

# THE MASSACHUSETTS LAWYER

The business and buzz of the bar

## Mental toughness is not just for athletes

By Pamela Enders



It started way before he made his way into the courtroom: the queasy stomach, the sweaty palms, the sense of dread, the dry mouth, the tight chest.

It was always like this for Carl, a bright, competent attorney who approached each courtroom appearance with fear and trepidation. He told me he was starting to hate his job. "It's occupying too much space in my head and it's spilling over into every area of my life."

Carl had graduated from a reputable law school near the top of his class. He knew the law well, worked hard and prepared thoroughly for his cases, but at the

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moment of being in the spotlight, he faltered. Carl lacked mental toughness.

Elite athletes know about mental toughness. Like Carl, an athlete has to be able to perform at an optimal level in high-visibility, high-stress situations. In the pressure-cooker world where athletes must perform, it is estimated that 50 to 90 percent of success is attributed to certain mental factors known collectively as mental toughness.

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These are:

- reboundability (the ability to mentally bounce back from setbacks and mistakes);
- ability to handle pressure and stay calm in the clutch;
- concentration (the ability to focus on what's important and block out everything else);
- confidence; and
- motivation.

Mental toughness training, whether for athletes, performing artists, business people or lawyers, is geared to capitalize on a person's strengths and to find ways to address and manage or minimize the liabilities around performance.

Carl was assiduous in preparing for his cases but he didn't know how to prepare himself mentally.

The first step was to determine what was going wrong for Carl. "I don't know what happens," he said, "but at a certain point I get anxious even thinking about the case and then it seems to go down hill from there. By the time I get to the courtroom, I'm a mess! I tend to stumble through my opening statement so that even the jury's looking at me like I'm an idiot."

Carl and I discovered that his internal dialogue, what he said to himself, was rife with negativity. He convinced himself that he would fail and he ended up looking and acting like a failure.

A basic tenet in performance psychology is: "What you think is reflected in what you do; you become what you think." We needed to change Carl's thinking and we needed to

change the way Carl saw himself.

Carl's negative internal dialogue (e.g., "I'm no good at this; the judge will never listen to me; I sound stupid.") was a big factor in sabotaging his performance. He was taught how to identify negative thinking and then how to either change it into something more realistically positive or to neutralize it so he could move forward and not get mired in negativity. Quieting the negative internal dialogue enabled Carl to reduce those distractions so he could more effectively deal with the task at hand.

The next step was to revise Carl's image of himself. We accomplished that via one of the most powerful techniques used in mental toughness training — mental imagery training. This is seeing oneself with the mind's eye in a particular situation. The key is to see oneself vividly and to add the kinesthetic aspect, i.e., to *feel* oneself in the performance situation as fully as possible.

The first thing we needed to do was find a cue word for Carl that would summon an image associated with positive feelings. He recalled that his father had told him that he thought Carl was a "real powerhouse" and that he would go far in the world. Carl's father had died when he was young and subsequent events erased those positive images. It seemed important for Carl to reconnect with himself as a powerhouse and so that was the cue word we used.

Once we had the cue word, we could get to work. Here's how it goes:

First, Carl used a deep breathing relaxation technique to ease himself into a pleasant relaxed state. Then, he was asked to see himself in the courtroom as he would like to be — strong, con-

fidant, focused and calm.

Once he had reached his ideal positive state, he was asked to say his cue word to himself to create an association between the cue word and the ideal state. He was asked to repeat this over and over to strengthen the association.

A court date with a particularly difficult judge was scheduled for the next week. Happily, Carl reported that, upon entering the courtroom, he said his cue word to himself, which resulted in the following transformation: His body posture changed; he stood taller and straighter and was able to look the judge in the eye, and with a strong, confident voice, talk directly to the judge who responded favorably to this young powerhouse lawyer.

The technique of mental rehearsal is as follows:

1. The first step is to choose a word or phrase that is associated with the feelings you want to experience in the performance situation. Make this your cue word or phrase.
2. Now find a quiet place where you can relax. Close your eyes, notice your breathing, and begin with a long, slow exhale. Repeat. Again. Focus on your out-breath, telling yourself that with each out-breath you are relaxing more and more.
3. Once relaxed, see and feel yourself in the actual upcoming situation performing the way you would like — strong, confident, focused and calm.
4. Once you reach your ideal state, say your cue word to yourself over and over to create an association between the cue word and the ideal state.
5. At the time of the actual event, say your cue word or phrase to yourself to reconnect to your ideal positive state.