



THE **MIND game**

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COMBATING NERVES

In part two of his series on dealing with anxiety, our High-Performance Coach looks at further helpful techniques

Having discussed in the previous issue why we suffer nerves, I'll now outline some mental techniques to help alleviate them. In our next two issues, we'll look at physical and environmental tools you can use too. Some will work right away; others will take time and practice before you really feel the benefits.

Firstly, identify your controllables. You will only ever have 100% control over three things: *myself, my effort, and now.*

Focusing on anything else which we have less than 100% control of is a waste of mental energy and can become a distraction: the result of a match and its perceived importance, for example. No-one wants to lose, but focusing on the outcome rather than your processes can make you feel more anxious. You need to bring your mind and body into the present using mindfulness tools.

REFRAMING

Recognising when negative thoughts enter your mind, and doing it early, allows you to put an intervention in place to help deal with them. Try and replace them with positive ones especially linked to your strengths, your mantra and how you want to play the game.

Think about what happens to your body when you feel nervous: your heart rate goes up, you feel butterflies in your stomach and have sweaty palms. Studies have shown that these physical responses are exactly the same as when somebody is excited. So next time you have these sensations, **tell yourself that these are exactly the same feelings as excitement.** It's a great way to mentally reframe what is happening to your body and to use the sensations in a positive way.

When you are having negative thoughts, use this sentence: "I am having the thought that...". This is to 'invite' the thought in and

to accept it is there, but remember **it is only a thought.** This takes away its power over you. If you're catastrophising, say to the thought: "I recognise you are there, I am not responding now, but we will talk later."

VISUALISATION

As discussed in 2020 Issue 3, visualising real, vivid, positive aspects of your game using all five senses is recommended. Visualise every possible detail of your best performance. Whatever you can do to make the imagined experience feel real will aid in translating what you imagine into what you achieve.

Visualise yourself playing and controlling the ball exactly how you want it to happen. Don't focus on your opponent's ranking or the occasion. The ball is there to be hit well, no matter who you're playing or where you are. When we compete, we need to keep it boring and emotionless, as if your body is on fire but your mind is on ice. Keep a cool head and stick to your processes, which you have full control over.

THOUGHT STOPPING

When you have a negative thought about the upcoming match such as "I won't win" or "I don't feel my best," picture a **big red stop sign** in your mind's eye. Hold this image for a few seconds and allow it to fade, along with the thought attached to it. This can be used to block unwanted thoughts before they escalate and disrupt performance. It also keeps you focused on the task at hand. This tool should only be used when you need a quick and urgent intervention and if you cannot get outside of your own head and mind.

NOW

Studies have shown **now** to be a moment



Paul Coll conquers his pre-match nerves with mindfulness

in time that lasts between two to five seconds. In a squash match, we need to bring ourselves into the 'now' time and time again. If we find ourselves dwelling on the past ("that was a bad error" or "my opponent is cheating by picking up doubles") or forecasting to the future ("what a great result this will be" or "what will my parents say if I lose this match?") you are taking yourself away from **now** and heightening your chances of becoming anxious.

Being aware and catching your thoughts dwelling or forecasting is powerful. From there, you can bring yourself back into the here and now where your mind and body are in the same place at the same time. This is where practising mindfulness daily can be your superpower.

To help you stay in the moment, you can use the acronym WIN - **W**hat's Important **N**ext? Ask yourself this question before the next rally when your mind may be dwelling or forecasting. It cuts away all the unnecessary excess of what has happened in the past or what may happen in the future, returns you to **now** and prompts you to start the next rally in a positive and proactive way.

In 2022 Issue 2, part three of my Combating Nerves series will look at physical tools that will help alleviate anxiety before and during matches.

For more ways to improve your psychological skills for squash and life, download theSquashMind app

