

GOLD MINDS

MENTAL SKILLS 101

BY WAYNE GOLDSMITH AND HELEN MORRIS

Here are some “mental must-haves” for every swimmer.

Here’s a question for you:

Would you take a math exam without ever having gone to your math classes or without ever studying your text...and expect to do well?

Here’s another question for you:

Would you attempt to sing in front of a large audience without spending months learning how to sing or how to perform the song? Would you sing if you hadn’t taken the time to memorize the words to the song?

OK...one more question:

Would you go to a swim meet, expecting to do personal-best times and to win medals without training every day for months and months—i.e., working on your fitness, skills, technique and speed?

Did you answer “No” to all three ques-

tions? I sure hope so.

YOUR MIND IS WHAT MATTERS

Here’s a funny thing: swimmers will often go to swim meets, knowing that mental skills are important and knowing that mental skills such as relaxation, concentration, focus and mental toughness are critical to perform successfully, but they never actually practice them until race day!

- There is a time to practice mental skills: **all the time!**
- There is a day to practice mental skills: **every day!**
- There is a place to practice mental skills: **everywhere!**

Your mind is your greatest swimming

asset. Your mind—more than your muscles—will determine how successful you will be as a swimmer.

And the best of all is that because you use your mind every day...you can train it—*every day!*

MIND AND MUSCLES

Take a look at some of the mental skills most commonly used in swimming (see **Table 1**).

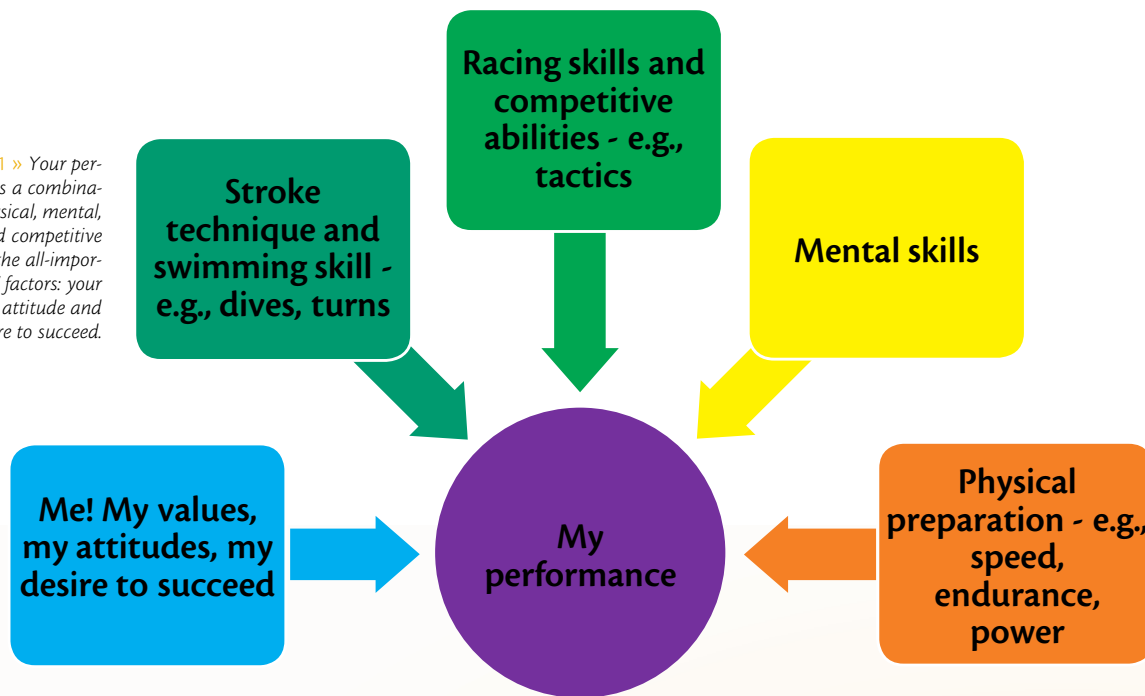
To develop these skills, you have to think differently.

Most people look at mental skills as something to do separately from the rest of their training program—like going to a lecture on motivation or a class about relaxation.

TABLE 1. THE EIGHT MENTAL “MUST-HAVES” FOR EVERY SWIMMER

MENTAL SKILL	WHAT DOES IT DO?	EXAMPLES OF HOW YOU CAN USE IT
Relaxation	Keeps you calm, composed and confident. Stops you from wasting energy and effort, worrying about things that don’t matter.	Stay relaxed and stop using too much energy when preparing for a race. Keep relaxed, rested and ready for the right moment. Swim your race in the pool and not in the ready room!
Imagery/Visualization	Improves your racing skills—by allowing you to “see it,” then do it.	When you visualize winning the tight finishes, your body is more likely to make sure it happens in the race!
Breath Control/Arousal Management	Helps with relaxation, self-control, nervousness and racing strategies. Gets you pumped!	When you are feeling too nervous and tense, push the pre-race nerves away with each out-breath. Breathe a little faster and shallower to get you ready to go when you are too relaxed!
Self-belief/Self-confidence	Helps you to be able to be your best, perform your best, act your best and accept your best.	You are more likely to be in control, composed and calm when you compete if you believe in yourself, your preparation and your values.
Environment Awareness/Focus (2 sides to the same coin!)	Allows you to acknowledge (without judging) people and things in your immediate environment. Gives you the ability to ignore (screen out) irrelevant things in your environment.	Be aware of what is going on in order to take advantage of it (e.g., nervous competitors, quiet places), BUT learn to block out the things that don’t matter... and concentrate on the task at hand.
Motivation/Attitude	Allows you to get the most out of every lap, every drill and every session by striving for excellence in all that you do.	Have a great attitude and show initiative (motivated behavior): get the best out of yourself EVERY DAY in all that you do. Inspire others with your own attitude, dedication and commitment.
Psyche-out Management	Allows you to manage the attempts of other competitors to influence your race.	Ignore the efforts of other swimmers trying to psyche you out in the ready room and marshalling area by focusing on your own needs, your own pre-race routine and your own race goals.
Pressure and Pain Control	Allows you to stay calm and in control when the going gets tough.	Focus on breathing rhythm and relaxation in the final 25 meters of your 100-meter events.

DIAGRAM 1 » Your performance is a combination of physical, mental, technical and competitive skills plus the all-important “ME” factors: your own values, attitude and your desire to succeed.



You might think, “I go to the gym to get strong, I go to the pool to train hard, and I go to a mental skills coach to be motivated.”

Wrong!

Rather, **peak performance comes from the integration of mental skills and physical abilities** (see **Diagram 1**): mind and body working together in harmony—“mind and muscles”—in everything you do. It’s called **MENTAL POWER TRAINING** (or **MPT**): using mental skills to enhance the impact of your physical training every day.

Think of it this way:

Your muscles have limits. They get tired...they run out of energy...they get fatigued.

However, *your mind has no limits*. It has boundless energy and a limitless ability to strive for excellence, to dream, to believe and to seek new challenges.

So, it makes sense to put your mind in charge of your muscles!

It’s like having a kind of muscle turbo booster or a secret, high-powered fuel additive. Believe it: **mind and muscles working together can achieve anything!**

Here’s an example: most swimmers think exclusively about *physical and technical things*—“body things”—when they push off for a repeat in training. Their thought process goes something like this: “I need to remember to streamline, to kick with power and rhythm underwater, to explode to the surface for my first stroke and keep my arm strokes long and strong.”

Now, let’s integrate some MPT:

“Before I push off, I will imagine myself

flowing through the water in a long, strong streamlined position (*imagery*). I will stay loose and relaxed, and not tighten up (*relaxation*). I will take long, deep, relaxed breaths (*breath control*). I will make sure every push-off is the same high-quality push-off for the whole session (*motivation/attitude*).

MENTAL POWER TRAINING EXAMPLES

Last 25 meters of a race:

Body thinking: “My arms hurt. My legs hurt. My lungs feel like they are going to burst!”

MPT thinking: “I will stay long and loose and smooth and relaxed (*breath control*). I will keep focused on my breathing—let the pain flow out when I breathe out, and when I breathe in, I am breathing in energy and power and light (*pressure and pain management*). I can do this—I know I can (*self-belief/self-confidence*).”

In training:

Body thinking: “OK, it’s a kick set. I will kick my legs fast and hard and keep pushing the speed every lap.”

MPT thinking: “My legs are like propellers—they move fast and never get tired (*visualization*). I will keep my arms and chest and back loose and without any tension (*relaxation*). I will challenge myself every lap to kick as close as I can to my personal-best swim time (*motivation/attitude management*). The more tired I get, the more I focus on breathing and relaxation (*breath control/pressure and pain management*).”

Remember this: **with my mind managing my muscles, my muscles can master**

magnificence! ♦

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SUMMARY

1. Mental skills are like all other swimming skills: they have to be practiced every day to be mastered.
2. Try MPT: integrate mental-skills training into all your other swimming training and preparation activities—from the first push-off of the morning to the last touch of the day. Think physical and mental: mind and body working together to enhance your swimming performance. The world’s best racing car is only as good as the mind of the person driving it!
3. Your coach has the skills, knowledge and experience to guide you through your physical and technical preparation, but you need to take responsibility for your own mental-skills development program. Remember: “If it is to be—it is up to me!”