

Not Sure How to Do Mental Practice? Here's a 7-Point "How-To" Guide

Description

In last week's podcast episode, Danish trumpet player Kristian Steenstrup taught us an intriguing 4-step process for learning music more efficiently (you can check that out [here](#) if you missed it). A process which involved using both auditory imagery (imagining sounds in your head) as well as kinesthetic imagery (imagining the feel of physical movements without actually moving).

Mental imagery or visualization is a technique that has been used for decades by athletes, whether to build confidence, enhance performance, or allow them to put in additional practice repetitions without putting excessive wear and tear on their bodies.

And it's not just athletes who engage in visualization, of course. A student recently confessed that she used imagery to prepare for her secondary piano lessons so she could spend more of her practice time on her instrument, and less on the piano (perhaps not the most nobly-intentioned use of visualization, but still pretty clever, and not a bad way to use one's subway commute!).

And we've all mentally rehearsed awkward conversations in advance, whether it's telling your parents you just wrecked the car, negotiating your rent, or delivering the notorious "[It's not you, it's me](#)" line when having that difficult end-of-relationship conversation.

How do we know if we're doing it right?

But aside from knowing that we should probably visualize what we want as opposed to what we don't want, what exactly are we supposed to do? Should we be sitting down somewhere quiet? Or standing up with our instrument? Remaining completely still and motionless? Or is it ok to let our fingers and arms move? Seeing everything as if we were looking through our own eyes? Or as if we are watching ourselves from the audience?

It's not like anybody ever teaches us how to do mental practice or gives us a step-by-step guide...so at the end of the day, what are we supposed to be doing when we do mental practice? And how do we know if we are doing it right?

Lucky for us, two British researchers ([Holmes & Collins, 2007](#)) put together a 7-point "how-to-do-visualization" checklist, drawing from research in sport psychology, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience. Kind of like a CliffsNotes guide to effective visualization.

Ready to check it out?

The PETTLEP approach

Called the PETTLEP model (you'll see why in a moment), the main idea is that the more closely we can get our visualization practice to resemble our physical practice, the more effective our efforts will be.

Here are their 7 guidelines for taking your visualization to the next level:

1. Physical

Perhaps the most important of the guidelines, the idea is to make your visualization experience as physically similar to playing as you can. Meaning, consider going beyond simply imagining the kinesthetic sensations you would experience when playing your instrument, but actually hold your instrument or wear the clothes you'll be wearing when you perform.

This doesn't mean that you have to wear a gown or tux every day for your imagery session. But when you get closer to a big performance or audition, it might not hurt to do some visualization while your audition/performance-day outfit. Maybe even get your heart rate up by doing imagery while jogging on a treadmill (or after your morning double espresso), or make your hands cold, and try to remember what your body feels like when you're feeling some nerves.

2. Environment

If you're using visualization to mentally practice a passage or solve a fingering issue, it may not matter so much what surroundings you imagine yourself playing in.

But if you're using visualization to build confidence and prepare for a big audition or performance, see if you can arrange to do some imagery in the same location where you'll be auditioning/performing.

If you aren't able to get into the hall ahead of time, even just to take a quick peek and walk around, that's ok. Nowadays, there's probably a picture or video online of the space you'll be performing in, which can help.

And if that fails, even walking into a similar hall or space, just to get a feel of the size, the stage under your feet, and the expanse of the seats in the audience can help provide a richer and more vivid image for you to work off of.

3. Task

We all think about different things while performing; your imagery should reflect this too. Do you focus on your fingers? On the quality of sound? On phrasing? What toppings you're going to put on your celebratory pizza? This will vary from person to person, and also across skill level too, with more experienced folks tending to be focused more on higher-level big-picture concepts than technical or

mechanical details.

Either way, think about what the optimal content of your thoughts should be in a performance, and add these to your visualization script.

4. Timing

Generally, it makes sense to do imagery in real-time. Not rushed, or slowed-down, but with the same exact rhythm and timing as the actual physical execution of every shift, bow change, and exhale. Of course, if you're slowing things down to troubleshoot a passage, just like you would when practicing physically, it can make sense to do this in your mental practice too.

5. Learning

As you continue to learn and grow, so too will (or should, anyway) the content of your imagery. Why's that? Well, as we become increasingly skilled musicians, the level of detail and awareness we have about our playing continually expands.

Think about all the things you know now that you didn't a year ago, never mind 5 or 10 years ago. There was a time, for instance, when simply getting the notes was enough. Then it was getting the notes with good sound. And also in tune. With good rhythm and pacing. With inflection. And so on. Once you get the basics down, your focus turns to increasingly subtle details and refinements, all of which have to be continually added to your imagery script as well.

6. Emotion

Most of us don't perform in a relaxed, totally chilled-out state. So visualizing yourself performing in the biggest audition of your life, supremely calm and relaxed, doesn't prepare you particularly well for the reality that you'll ultimately experience.

What emotions will you be experiencing at the audition? Will you be nervous? Excited? Be sure to add those to your script!

7. Perspective

There are two perspectives or points of view we can use to "see" ourselves in action. An internal perspective is where you experience yourself playing as if you are looking through your own eyes. An external perspective is where you see yourself playing as if you were sitting in the audience, looking at yourself through another person's eyes.

Internal seems to be more effective, as it's a closer approximation to what we experience when we're playing for real, but sometimes an external perspective can be helpful too. For instance, if you're trying to rehearse your walk on stage, or figure out how to refine the movements of a skill that uses more of your

entire body.

And, some people just have a natural preference for one or the other. That seems to be ok too.

It's not all or nothing

Whew! That might seem like an awful lot to think about at first. But don't worry. If you're new to visualization (or even if you've been doing it for years), take it in small steps. Just focus on one area first, and as that begins to feel more natural, begin incorporating other elements as you become increasingly comfortable with the process.

You don't have to incorporate every single one of these elements to experience the benefits of mental rehearsal. Think of the PETTLEP model as a roadmap for effective visualization. A set of guidelines that can help you more closely approximate the experience of physical practice, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of your efforts. And Kristian's 4-step process too. =)

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References

Holmes, P. S., & Collins, D. J. (2001). The PETTLEP Approach to Motor Imagery: A Functional Equivalence Model for Sport Psychologists. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 13 (1), 60–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200109339004>

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