

Survival Guide

Master Stress with Mental Toughness

When a psychologist starts to wonder about her own performance as a singer, she does what she's trained to do - nose around in the literature until she finds out the whats, whys, and wherefores. In the case of Pamela Enders, it was sports literature that helped her move from performance anxiety to relaxation and enjoyment. She now applies what she has learned from this literature to performance in both corporate and performance situations through workshops and individual and group coaching.

Enders offers a workshop on "Developing Mental Toughness: How to Perform Masterfully and Project Confidence in High Stress Situations," on Thursday, July 7, at 9 a.m. for the Institute for Continuing Legal Education, New Jersey Law Center, New Brunswick. Cost: \$189. To register, call 732-214-8500.

Mental toughness is a term that emerged from research in sports psychology. Enders defines it as "the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances. It is the constellation of psychological and cognitive qualities that determine one's competitive edge." She cites five mental factors necessary for excellent performance:

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. Trial lawyers in the middle of a trial, for example, must concentrate on cross-examinations no matter what else is happening in the courtroom.

Confidence.

Motivation.

Enders has adapted a test from sports literature that assesses how well a person is functioning in each of these areas. The purpose of the test, which is available on her website (www.pamelaenders.com/test.html), is to illuminate strengths and vulnerabilities, because, she says, "the good news about mental toughness is that these skills can be trained and taught."

Enders' work is based on psychological theories, one of which describes concentration, suggesting that it can be focused either internally or externally, and either broadly, looking at the big picture, or narrowly, focusing on one thing. This theory implies four types of concentration:

Broad, external. Used to quickly read and react to the world around you. When lawyers walk into a courtroom, they use this to size up the jury, see who the witnesses are, and see what the other side looks like. Basketball players would use this to decide where to move the ball on the court.

Broad, internal. "Lawyers and CEOs tend to favor this one," says Enders. "It is used for big picture work." It involves taking information from the environment and using it to analyze issues, solve problems, and plan strategy for the future.

Narrow, internal. Used to rehearse an activity or a speech. It focuses on only one thing and involves systematically repeating the activity internally.

Narrow, external. Used to hit a ball, shoot a basket, or sink a put. When balls are coming to batters, they must ignore the fans screaming, the other team, and focus only on the ball.

“It is important to know what type of concentration is required for each kind of action,” says Enders, “and to become aware of what might interfere with concentration.” She cites two major types of distraction: external, which includes things like noise, people talking, or the weather; and internal, which involves things like not feeling well physically or engaging in internal dialogue.

Enders tries to help people become aware of negative thinking that can undermine their performance. “It is often so automatic that are people not aware of it,” she says. “They are just aware of the consequences - anxiety and depression.” A batter in a dugout who is up next with bases loaded and a tie score in the 9th inning may be thinking, quite unconsciously: How can I possibly get a hit? I struck out last inning. But if the batter is aware of these negative thoughts, he can change them into something positive, like thinking about his RBIs and hits during the preceding week.”

“Changing this way of negative thinking,” says Enders, “you must be able to dispute and debate your negative thoughts. The first step is to evaluate the beliefs expressed in these negative thoughts. Enders describes the thought process you might use to debate these beliefs:

Evaluate the evidence to see if the belief is true. Although the baseball player did not do too well in this game, in the previous three games he had RBIs and a home run, and he has a contract for \$X million. “Most of time you will have reality on your side,” says Enders.

Think about alternative explanations for the belief. “Many events have many causes,” she says. The baseball player may not be doing well today because of a pulled muscle, a bad cold, fatigue, or simply because he didn’t practice enough the previous day.

Analyze the implications of the belief. For the player it is that he will be lousy today in the batter’s box. If the negative belief is correct, which it sometimes is, then the person must decide what steps to take to address the problem and to develop an action plan. The batter might need to work closely with the coach, get feedback, and find out what is wrong so he can improve.

“Too often,” says Enders, “people give up.” She advises developing an objective, dispassionate perspective - as if someone else has the problem.

Assess the usefulness of the belief. If it is destructive, then Enders advises using distraction and setting aside those feelings and beliefs for the moment.

Enders majored in psychology at the University of Wisconsin and earned her Ph.D. from Temple University in 1982. But it was only a few years ago that she became interested in the psychology of performance. When she was young, she had been a singer, but set that career aside to study for her doctorate. A few years ago she started doing some cabaret singing again. “I always wanted to get back to it,” she says, and she finally did it “as a resolution to a midlife crisis.”

She found she would get anxious days before a performance and became interested in the psychological factors at work. “I did research and discovered the world of sports psychology,” she says. “I applied the techniques to my own performing with great results - I have more fun on stage, think less about any mistake I might make, and connect more to the audience.”

One of her theoretical foundations for the way she looks at performance is the “inner game approach,” derived from the “Inner Game of Tennis” by Tim Gallway. “The ‘inner game’ approach is to reduce interference at the same time that your potential is being trained,” she says, “so that your actual performance comes closer to your true potential.”

The first step is to look at what’s interfering with your performance. One factor may be negative thinking; a second is anxiety. To manage somatic or bodily anxiety like queasy stomach, butterflies, shaky hands, or running out of breath when talking (all of this is usually called stage fright), relaxation techniques are helpful.

A cognitive approach to anxiety uses visualization to mentally rehearse a performance before the fact; research has shown this makes a big difference in actual performance. A baseball player who has an upcoming game would close his eyes and, with his mind’s eye, see himself playing the game. He would both see himself at bat and try to experience it in the body - how his body will feel, how he will hold his body, how the bat will feel, what the ball will look like coming toward him, and how he will move his body with the bat when hitting ball. He does this over and over, says Enders, “creating a mental blueprint.”

“When we rehearse mentally, we can do it perfectly,” she says. “The more we do it perfectly, the more we are creating neural pathways so that when we are in the actual situation, it will feel familiar and we will be able to perform with ease.”

Enders uses this approach on herself and teaches it in her coaching business in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “It affected the way I rehearse and practice,” she says, explaining that when rehearsing she gets into a relaxed state and only when she is really calm and focused does she begin. If she finds herself getting distracted, she stops and gets back into the relaxed state. On stage she uses a keyword to bring on the same feelings, allowing her to enjoy herself and “be as creatively expressive as I want to be.”

Then, she says, it dawned on her that the principles of performance psychology could be applied widely. “I realized that so many people’s lives are hampered because they are afraid to put themselves into the spotlight.” She started offering workshops locally to performance artists and business people, and from there it blossomed. “I have integrated my two lives, psychology and performance to become a performance coach,” she says. “I have the tools to teach people to overcome fears and move forward with their lives.”

- Michele Alperin

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