

Humans are a complicated animal and athletes are doubly so. You have actively chosen to repeatedly put yourselves in emotional and physical harm in a highly competitive environment with regular pain and suffering. This already singles you out from the general population.

We pay a lot of attention to the physical aspect of training the body, but not always as much with regards to training the brain. This is probably not ideal as most people's bodies are limited by their head.

You must train the brain as much as the body, our training naturally and inevitably does both, it's just most people only concentrate on the physical aspects and are not always aware they are also training the stuff between their ears. What we do in training affects how we react in race situations, also we react differently on different days and at different points in our lives (due to levels of maturity, experience and external factors which can influence this). So, we need to reinforce certain behaviours and try our best to remove others, positive thoughts and positive mindset aid improvements, rather than the negative thought processes which self-fulfil in a downward spiral. If you are enjoying your sport, you'll probably be enjoying training, pushing yourself and enjoying the rewards.

If you think you are going to do badly, you are correct!

Anxiety ("nerves") is a very similar physical and emotional response to excitement – think about queuing for a roller coaster – you know you are going to be scared but you can't wait to get on! The brain is getting the body ready for what comes next, it's up to you how you choose to receive it, excited about what could happen, petrified by what could happen. Racing and nerves are the same, you choose how to react.

There can be a number of factors that affect how we perform and how we judge that performance. We must try to separate doing well (or doing your best) from the limited criteria of winning. Winning is seen as our obvious goal but isn't always the ultimate achievement.

Competing in an event beyond your ability and doing well could be a far greater achievement than winning a race against inferior competitors.

If you are always winning, how are you going to cope with losing or even the possibility of losing? However, being in a group where there is no chance of winning does this mean you'll never get the winning mentality? Do you get used to and accept never winning? There must be a mixture of scenarios to fully train the brain.

Practice makes permanent (not perfect).

Practice giving up in training (which effectively is what you do when you find an excuse or reason to stop) will only make it easier to repeat in a race.

Boat & Equipment failures do happen, and people do get injured or get a cold, but if this only ever happens in pressured situations or where you think you are underperforming, are you fooling yourself? Injuries that stop you in a race usually don't disappear the next day. Your rudder/seat/footrest/paddle joiner doesn't fix itself by going on the roof home!

Are you searching for excuses before you start? "I've had a cold, I've been away from training, they're older/bigger/stronger/faster than me". This is a type of mental behaviour we want to move away from.

Be honest and critical about your performance, not you as a person. If you weren't good enough on the day, against what criteria are you measuring that? Were you ever going to be good enough? Are you being realistic? Are you too young, too slow, not ready yet? Who said you weren't good enough? Was it you, your coach, your peers, or the magical "them"? Set realistic targets that stretch and challenge you, winning (coming first) might not be possible but this shouldn't stop you from performing at your maximum potential.

If you know you are not as strong in the head as you could or need to be, find ways to change your mindset. Sometimes this is just about growing up and levels of maturity or learning to stop focusing on the outcome (where did I come?) and move to a how did I do? Practice races where the outcome isn't as important but still matters. Spend time in your head controlling what you can control rather than being in the competitors' boats worrying about how they are doing.

Judge yourself on your performance not there's

Focusing on your performance/desired outcome rather than the result should enable you to deliver your best performance despite what is going on besides you, this would mean that you could do the same time if you were winning or two lengths down, it would mean not needing to push the start in training, it would mean you could go around the outside of bends when the group were on the inside or going up the middle when others are on the bank, or going head to head with someone without going to their wash.

Goal setting: How do you practice training the brain? You need to set goals, practice winning/doing well as well as "losing" struggling and dealing with adversity and being the slowest in a group. You should have an aim, these should be both short term and long term (I'm going to try to win three efforts tonight, I'm going to win the island race next week – I'm going to win the world championships one day), you need to aim towards something.

Competing in K2: Crew boats can for some paddlers remove the emotional stress that stops them performing in a K1, it can also allow others to shine (mixed K2s) where they would have no chance of winning on speed alone in their K1. Crew boats can allow you to do things not yet possible in your K1 and learn mental robustness (as long as it's not a crutch

for only ever doing crew boats). Not letting your partner down might help you when you come to race in your K1.

Enjoy yourself: What is your motivation? Find out what it is you enjoy and keep checking you are enjoying it, there are going to be days you hate but they should be easily outweighed by the good days, if they aren't you need to change something.

How to deal with pressure and get motivated?

Different people respond to different ways of motivating and at different times. This is about internal and external motivation and validation. What drives you? Does this change?

Pressure is not a bad thing (per se), in fact it's very important to expose athletes (yourself) to pressure, and our marathon system is very good at this. However, this needs to be done in a controlled and positive way. So, a strong, emotional responses to pressure (from the coaches as well as athlete) are not necessarily bad. If you didn't care, you wouldn't be there!! But overly negative responses from both should be avoided (*"I'm rubbish" – "you were rubbish today"*).

Paddlers who feel positively challenged are focused on what they can achieve, those paddlers that are threatened (by challenge) are focused on what might go wrong and the resulting criticism. *"I'm going to see how long I can stay with this group"* is a positively challenged focus, *"I'm never going to stay with them they're too fast"* is a threatened response.

Good or controlled pressure is an important part of a high-performance environment. A high challenge/low stress approach to pressure usually leads to greater achievement. These are the situations where *"failure"* is a learning moment and not the end of the world. You as an athlete will experience more failures than successes and in certain scenarios *"failure"* is the desired success, i.e. going until you can't go anymore! Here the ultimate success is to *"fail"*.

However, *"pressure"* comes in many forms:

Internal Pressure: from the athlete (you) with a desire or need to do well – this can be from personality traits, some good and desirable and some that would need managing (perfectionism can lead to outstanding technical performances but not always a happy athlete). Sometimes internal pressure can be for external validation too (that's one to be careful of, especially in the social media age). Are you competitive in other areas of your life? What drives you to hurt yourself in training? If it's to seek lots of external praise and well done, thumbs up or likes on social media, it isn't internal.

Internal Validation: *"I was good tonight"* these people don't need external recognition or validation, or the latest kit or branded clothing and usually aren't worried about what others think, other people's perception of them doesn't affect how they judge themselves.

External Pressure: Can come from “*other’s*” expectations of how you can or should do and a perceived hierarchy (think divisional system or sprint rankings – *I can’t race him he’s in div1, Mens A*), it can also come from unrealistic expectations that can’t be fulfilled which leads to negative pressure. “*I need to do this for them to select me*” is external, “*I want to do this to get selected*” is Internal.

External Validation: needing the praise of others, it’s nice to get but becomes an issue when it’s what you need or judge yourself by, if you judge your performance or even worse, your self-worth on external validation isn’t always a good thing. We all think we are immune to such behaviours but a common example “*I couldn’t wear that, what would everyone say?*” is in need of external validation.

Uncontrollable Pressure: Is when you worry about things that can’t be controlled – weather, other people’s performance, other people’s reaction/expectations or being judged. You have no influence on how others judge your performance so their opinion shouldn’t matter if you truly delivered your best performance. What more could you do?

Confidence is key to a good performance. Self-belief in your own ability to perform (at or above expectations) is vital in being able to perform under pressure. A high level of confidence, born from realistic expectations rather than delusional belief, is important for a positive challenge, i.e. “*I know I’m going to smash this*” = self-confidence. The opposite is “*I need to do this*” = stress or negative challenge. “*This is the day*” = self-confidence, “*I hope it goes well today*” = stress or negative challenge

Confidence comes from being previously successful at the given task, it’s hard to be truly confident doing something you’ve never done before!! Therefore, brain training is about building confidence through successful experiences which gradually gain in demand and difficulty.

Next is a feeling of control. People who experience a lack of control but are judged on the outcome are highly stressed and negatively challenged. Believing you have control or some influence over how you perform is important for a positive challenge.

Whereas believing you have **NO** control or influence over how you perform or how your performances are judged is certainly a negative experience. Going into pressure situations focused on factors that cannot be controlled, creates a threatened athlete, wherever possible this should be mitigated (being able to achieve that with selection etc. isn’t easy).

Finally, being focused on what **can be** achieved. Individuals who are positively challenged are focused on what can be achieved while those that are threatened are focused on what might go wrong. For example, “*just go ‘til you blow*” or “*live with it as long as you can*” is high challenge (positive) but removes the negative stress of the outcome being important and so you can focus solely on the challenge aspects.

Mental training:

Racing is hard both physically and mentally. You can be either giving pressure, receiving pressure and if mentally very strong ignoring everyone and following your set plan. Do not

expect to turn up to a regatta or marathon and be able to compete if you haven't trained your brain as well as your body to do so. You need to know your body and how it feels on the limit and how long you can hold it there (the pain), and what it feels like when you go over the edge and how you cope with that mentally. It's going to hurt! If you've never experienced this in training how do you expect to deal with it for the first time on the big day?

Regatta and racecourses by their very nature, can be wide open spaces and to those athletes used to being near a bank you can lose the sensation of speed. Training the brain means practicing being away from the group, on your own in training and not stopping until the very end even if you are winning and especially if you are down. You can do this in efforts around bends where you go around the outside and you only catch/win at the end, or you start a long way down on someone slower, thus building mental strength. The handicap system set out in the yearbook allows races that are very good for this.

Marathon races are dynamic constantly changing events. If you do the same thing in the same pattern in training how can you deal with different outcomes in a race? Try catching up, try being in the worst position.

Train the brain for the worst possible scenario and it won't become the worst possible scenario!

As an athlete you need to learn to relive (play back) the race (marathon or sprint), ask what went well, what went wrong and what would you do differently next time? You must learn to recall what was going on so that you learn to concentrate in the moment and be aware of what is going on around you and with yourself.

Just like all training it should hurt!! Learn to deal with it and **NEVER** think it's only you who is hurting. At some point in your training sessions you should go absolutely flat out (but **NOT** at the detriment to your technique) for the prescribed length of effort. This would mean you cannot physically get to the end of an effort over 35-40 seconds, or to the end of a thousand without your legs going wobbly or a 10k without feeling like you won't make the last 1000m. This is training the brain to understand what going as fast as possible actually means. You must train the brain for all scenarios i.e. the end of the race – the part of the race where the legs have turned to jelly and the arms to wood! You can't do this if you don't do the whole effort or wash hang constantly or do a big start and then slow down and a big finish, train like you need to race. The key is to get to a point where you are just on the edge of total shut down and keep on the right side of it. This, like all skills (both physical and mental) takes time and plenty of repetition and practice (and probable failures, remember these are positives when done in training or events that are for learning). Keep practising it's ok to get it wrong **if you learn**.

Lastly: This brain training carries through into all areas of your life. You'll become a more robust and confident individual. You'll know what it is to work hard, to be judged (both internally and externally). You'll know how to deal with success and failure in positive ways, not being swayed by praise or put down by criticism. You'll know that if you gave it your

best, that is all you could do and the outcome (however judged externally) was the best you could do. You currently get judged every week throughout the year (usually by the stopwatch) and you deal with that, this makes you pretty special in comparison to most of society and has lasting benefits in school, work and life.

It allows you the chance to compare yourself with the best in the club, the country and the world and know what you can achieve with hard work and dedication. So actively participate, question, think and don't just let it happen to you. Influence rather than react. Lead rather than follow and most importantly enjoy yourself.

