



Sports PSYCHOLOGY

The Center of Attention:

LEARNING TO CENTER FOR BETTER FOCUS & IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

When people ask me what I do as a sports psychology consultant, I simply tell them "I help athletes use their minds so they can perform better with their bodies." Invariably, their next response is, "Well, how do you do that?" And while helping athletes perform at their best is always a unique challenge, there's an exercise I prescribe that can be as universally beneficial as aspirin. It's called centering.

Centering is a simple breathing technique that athletes can use to control stress and muscle tension, block out negative or distracting thoughts, and refocus their attention on task-relevant cues. If you're participating in a physical activity of any kind, you can use centering to improve your performance. In addition to an improvement in your performance, centering can be beneficial for reducing soreness and injuries. What follows is an introduction to the centering process, some instructions for learning how to get centered, and some tips for integrating centering into your training and competitions.

What Is

"How many sport psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Just one, but the light bulb really has to want to change."

by Geoff Miller

mon clichés in sports coaching. Taking a breath helps you relax, but it doesn't do much else unless you understand what to do AFTER you take that deep breath. Centering picks up where "taking a deep breath" leaves off. The process of centering is based on using breathing to maintain center of gravity, control stress and stay focused. Centering has both a physical and a mental component. Physically, this involves putting your weight into a position that is ideal for executing your performance. Mentally, it involves putting your mind into a state that is not too relaxed or too pumped up, where you fix your focus on the most important instruction for carrying out your physical task. It's the mental side of this equation that makes centering so effective.

Your center of gravity is a place in your body where your weight is evenly distributed from front to back, side-to-side, and top to bottom. Think of it as the bubble of air that rests inside the tube of liquid in a carpenter's balance and is located somewhere around your navel. Your center of gravity changes as you shift your weight. If it gets too high or goes too far forward, backward, or to either side, you can easily lose your balance. Too low, you won't get off the ground.

Because they're the key ingredients to performing, center of gravity

and breathing are taken for granted by some athletes. For example, skiers and skaters perform on slippery surfaces that demand constant attention to balance. When you are on skis, you become immediately aware of the importance of keeping your mass centered, or you learn to brush the snow off of your back. Ask an offensive lineman or a wrestler the importance of keeping a low center. A gymnast and a high jumper can tell you exactly where his or her center of gravity needs to be in order to take flight. But do golfers typically have this information? Tennis players? Runners?

How about breathing? Even a beginning runner can understand the importance of developing a regular breathing pattern, but being on land, we can cheat once in a while and breathe when we need to, eventually throwing off our rhythm. Dive into a pool and swim a few laps and you'll quickly realize when you can and can't take a breath.

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Physical and Mental Reactions to Stress

When you start to feel stress, you experience physical and mental changes. Physical reactions to stress include increased heart rate, shortness of breath, sweaty palms, and increased muscle tension. The term "fight or flight" is used to describe this response as your body prepares to either face the cause of your stress

How to Get Centered

1. Start by putting your body into an “athletic” ready position. Make sure your weight is evenly distributed on both feet and you’re not leaning too far forward or backward. Bend your knees slightly and imagine that you may have to move in any direction at a moment’s notice.
2. Take a deep breath from your abdomen and feel your neck and shoulder muscles relax as you inhale.
3. Exhale slowly and completely and, as you do so, turn your focus to your center of gravity. Feel your center getting lower as your shoulders relax, as the breath finishes.
4. As you finish your centering breath, think about the single-most important component to your success as an athlete. This is the time for you to build in a technical and tactical reminder that boils down the complexity of your performance into a short phrase or even a single word.

Getting Centered *

1. Start by putting your body into an “athletic” ready position. Make sure your weight is evenly distributed on both feet and you’re not leaning too far forward or backward. Bend your knees slightly and imagine that you may have to move in any direction at a moment’s notice. Your feet should be approximately shoulder-width apart. You’ll be most comfortable with one foot slightly in front of the other. You can confirm that you’re in this ready position by simply bouncing up and down a few times in place to get a feel for your weight distribution, as a boxer might do before starting to spar.
2. Take a deep breath from your abdomen and feel your neck and shoulder muscles relax as you inhale.
3. Exhale slowly and completely and, as you do so, turn your focus to your center of gravity. Feel your center getting lower as your shoulders relax, as the breath finishes. You may feel your feet pressing more firmly against the ground. You may notice your back and shoulders unknitting and releasing tension.

This is the key to blocking out distracting thoughts. We know that

if your focus is on your center of gravity, it can’t be anywhere else — not on your opponents, not on that little voice inside your head, not on bad memories of past performances.

4. As you finish your centering breath, think about the single-most important component to your success as an athlete. It might be maintaining a constant pace. It might be to fly out of the starting blocks the instant you hear the gun go off. This is the time for you to build in a technical and tactical reminder that boils down the complexity of your performance into a short phrase or even a single word.

The reminder is intended to make your focus a specific one that takes you out of your head and back to something that is simple, basic, and helpful for bringing you back “into the moment”. At the end of a centering exercise, you should feel relaxed, alert, and focused on something that will enhance your performance, rather than detract from it.

Centering on the Run

After reading these instructions for centering, you may be thinking, “sounds great, but how can I do this

head on, or run away from it as fast as possible. Mentally, your first reaction to stress is to focus on your dominant attentional style. This is the attentional channel (Awareness, Analysis, Problem-Solving, or Action) that you prefer over the others. [For a detailed description of dominant attentional style, see the Jan./Feb. 2002 (Vol. 11, No. 1) issue of *Peak Running Performance* or contact Winning Mind.] As pressure continues to increase, your level of confidence decreases and you eventually switch to a narrow and internal focus of attention. This typically involves negative or self-doubting thoughts and it sets the stage for the occurrence of “choking”. Choking happens when an athlete fails to perform in a high-pressure situation. It results in a lapse in concentration and an error in performance.

Remember that these are your body’s natural responses to stress and pressure. They are not symptoms that are likely to stop occurring, no matter how much you want them to go away. Your tolerance for pressure

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may change so the frequency of your physical and mental reactions may change. There nevertheless will always be circumstances that will elicit shortness of breath, increased heart rate, and inadvertent mental channel changing. The key to performing at your best is learning how to deal with these reactions and getting back to your center as quickly as possible.

in the middle of a run when I'm feeling the most pressure and my mind is really starting to wander?" It's true that you can't take time in the middle of a race to stop and get into an athletic posture that will allow you to refocus. But there is a way you can use centering while you're moving fast. Centering on the run can help reduce your running related injuries, too.

Remember that the benefits to using centering are to control stress and muscle tension, block out negative or distracting thoughts, and refocus attention on task-relevant cues. Your approach should be twofold: practice centering to strengthen your mastery of this skill by itself and then integrate the techniques with your running style. Like any other skill, centering is something you must practice. Don't make the mistake of trying it a few times and thinking that it can be used with ease when you need it most. While the mechanics of centering are simple, practice is needed to experiment with putting the most effective reminder into your routine and building a bond with that cue that has significance. With some commitment to this practice,

When you start to feel like your breathing is becoming irregular, your mind is racing with distracting thoughts, or your body is in pain, take a deep, centering breath without breaking stride.

you can make strong, meaningful connections that trigger feelings of confidence and a clear mind in just one or two breaths. Here's how it works . . .

When you start to feel like your breathing is becoming irregular,

your mind is racing with distracting thoughts, or your body is in pain, take a deep centering breath without breaking stride. Turn your attention to your center of gravity and notice as you exhale how your muscles respond to this breath. As you complete the breath, make your focus narrow and external, to the place in your mind that we call the "Action" channel. Focus on taking your next step and look down so you can see your foot stride forward and contact the ground. Listen to the sound it makes. At this point, your body should be more relaxed and your mind should be returning to center. Continue the centering process, switching your focus from your center of gravity to a narrow field of vision that includes only the ground in front of your feet.

This process is helpful in preventing injuries caused by bracing. Have you ever left the office at the end of a long day, and noticed sharp pains in your neck and shoulders? Why are your muscles sore? Were you lifting heavy boxes above your head all day? Lifting heavy objects not included, you're experiencing a physical reaction to stress that causes your muscles to tense up and fatigue. Your body "braces" when it anticipates "bad things" happening.

You do the same thing when you start to feel stress on a run. You expend enough energy out there as it is, but when you anticipate danger in the form of competitors passing you, maintaining your expected pace, or facing any number of other obstacles, your body tenses up and works against itself. Some people feel this tension in their backs, others their legs. I personally get pains in my right shoulder when I'm feeling really tense on a run. By taking a series of centering breaths once in a while, you can lower muscle tension in specific muscle groups and reduce your chances of hurting yourself while trying to move against your braced muscles.

Back to Center

Centering is a simple breathing technique you can use to control stress and muscle tension, block out negative or distracting thoughts, and refocus attention on task-relevant cues. It's a skill like any other that must be learned and practiced, and you can benefit physically and mentally from using it at the right times. By incorporating centering into your training, you can turn a simple exercise into a powerful resource that will improve your performance and your satisfaction. ■

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* **Editor's Note:** Instructions for centering reference the instructional steps outlined in the Athlete's Mental Edge (AME) program report, which was designed by Robert Nideffer and Marc Sagal. To learn more about AME, visit www.takeame.com.

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