



Home / Tips & Training / *Mental Training*

[BACK](#)

CONCENTRATION: THE MASTER SKILL OF MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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What you focus on both before and/or during your races will largely determine if you soar with the eagles or gobble with the turkeys!

Your training and health being equal, what you concentrate on at meets is the main cause of your best and worst swims. When you struggle with going faster in practice than races, faster in your off-events than your best ones or being unable to break through and get a certain time, faulty concentration is usually the main cause.

What you focus on as you go into a race will dramatically affect:

- Your ability to stay calm and loose under BIG meet pressure
- How quickly you're able to bounce back from disappointing swims
- Your level of self-confidence
- Your skill in avoiding getting psyched out and intimidated
- How well you handle adversity

Did you know that you're ALWAYS doing a great job of concentrating, but most swimmers concentrate on the WRONG things?

That's right! When you swim your fastest and when you totally fall apart under pressure and add gobs of time, you're doing an excellent job of focusing! The key question here is, "ON WHAT?" When you go fast, your concentration tends to be on the RIGHT things both before and during the race, and when you struggle performance-wise, your focus is on all the WRONG things.

What SHOULD you focus on?

Championship concentration involves focusing on two, overlapping things: The first is the **NOW**, as opposed to the **PAST** or the **FUTURE**. Whenever you swim, your focus always has to be in one of these three "mental time zones." **The NOW is what is happening in the present and is the only time zone you have total control over and can swim fast in!** If you're stretching behind the blocks, three minutes before your race, your focus needs to be in the NOW on your stretching, not on your last race, (the past) or whether you'll make tonight's finals, (the future).

The second important target for your concentration is on what **YOU** are doing as opposed to what everyone else around you is doing. In other words, before and during your races, you want mentally to "**stay in your own lane,**" focusing on yourself and no one else. All too often swimmers get caught up comparing themselves, paying too much attention to their competitors or focusing on what others watching (parents and coaches) might think of them.

What does it really mean to stay in the now and in your own lane?

Staying in the NOW and in your OWN LANE means that your pre-race and during race concentration needs to stay on the **FEEL** of what you're **DOING** before and during your swims. This means that if you're behind the blocks pre-race, you want to focus on the feel of the stretching, NOT your thoughts about the race. Focusing on feel during your swim might mean that your concentration is on feeling long and smooth, how much water you're pulling, your pace, feeling your chest pressing down just the right amount during fly or any number of other things depending upon what stroke you're swimming. **FEEL IS THE "GAS PEDAL" FOR FAST SWIMS!**

Performance-disrupting distractions come from both outside and inside the swimmer!

OUTSIDE: Swimmers need to let go of all of the external distractions, such as who's watching the meet, how their teammates or competitors are doing, the conditions of the pool, the clock, how crowded warm-up is, what their coach may do or say, who's in their heat, their lane assignment, how important their race is and what's at stake, their parents' reactions to how they swim, etc.

INSIDE: Distractions from the inside encompass the swimmer's thoughts about everything above as well as how they feel that day, whether they got enough sleep, how their training has been, whether they missed critical practices because of illness, how the taper went, the last time they swam this meet, how the season has gone so far, how they felt in warm-up, how big and fast their competition is, things going on in their personal or academic lives, etc.

Concentration is a two part skill:

- #1) Recognize that your focus has drifted from what's important
- #2) Quickly return your focus to what's important

What hurts swimmers isn't that they lose their concentration. Breaks in concentration are absolutely NORMAL. What really hurts you, is when you lose your focus and you don't immediately catch it and bring it back!

How do I get good at recognizing that I've drifted and then bringing my focus back?

- You must spend regular time in practice deliberately working on this mental skill Throughout practice, for two minutes at a time, both during your warm-ups and through the main set, practice noticing when your focus drifts, and then immediately returning it to what you're doing in the NOW
- If you start thinking about what happened in school today, the past, quickly bring your focus back to your breathing pattern or keeping your stroke long as you swim
- If you notice that you're thinking too much about another teammate, return your concentration to your lane and the feel of how much water you're pulling, one stroke at a time
- In dryland training, focus on the feel of each exercise, one rep at a time

By regularly practicing this master skill of concentration, you will develop the ability to consistently swim fast when it counts the most!

As a sports psychology consultant, Dr. Alan Goldberg works with swimmers at every level. A presenter at the Olympic Training Center, swim coaches clinics and clubs around the country, Dr. G specializes in helping swimmers struggling with performance problems, get unstuck and swim fast when it counts the most. He works over Skype, providing one-on-one consultation with swimmers and other athletes around the world. Dr. G has written over 35 mental toughness training programs and books. In addition, he is a regular contributor to Splash Magazine.



For more FREE mental toughness tips and swim articles, go to Dr. Goldberg's website, www.competitivedge.com and click on "choose your sport" and then "swimming." You can also visit him on Facebook, follow him on Twitter and sign up for his free, monthly mental toughness newsletter.

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Questions? I hope you'll feel free to contact Dr. Goldberg at Goldberg@competitivedge.com or call directly (413) 549-1085.

[BACK](#)