

Achieving Peak Performance Through Mental Wellness

By Faizan Imtiaz with contributions from Fit to Lead team members Ryan Stoness, Shane Lakins, and Jessica Roberts at Smith School of Business

The Author

Faizan Imtiaz specializes in mental performance and helping individuals maximize their productivity through psychological strategies and concepts. Faizan is currently pursuing his Doctorate in Psychology at Queen's University and has extensive experience in topics such as applied sport psychology, resilience, and mental conditioning. He has a passion for helping individuals apply small changes that give them a competitive advantage and help them reach their full potential.

Achieving peak performance relies not only on being physically healthy but also on an individual's mental wellness. By focusing on the mind-body link, extracting the positive and aiming ever higher, you can improve performance and productivity in both your work life and personal life.

Link Your Mind and Body

Research

It is common knowledge that our body language affects how people perceive us. When we're confident, for example, our body tends to expand and open up, while a lack of confidence has the opposite effect and we often constrict and become small. According to Tracey & Matsumoto (2008), this is universal and innate across humans and animals. But research has recently begun to highlight that our body language can also have a drastic effect on our own thinking and physiology.

Cuddy and colleagues (2012) at Harvard examined this idea in a study that saw one group of participants being asked to assume a high-confidence *power position*, while the other assumed a low-confidence *low-power position*. They were told to hold their assigned position for two minutes. The researchers then measured the participants' levels of testosterone, a hormone associated with confidence and success, and cortisol, a hormone associated with stress.

The high-power participants reported feeling significantly more powerful and in charge than their low-power counterparts, and their hormone levels reinforced their sentiments. The high-power participants experienced a 20 percent increase in testosterone and a 25 percent decrease in cortisol. The low-power participants, in contrast, experienced a 25 percent decrease in testosterone and a 15 percent increase in cortisol.

Relevance

The corporate world is very competitive and you need to take advantage of every opportunity that can give you an edge. The research on the link between our minds and our bodies appears to suggest that we can either use our body language to help us or harm us. If we are aware of this reality, we can take advantage of it and maximize our competitive advantage.

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*Trail-blazing
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Strategies

While it would be unreasonable to try to change everything about your body language, small changes can help to encourage your mind to internalize new behaviours until they become natural:

- Research clearly illustrates that positive body language helps our confidence and puts us in a positive mental frame, so make a conscious effort to show positive body language.
- Smile! We all know that smiling is often a sign of happiness, but did you know that by simply mimicking a smile you can actually make yourself feel happier? A study conducted by Zajonc and colleagues (1989) found that participants' moods were heightened after repeatedly making vowel sounds in which their mouths replicated a smile - the letter 'E'.

Extract the Positive

William James, who taught the first North American course in psychology, said over a century ago: "The greatest weapon against stress is our *ability* to choose one thought over another." As such, we must focus on channeling our mental energy towards the positive instead of simply trying to avoid the negative.

Stress management is like being in a completely dark room and, all around you, there are positive, negative, and neutral words written on the walls. If you only have a flashlight, you'll only see what you put your light on. If you condition your mind to act like the flashlight and focus on the positive, the negative words have a significantly lower chance of affecting you (Barrett, Farrell, Ollendick & Dadds, 2006). By focusing on positive thinking, you are not only able to stay in a positive mind frame, but it also closes the window for negative thoughts to intrude.

Research by social psychologist Alison Ledgerwood shows that framing facts in positive and negative ways drastically changes how we perceive them. For example, telling people they have a 30 percent failure rate decreases their affect while giving them the exact same information in a positive frame, i.e. 70 percent success, increases affect. But something very interesting occurs when this information is followed up by the opposite information. People who have initially been exposed to a positive frame immediately become negative once they are exposed to negative stimuli. Individuals who are initially exposed to a negative frame, however, do not become more positive after being exposed to positive stimuli. That is, our minds seem to get "stuck" in the negative. Oftentimes, it can take four or five positive interactions to counter one negative interaction. Therefore, it is critical to remain patient and continuously make an effort to expose yourself to positive experiences in order to bounce back from adversity.

Relevance

Professions in which things are constantly fluctuating and one is required to frequently adapt to varying challenges can be high in stress. This is particularly true for the world of business. A study of 80 business

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professionals found that all of the subjects reported some level of stress in their day-to-day activities (Gadzella, Ginther, Tomcala & Bryant, 1991). Moreover, most of the professionals (68 of the 80) reported moderate to severe experiences with stress, with only 12 of the 80 reporting mild stress in the professional environment.

Strategies

There are a few strategies that you can employ to help extract the positive in potentially stressful situations:

View stress as adaptive: As humans, we are not very good at accurately interpreting our arousal and this can have major implications on our levels of stress. Stressful situations naturally evoke responses such as a high heart rate. This physical reaction is often perceived as nervousness or fear, but it does not necessarily have to be this way.

A study at Harvard (Jamieson, Nock, & Mendes, 2012) looked at teaching people that arousal can be adaptive and functional. They told participants about how the body's responses to stress have been evolved to help meet challenges and how they can aid your performance. For example, increased breathing helps bring more oxygen to your brain. They then had everyone participate in a stressful situation, such as an interview or doing math. Compared to control conditions, those who viewed arousal as adaptive experienced less stress and less extreme physiological responses, i.e. blood vessels did not constrict in spite of increased heart rate.

How you think about stress makes a difference. Simply working to change your perception of arousal and stress can have a profound impact on how much stress you actually experience.

Focus on what you can control: We only have a limited amount of mental energy. In order to be at your overall best, you must use your energy efficiently by focusing on the things that you can control and not waste time and energy on the things you cannot control.

Condition your mind: New thoughts and images stimulate new pathways in the brain, called dendritic growth. Over time, repeated thoughts make these connections stronger, more readily available and ultimately more impactful on actual behavior. The more you think and behave a certain way, the easier it becomes to naturally respond in that manner the next time.

Aim High

In 1954, Roger Bannister, and every other runner in the world, was trying to run a sub four-minute mile. No one could do it. Scientists even suggested it was physically impossible. This caused runners to have a negative expectation of their ability at the onset of their trials and, as such, they failed. Bannister expected to succeed and did just that. After he accomplished the feat, the expectations of other runners improved. Since then, numerous individuals have broken the four-minute mile.

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Whether or not you're consciously aware of it, what you expect from a situation will change the way you approach it

Whether or not you are consciously aware of it, what you expect from a certain situation will change the way you approach it. Results from a review of laboratory and field studies on the effects of goal setting on performance showed that in 90 percent of studies, specific and challenging goals led to higher performance than easy goals, "do your best" goals, or no goals. Goals affect performance by directing attention, mobilizing effort, increasing persistence, and motivating strategy development. Goal setting is most likely to improve task performance when the goals are specific and sufficiently challenging (Locke, 1981).

The idea that expectations lead to outcomes is supported by several studies:

- The placebo effect: Patients given sugar pills in place of actual pain relievers and told that the pills would significantly reduce their pain actually experienced noticeable reductions in pain (Brown, 1988).
- One-on-one competition: In arm wrestling competitions, objectively weaker individuals competing against objectively stronger individuals win 83 percent of the time when they are falsely told that they are actually stronger than the person they are competing against.
- Weight lifting: Individuals are often able to lift significantly more weight when they think it's lighter than it really is (Ness & Patton, 1979).

Relevance

If you are clear in outlining what is expected and have evidence to show something can be done, it will help push people beyond their own expectations as they rise to the occasion.

Strategies

Consider one or more of these strategies to build your mental fitness.

- Set clear expectations at work to help ensure employees are on the same page and everyone understands what is required of them.
- Allow and encourage employees to clarify any confusion with questions.
- Trust employees to do their jobs and don't micro manage, but be available if assistance is needed.
- Meet periodically throughout a project to check how things are going, adjusting expectations if necessary.
- Use an app or a notebook to record goals and make those goals SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely).
- Encourage both team goals and personal goals.
- Ensure goals are applicable to all facets of life: personal life, fitness and health, relationships, personal finance, and work.

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Every day and every second, you have a choice regarding the attitude you will embrace. You cannot change the past or the way other people act. You cannot change the fact that things will never go exactly how you plan and sometimes go completely in the opposite direction. All you can change is the way you respond.

The Fit to Lead Program at Smith School of Business provides strategies and insights on how to better manage energy, improve focus, and manage and utilize stress to help achieve healthy, balanced, and productive lifestyles. The Fit to Lead team provides services to the MBA and Executive Education programs at Smith School of Business and works with individual or group clients to develop custom solutions for their personal or organizational needs. For more information, contact Ryan Stoness, Manager of the Fit to Lead program at rstoness@queensu.ca.