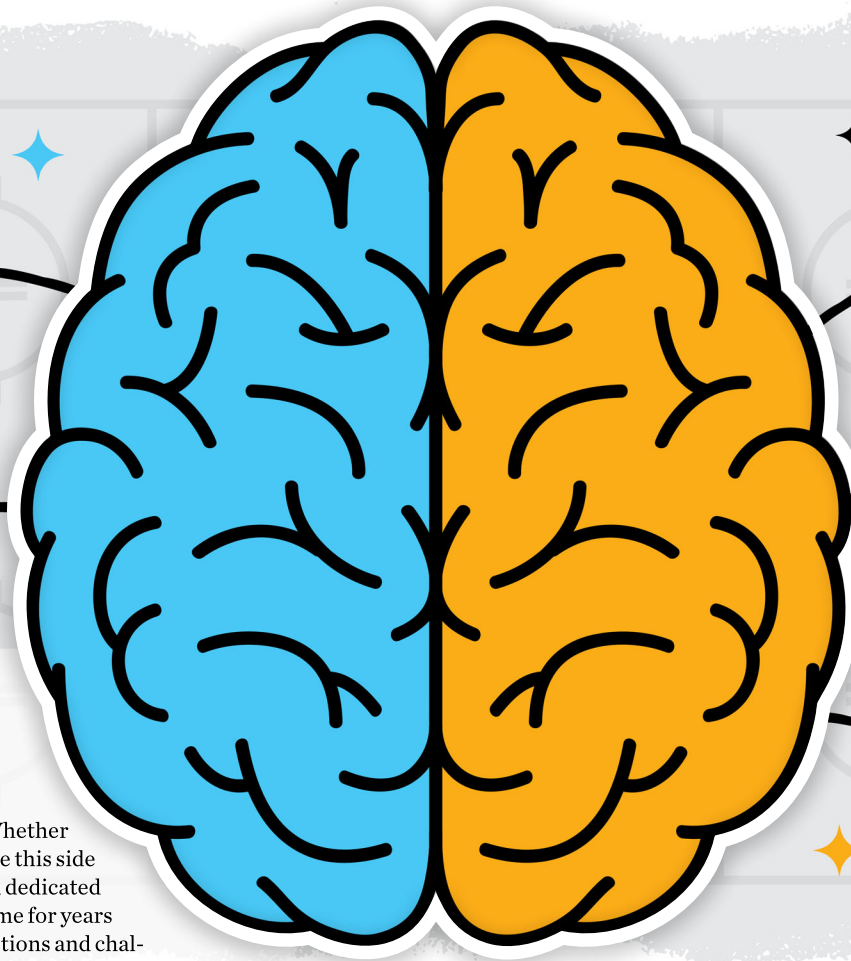


Your Sharpest Edge: Mental Skills For Success

→ By Julia Allain



SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IS A RELATIVELY NEW AND EVOLVING FIELD, and there is still a lot to be learned about how our brain impacts our performance. Whether we are just starting to explore this side of performance or have been dedicated to developing our mental game for years already, there are many questions and challenges that we all are facing on the ice and in our heads. Here are some of the most common questions I get from athletes, coaches, and parents when it comes to sharpening these skills and being our best when it counts the most.

Q: *What are the most important mental skills to start developing at a young age?*

A: Body language and self-talk are two of the most basic mental skills that we can begin working on at really young ages. These are things that can be easily role-modeled by parents and coaches in all situations, not just athletics. Kids are frequently imitating what they see and hear, and if they see the people they look



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up to dropping their heads down low, throwing up their hands in a fit of frustration, and verbally expressing negative thoughts, they too will begin implementing those habits.

Instead, demonstrate for them how to face their challenges with determination and grace. Be the positive voice for them before they can be it for themselves. Finally, in addition to these skills, normalizing failure is the most important thing we can do for our young athletes. Too often we try to protect our kids from disappointment, and as a result, we rob them of the valuable growing and learning experience.

rience that comes from falling down and getting back up again. While our intentions are good, the result is an unfortunate fear of failure that feeds into performance anxiety later in life, and an internalized belief that they can't or shouldn't have to persevere through things when they are difficult. If we give young athletes the time and space to make mistakes, they will learn that those mistakes are a regular part of the growth process and will gain experience and as a result confidence in their ability to navigate through them.

Q: What do I do when positive self-talk isn't working?

A: Self-talk is a critical part of our mental game, and mental skills coaches, like me, often preach the power of positivity when it comes to our internal dialogue.

However, blind optimism doesn't help us navigate the many challenges we will face as athletes. Sometimes things aren't great, and if we aren't willing to acknowledge the negatives at hand, we won't be able to adjust and overcome them. As a result, positive self-talk doesn't always work. Therefore, I encourage my athletes to have positive, but honest self-talk.

We can't expect you to tell yourself how great you are doing, if you aren't doing great. Lying to yourself won't work - you are too smart for that. Rather than focus purely on a positive approach, I instruct my athletes to make use of a simple three letter word: but. "I am not playing great right now but..." As long as you don't let your thoughts end on the negative, you are still able to move forward effectively. The word "but" allows you to shift your attention to your strengths, a solution, or the positives that exist, despite the presence of the challenge. "I am not playing great right now BUT, I know I can do better, there is still a lot of time left in the game, all I need to do is make a small adjustment."

Q: How do you prepare differently for a big game vs. normal pressure?

A: One of the biggest mistakes coaches and athletes make when it comes to performing on a big stage is changing their normal routine. Our confidence often grows with familiarity that stems from knowing our experience has prepared us and we are in a situation that we know how to handle. Routines provide us with that sense of familiarity even if we are in new locations or new experiences. They remind us that despite the changing circumstances and context, the most important thing is exactly the same: the game.

Preparing differently for a big game only alerts your attention to the fact that this game is somehow different, challenging your belief that you have the appropriate experience and skills necessary to achieve your goals. If you don't think your daily routine is enough to prepare you for a big game, rather than shifting your approach for the big moments, consider altering your preparation for every game to match the intensity of a big game and prepare yourself for those moments all year long. ★

Julia Allain is the founder of Allain Mental Performance LLC, where she has worked with numerous collegiate, professional, and internationally competitive athletes, including USA Hockey's National Team Development Program.

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