carry your athletes through programs during the difficult or trying times. The words will

allow the mind to become “non-thinking”, thus in the zone. The zone is ultimate “tight mind.

There are three types of MC thoughts to give an athlete as mental cues when he or she is afraid:

Technical Statements: Statements or corrections (“lift”, “tight”, “shoulders square”)

Energy Statements: Statements that bring energy up or down (“go!” “push here!”, and “relax” “breathe”)

Confidence Statements: Statements that encourage and build trust (i.e. “I can do it”, “I’ve done it before”)

Have your athletes focus on these cue words to lock down the mind and keep it tight.

Anchor phrases

Anchor phrases are any phrase or series of actions that help tighten the mind. The mind must be anchored strong and steady in order to stay on course in the turbulence of negative thinking. Just as a skater pulls their body back to proper position to make a technical correction, they can pull their mind back the same way by using an anchor.

An anchor is a series of thoughts or actions that will pull the mind back to perfect mental position. An anchor is a series of strong “come-backs” to those negative thoughts keeping an athlete in fear and doubt. Anchors help your athletes return to focus, fearlessness, and doubtlessness. Examples of strong anchors include: “breathe, stay on course, I can do this”, “breathe, tight mind, don’t go there”, or “relax, keep it cool, it’s no big deal.” Each anchor statement should include breathing and positive self-talk. The anchor should break the downward spiral of frustration, fear, or nervousness, and get your athletes mind back on course. Whenever you notice loose mind, help your athletes pull it back by telling them to “go get a drink, and use their anchor”, or “do some drills and use your mental anchor”, or simply, “anchor your mind”.

The Confidence Bank

For some athletes, negative thinking is simply a deficit in confidence. Look at the mind as a confidence bank. When positive deposits go up, the mind feels an abundance of confidence. When there is a deficit in the confidence account, the mind feels fear, frustration or worry. Help your athletes have a wealth of confidence by building up their accounts. An account is built by success. Even successful drills or progressions can make the bank overflow. See all fear as a lack of confidence. Even if the athlete has done the element hundreds of times, if they are fearful, then they are lacking in confidence. Remember, fear isn’t always rational. As you see fearful behavior, especially popping, help the athlete have success by going back to the last successful drill. Build up the bank again, before pushing them to do the element that they are afraid of. It’s better to bank successful drills than repetitive popping. Popping is simply a bad habit! Don’t let that habit happen.

It’s important to note, that the mind seems to focus on failures more than successes. A skater can successfully perform an element, jump, or combination, over and over again, just to have all of that shattered by a scary stop in the middle of it.

Watch your Language!

Your language is essential in creating the atmosphere in your rink. Are you creating an atmosphere of fear and frustration, or one of confidence? What we put energy into grows bigger. Use language with your athletes that changes the way they view mental weakness in themselves and their teammates. The following are some phrases to use in order to build confidence with your athletes and help them train their minds.

It’s ok, we just need to build up your confidence.

Tight mind, I can see your negative thoughts coming up.

Go back and do some drills. Let’s build up your confidence bank.

Check your thoughts. I can see loose mind.

Anchor your mind. Focus on the correction and put it on automatic.

Don’t think about anything but this correction. Say it over and over again in your mind.

Walk through this element off the ice saying your key words.

Your mind is getting you into trouble. Focus on this correction.

Remember, look at frustration, nervousness, and fear as simply loose mind. It can be corrected, there are drills for it. Correct loose mind quickly and easily before you lose yours!

Alison Arnold Ph.D. is a sport psychology consultant for USA Gymnastics and United States Figure Skating among other organizations and teams. She is the author of “The Athlete Warrior: Advanced Mental Strength for the Advanced Athlete. She spends her time creating mental toughness training programs, and workbooks, doing clinics and helping coaches from going crazy.