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Getting Un-Stuck

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[by Dr. Randy Borum]

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* Getting Unstuck

In your quest to achieve, you've probably hit a sticking point at some time or another. You'll often find that once you attain a certain level of performance with respect to speed, power, strength or timing, it becomes nearly impossible to do better. The key to taking your skills to the next level is learning how to get yourself unstuck.

As a human being, you have biomechanical and physiological limits, but most of the time, you're nowhere near them when you hit a personal barrier. The nudge you need

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to push past it is more likely to be mental. For recreational martial artists, just getting over that hump often provides the required momentum and confidence to make larger improvements. For elite practitioners, even very small improvements can mean the difference between winning and losing.

Getting stuck is a type of performance failure. You keep reaching for a goal or objective but repeatedly fall short. Under those circumstances, a common response is to keep trying and—as you become increasingly frustrated—conclude that it can't be done, that you can't do it or that it's not worth the effort to succeed. A quote commonly attributed to Albert Einstein shows the futility of such an approach: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result."

Maybe this means that a key to getting unstuck is doing something different instead of trying harder. One way to do

First, take some time to learn how to create vivid images in your head. The images should be as realistic as if you were actually doing the task. It helps to use all your senses and then think about the fine points of each one. For example, consider the pictures you see when you mentally create a scene, then think about the color, sharpness and brightness. Include the sounds, smells and tactile sensations. Don't forget internal sensations—how your muscles feel, how rapidly you're breathing, what your thoughts are—all of which is part of creating a mental experience.

Next, make a plan that will apply the imagery to your situation. You may find it helpful to set a goal that's slightly beyond your sticking point—in speed, endurance, number of repetitions or whatever happens to be limiting your performance. Then create vivid mental images—in real time—of yourself successfully performing at the

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something different is to refocus your effort on the mental aspects of your performance. The first task is to make the goal possible in your mind. That may seem overly simplistic, but it's vitally important. Athletic history is full of examples in which mental barriers constrained a particular sport for years.

One of the most famous illustrations of the power of the possible is the elusive four-minute-mile barrier in track. For years, the best runners in the world could never quite make it. Over and over they tried, many times coming within a second or two but always falling short. Finally, in 1954 Roger Bannister did it. Once that happened, several other four-minute milers followed—more than 15 of them in the first three years after Bannister's success.

You don't have to be a sports psychologist to understand that beliefs and mental models of the world profoundly affect performance and behavior. Making a task possible in your mind is the first step toward making it doable in practice.

By creating vivid, "first person" experiences in your head, you can build a history of personal success into your mental model. In previous columns, we've discussed mental imagery, but in case you missed it, here's how you can use it to get unstuck.

new level. Be sure to think positively and confidently before you begin. Expect that you'll succeed.

Mentally rehearse those scenarios repeatedly until everything flows naturally. As soon as you begin, vividness enters the picture, and you'll automatically feel confident of the outcome. Make a plan to get unstuck in an environment that closely mirrors the one from your mental images. Re-connect with the feeling of confidence that comes from having already done it mentally, then allow yourself to perform.

Once you get past the sticking point, you may find that subsequent improvements will follow. If not, go back to your imagery training to work through the next barrier. Remember to acknowledge your successes. Delight in what you've done and continue to redefine what's possible for you to accomplish. ✕

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