

Struggling with Practice Apathy? You Might Be Neglecting “Psychological Rest”

Description

If BuzzFeed is any sort of approximation of the world at large, it would seem that a lot of folks are spending their quarantines trying to level up their cooking/baking game or DIY skills in some way or another.

Whether it's [making \(and eating\) boiled eggs](#), [cutting a little cutout in the door for the cat](#), or [grooming the dog](#), there are a lot of funny examples of people's attempts to develop some new skills.

Of course, there has also been an understandable desire to level up in areas of our lives that are a little more important to us as well.

By finally working through that stack of rep on our shelf that we've never quite had the time for. Or simply practicing more and better. Which are meaningful and worthwhile goals, of course. But I think there's a potential danger lurking here as well. Which is hinted at in this quote by Olympic marathoner Keith Brantly:

“Any idiot can train himself into the ground; the trick is working in training to get gradually stronger.”

I think we all recognize the importance of getting physical rest, so as to maximize recovery from long practice days, minimize our risk of injury, and avoid overtraining or burnout.

But I don't know that we put much of an emphasis on getting enough *psychological* rest.

I mean, we spend a lot of time thinking about how to *practice* more effectively, and how to *perform* more effectively, but who puts any time into strategizing ways to *rest* more effectively?

Yet we've all experienced the consequences of insufficient psychological recovery – whether it's that feeling of being fried after a long week of double rehearsals, practice, and performances, the “post-audition blues” following an intense couple months of audition prep, or feeling strangely tired and unmotivated at this particular moment in time despite getting enough sleep and feeling intense internal pressure to make the most of your time.

So...what is psychological rest exactly? And what specific things could we do to get more of it? (Spoiler alert: it's a lot more interesting than simply getting more sleep.)

Psychological rest

Believe it or not, the topic of psychological recovery from training and competition hasn't actually been studied very much. But a 2019 study ([Eccles and Kazmier](#)) of a top-5-ranked collegiate field hockey team gives us some clues as to what causes our inner Eeyore to dominate at times, and what we can do to keep our inner Tigger at the forefront instead.

What difference does it make?

The researchers were initially curious about what differences there might be when athletes were mentally rested compared to when they were mentally fatigued.

And the gist, is that mentally rested athletes reported feeling “fresh,” were more highly motivated to engage in their sport, willing to put in more effort, and enjoyed their sport more.

Meanwhile, mentally fatigued athletes described feeling “tired,” “looking forward to stopping,” and difficulty remembering why they bothered doing it in the first place.

Perhaps you've experienced these kinds of moments as well?

The challenge...

The difficulty, of course, is that while it's pretty easy to figure out how to get physical rest (just take a break from training!), it's not so clear what to do to get *mental* rest.

I mean, sure, sleep is one way. But during your waking hours, just because you're not at rehearsal, or have decided to take a day off from practicing doesn't mean that you're not still dwelling on what the conductor said, or ruminating on all of the things that sounded bad in yesterday's mock audition.

So what is one to do?

Well, the authors identified a few factors that tend to *increase* mental fatigue, as well as a few that seem to facilitate recovery.

A few things that increase mental fatigue (plus solutions)

Thing #1: Pressure to perform

The athletes' responses suggest that the pressure to perform at a high level in both practice and competition can be a major source of fatigue – both mentally and physically. As was evident through quotes like “you are exhausted after a tough session and you're also mentally tired because you're trying to concentrate.”

Solution: Schedule rest days

Coaches did their best to schedule in rest days during the season. Days when athletes could catch up on schoolwork, or take a break from having to perform or train.

I think the same thing makes perfectly good sense for musicians, and reminded me of something that violinist Donald Weilerstein has suggested to some students – taking 24 hours off from practicing each week.

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Thing #2: Always being “switched on”

During the season, the athletes spent most of their days either a) in practice or other sport-related activities (e.g. film study, working out, meetings), b) thinking in terms of optimizing sport performance even when away from training (e.g. preparing meals to eat healthily), and c) engaged in social activities that involve teammates and coaches (e.g. talking about hockey outside of practice).

Being constantly “switched on” like this can be draining! And not just because thinking about upcoming competitions can cause some anxiety, but because it can take a great deal of mental energy to constantly be thinking about your work and ways to improve.

Solution: Deliberately reduce the amount of time you spend thinking about music stuff (and reduce effortful thinking in general)

To “switch off” mentally, the athletes often engaged in “low-cognitive-demand activities” like watching TV or reading to get their minds off of hockey and training. They also made a point to get away from teammates, stay away from locations that were associated with training (like the gym), and even avoid looking at things that would remind them of hockey (like their hockey sticks).

This makes me think of the saying “work hard, play hard.” Rather than practicing in a semi-focused way and staying semi-switched on all day, perhaps it’s better to go all in and practice with 100% intensity for a few hours, and then make sure to devote a certain number of hours to being 100% switched off as well?

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Thing #3: Tedium

The athletes' days were quite packed and rigidly structured, with very little freedom to vary their activities, and very little change in their daily routine from one day to the next ("same place, same time, all the time, all week"). After a while, this rigid structure and lack of variation seemed to wear on them and reduce their motivation to engage in hockey-related activities.

Solution: Change up your schedule from time to time

There's certainly something to be said for having a routine. But it's a different story if the routine begins to feel stale, and you find yourself simply going through the motions.

If that's the case, change things up a bit – even in little ways. Because there's something really refreshing about doing something that you know you wouldn't ordinarily do on a normal day.

Like, maybe you've had the experience of heading towards the practice building, only to run into some friends who convince you to play frisbee out in the quad instead? Or spontaneously deciding to skip ear training to go eat lunch in the park with your significant other because you're feeling pretty burned out, and it's such a nice day out (not that I would know from experience, of course)?

Sometimes it's not even the thing that you do, but the sheer novelty of doing something outside of your normal routine that can be revitalizing.

Final takeaway

All in all, the research in this area seems to suggest that needing to get away from it all on occasion doesn't mean that you're lazy, lack commitment, or aren't serious enough. But on the contrary, taking the time to integrate periods of effective physical and mental rest into your daily and weekly routine may well be one of the keys to maintaining a schedule of consistently productive, fully engaged, and focused practice and performance.

Maybe it's a little like LL Cool J once said – "You've got to stay focused without being boring – because all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Skinny, but dull."

What are your go-to psychological rest strategies?

Our range of options for getting away or switching off may be a little more limited at the moment, but what are some activities or strategies that have helped you get psychological rest during quarantining? Please share below in the comments – and if your suggestions happen to be cooking or baking-related, could you share the recipe with us as well? I don't know about everyone else, but my kids have been sending some pretty strong hints lately suggesting that they're fed up with (ha! pun!) dad's regular rotation of meals... =)

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