

The Courage to Win™ in Sport: Perform Your Best Under Pressure 30 Day Advanced HOME STUDY Program with Lisa Lane Brown

Lesson 3 The Comeback Kid: How To Be Resilient In The Face Of Adversity, Challenges, And Setbacks

What is the Comeback Kid?

If you've been competing for any serious length of time, bad things have happened to you in competition. If you are like most athletes, what determines your performance is the *absence* of bad things happening to you on your 'big day'.

If you are fortunate enough to have a day when nothing bad happens to you, you will perform well and win. In the world of mental training, bad things that happen to you are known as "distractions" or "stressors" because they distract you from your "A" game—your best performance. *Every time these stressors show up, you tend to lose confidence and your performance suffers.* Your "demon stressor" is the one event or situation that causes you to lose your connection to your sport and affects you above all others.

Your 'Demon Stressor' Creates Learned Helplessness in You

The reason your 'demon stressor' affects your emotions and performance so much is because it creates learned helplessness in you. When this stressor shows up, you unconsciously conclude that your efforts will not make a difference - and because you have tried and failed in the past in this event, you tend to become passive.

Strategies for Resilience

There are three powerful strategies for being resilient to adversity, creating hope, and restoring your aggressiveness:

1. Man, Know Thyself
2. The Magic of Optimism
3. Tap Into Your Pride

1. Man, Know Thyself

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To effectively manage adversity, your very first job is to get to know your demon stressor.

In my very first session on mental training as an athlete 14 years ago (I was a competitive ringette player), a sport psychologist asked me to write down all the bad things that “blow my mind” in the game. The first thing on my list was: “Not scoring early.” That’s right. If I didn’t score a goal early on in the game, I would decide I was having a bad game, lose my confidence, stop trying to score, and play worse and worse.

This discovery came as a surprise to me.

I didn’t know this about myself, but I quickly found out that everyone on my team did, including my coaches. In fact, my coaches used to say on the bench, “That’s it...she hasn’t scored, so she’s finished now.”

This simple little exercise woke me up to my biggest weakness in performing. I decided to dedicate my entire first season of mental training to managing my reaction to this issue.

Mental Toughness Action Assignment 13

What Is Your “Demon Stressor?”

Now it’s your turn. Your very first job is to identify your stressors - those things that bother you most while performing. To do this, you begin by listing in the space below your top 7 distractions. Here are some examples athletes often cite:

- Getting a bad start
- Opponents are annoying
- Teammates are under-performing
- Losing a period or rally by a large margin
- Teammate, coach or parent says something negative to me
- Being given a role on the team I don’t like or want
- Not being able to read the competition properly
- Competing against a particular opponent
- Opponent is playing obvious “mind games”
- Having a bad warm-up
- Family member or friend is watching
- Conflict with a teammate prior to sport
- Being pre-occupied with life outside of sport, e.g., a problem at home
- Equipment or weather hassles
- Being late or given a schedule change
- Feeling sick or unusually tired

In the space below, list your top 7 distractions (things that trigger a loss of confidence): 3

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Now, put your distractions in the following order from *most bothersome* to *least bothersome*.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Now you know what your stressors are. Your “demon stressor” is the thing that has the most potential to cause you to lose confidence, choke, or under perform. It is the first thing on the list. This is very powerful exercise, because now you have the opportunity to transform your game by carefully working with your reaction to your “demon stressor.”

As an elite athlete, I’m sure you are well-acquainted with the process of reducing distractions for your team prior to major competitions. Jan Betker, Olympic curling champion, recalls that the months leading up to the Nagano Olympics were an exercise in preparing for distractions:

“The outside distractions of getting ready for Nagano were like nothing we’d ever experienced. Everything from team uniforms fitting properly, to the massive media interest, to arranging travel packages for family, to team finances from the COA, all became distractions that the team didn’t think they’d have to worry about. ‘Our practices were often spent in discussing how we would work through the Olympic preparation distractions...We’d spend half our time on the ice and cut it short to discuss [distractions].”¹³

While you may be a ‘veteran’ at preparing for external distractions, I believe the one of the most challenging mental training exercises will be your emotional preparation for the distractions you just recorded.

This season, I suggest you do major research--on yourself. Try each of 4 these strategies and determine which ones give you the best results when coping with distractions.

2. The Magic of Optimism

In fact, optimism should be the first strategy you employ when bad things happen to you in competition, because it is an extremely effective way to reverse learned helplessness - which is why you feel passive when these stressors show up.

According to 25 years of research on optimism by Martin Seligman, the leading authority in the field, we don't respond to life based on what happens to us. We respond to life according to what we *think* will happen to us.

In other words, we don't go to work because we get paid...we go to work because we *think* we'll get paid. This is no small distinction, because it means that our actions and emotions are heavily influenced by our thoughts and beliefs.

In other words, after one or two setbacks, we unconsciously decide we cannot get what we want. We become hopeless, ease up on our efforts, and fall into mild despair. We feel pessimistic and our motivation suffers. Next, we emotionally shut down against the feelings of despair, creating mild depression. This is learned helplessness.¹⁴

Finding Hope Using Optimism

The key to optimism is to convince yourself that *whatever setback you are facing in sport is temporary*. Note: optimism is not positive thinking. It does not mean that you try to find an advantage or "silver lining" in every bad event. Sometimes this is just not possible. For example, let's imagine you are a tennis player and your opponent is doing an excellent job of moving you around the court and exhausting you. *Positive thinking* would be saying to yourself, "I'm so glad this is happening because even though I'm losing, I'm getting an excellent work out."

Optimism is finding a legitimate reason to believe that the situation is **temporary**. For example, you might say to yourself, "If I serve and volley, I can stop him from moving me around on the baseline—and end points more quickly. This should help me rest."

When you can find a way to believe the setback you are facing is **temporary**, you create hope for yourself. And hope is what champions are made of.

To begin, write down the pessimistic thoughts each distraction triggers in you in the left hand column. Then, in the right hand column, write down why the situation is only temporary.

I have completed the first distraction for you as a sample (I continue to use tennis as the sample sport). Note that the optimistic response is not necessarily positive; *it merely suggests that the stressor or distraction is temporary*. Please write out an optimistic thought for every major distraction you have.

Sample Chart

Situation	Pessimistic Thoughts	Optimistic Thoughts
You miss your first two shots of a game.	"I'm playing terribly. I'm going to lose if I keep this up."	"Yes, I played two bad shots, but that was because I was nervous and forgot to watch the ball. Now I've gotten the nerves out. My strategy for beating him is sound; if I stick to my game plan and watch the ball, I have an excellent chance at turning my shots around."

Your Chart:

Situation	Pessimistic Thoughts	Optimistic Thoughts

Of course, now that you've completed this exercise on paper, your job is to practice invoking optimism during your event. By writing out your optimistic reaction, you have planned a mental coping strategy for your personal stressors. Remember that in the heat of competition, optimism doesn't necessarily wipe out your bad feelings about the stressor. What it does is create hope that your stressor is temporary, allowing you to re-focus and stay aggressive so you can defeat the stressor. 6

3. The 'Tap Into Your Pride' Strategy: Channel Fear and Frustration

Sometimes when you are faced with upsetting distractions, it seems impossible to be optimistic. In fact, the more you try to re-focus, the worse you feel. In these moments, I suggest you *channel* your negative energy into your performance. Channelling means using your feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment to get back to your RIGHT FOCUS and perform better.

Have you ever gotten angry in a competition and performed better as a result?

Mental Toughness Action Assignment 15

Describe the last time you were performing poorly, but tapped into your personal pride and turned things around. (E.g., you got angry in the 'good' way and performed better).

The 'Tap Into Your Pride' strategy is kind of like the time you just described. It's your tool for tapping into "good" anger...the kind of anger that energizes and focuses you. 'Tap Into Your Pride' lessens your frustration because you are not trying to manipulate or change your feelings in any way. You are *channelling* them instead.

Your anger in sport stems from the fact that you like yourself and know you can do better. When you channel your anger into getting back your RIGHT FOCUS, you turn it back into personal pride—which you can use constructively. Without using the 'Tap Into Your Pride' strategy, you can suppress your negativity inside you, making you fearful and passive in competition. There are three simple steps to Tap Into Your Pride.

- Step One: Express your anger and self-criticism
- Step Two: Ask yourself for what you want
- Step Three: Express positive support for yourself¹⁵

Step One: Express your anger and self-criticism

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Verbalize in your head your anger and self-criticism in a specific situation.

Example: John becomes self-critical when he plays passively in badminton.

Guideline

1. Use “you” statements, not “I” statements. For example, do not say, “I’m a total loser for playing defensively.” Instead, John could say, “John, you’re a total loser when you don’t ‘go for’ points and sit back. You look like a complete amateur when you do that!”

Here is an example for John.

Example:

“John, you’re playing like a complete idiot! It’s as though you’ve never hit an overhead smash in your life! You make me so furious when you completely under-perform!”

Step Two: Ask Yourself for What You Want

Ask yourself for what you want.

Example:

“I want you to calm down and stop trying to win every point immediately with a smash! I want you to move him around and only smash when it’s appropriate! I want you to play aggressive and smart at the same time. I want you to watch and determine what strategy he’s using!”

Step Three: Express positive support for yourself.

Be your own self-coach here by expressing how you really feel about yourself in the positive.

Example:

“John, you have so much talent! You have incredible touch and instinct for how to set up and end a point. You are a truly gifted athlete and I know you can take control of this match.”

Mental Toughness Action Assignment 16

Write out the ‘Tap Into Your Pride’ strategy in detail and try it over the course of the next week. If you are not training or competing this week, try it in a different part of life that may be frustrating you. What you will find is that you will become very skilled at channelling your negativity into your RIGHT FOCUS to quickly re-gain your composure. Your frustration will no longer trouble you, because you can *use it* to your advantage.

In addition to using the three strategies for resilience, one of the best ways to keep your confidence high in sport is to make sure that you re-bound *emotionally* when you lose or have a disappointing showing.

To keep your motivation and confidence high consistently, managing disappointment is essential. This is because every time you are devastated by a loss, your tendency will be to suppress the hurt of this experience because it is painful. By ‘suppress’, I mean that you will not want to face this hurt. You will simply try not to think about it.

Suppressing Disappointment and Fear Makes You “Choke”

The problem with suppressing disappointment, hurt, and fear is that it doesn’t go away...it accumulates in your unconscious mind and surfaces later as “choking.” When you choke, what’s happening is that all your suppressed fear of losing suddenly jumps out and grabs you during competition. Instead of staying in the unconscious mind (where you have locked it up), it spontaneously erupts in competition, paralyzing you.

The second problem with suppressing fear and disappointment is that suppressing feelings takes a lot of energy. The only way you can suppress such powerful feelings is to mute your entire feeling function - to mute all feeling a little. This leaves you de-motivated and less energized to training.

A Personal Example

Late in my athletic career, my team had the misfortune of having to play a powerhouse team...and we lost for four years straight.

In the fifth year, we entered the finals optimistically: “It’s going to be our year!” we proclaimed. But, our hopes were dashed when we lost to two games straight despite a valiant effort.

There was, however, an important wrinkle to this competition: if we won our next game--against a different team--we could still earn a birth into the National Championships.

We had exactly 45 minutes to re-group for this all-important game. It was at this moment that my body took over and instinctively prepared me for this next challenge. Upon entering our dressing room, all the wretched disappointment inside me over losing for four years came bursting forth. I sobbed bitterly, and couldn’t stop. Images of old losses flashed before my eyes, and I sobbed some more. At one point, I was crying so hard I went to the bathroom and put my head under the

dryer (I didn't want to traumatize the first year players, who had no idea that a mature adult could cry so whole-heartedly). 9

Three minutes before our next game, our goaltender (who knows me really well), calmly handed me my helmet. "You have three minutes," she announced.

I put my helmet on. Suddenly, I was completely focused, hopeful, and filled with energy. We won, and to this day, my team insists it was one of the best games of my career. The opposing coach even invited me to play at the National Championships as a special 'pick up' addition to his team.

As you can see from this example, the simplest and easiest way to prevent choking and de-motivation is to experience your disappointment and fear when you lose. This is the way to heal disappointment and fear and keep yourself in control - rather than letting your unconscious fears control you.

"I Just Want to Cry A Little"

A five-year-old named Lyndsay who taught me how to nurture myself through fear and disappointment.

At my summer ringette school many years ago, we tried to take her rollerblading with her group, but none of the rollerblades fit her. Her lip started to quiver when she realized she wouldn't be able to go.

About this time, her mother showed up with another baby in her arms. Her mother was clearly tired; when she saw her little girl crying, she became impatient. "Lyndsay, stop crying," she said in exasperation. Of course, Lyndsay's crying turned into hysterical sobs.

The mother lost her patience completely. "If you keep this up, I'm going to take you home and not bring you back tomorrow." The little girl sat down and paused. After a few moments, she looked up at her mother and said, "I just want to cry a little."

She was only five, but she got it. Sometimes, the crying IS the healing.

To re-cap: the way to heal your deepest hurts and fears is through self-acceptance on an *emotional* level, which means being willing to experience your disappointment directly. As you become skilled at healing disappointment, you will no longer fear choking, because you will not be suppressing the fear and pain of loss. Your unconscious mind will not be controlling you, because you've shed the light of consciousness on it.

In this Lesson 3, you've learned several ways to staying resilient in the face of adversity, distractions, and stressors. Your job now is to practice them in training and competition so you become very skilled at managing them well. Remember, mental training is completely unique to you - some strategies will work better than others. 10

Lesson 3 Summary

1. In the world of mental training, bad things that happen to you are known as “distractions” or “stressors” because they distract you from your “A” game—your best performance
2. The reason your ‘demon stressor’ affects your emotions and performance so much is because it creates learned helplessness in you.
3. Your “demon stressor” is the one event or situation that causes you to lose your connection to your sport and affects you above all others.
4. There are three powerful strategies for being resilient to adversity, creating hope, and restoring your aggressiveness: Man, Know Thyself, The Magic of Optimism, and Tap Into Your Pride.
5. When you know your stressors, including your demon stressors, you can plan exactly how you will react to them when they show up in competition.
6. Optimism is finding a legitimate reason to believe that the situation is temporary and finding hope, which is the stuff of champions.
7. ‘Tap Into Your Pride’ lessens your frustration because you are not trying to manipulate or change your feelings in any way. You are *channelling* your anger and frustration into finding your RIGHT FOCUS again.
8. A final way to keep your confidence high in sport is to nurture your heart through losses.
9. Most athletes suppress fear and disappointment after losing. The problem with suppressing disappointment, hurt, and fear is that it doesn't go away...it accumulates in your unconscious mind and surfaces later as “choking.”
10. The way to heal your deepest hurts and fears is through self-acceptance on an *emotional* level, which means being willing to experience your disappointment directly. Your unconscious mind will not be controlling you, because you've shed the light of consciousness on it.

Endnotes

¹³Scholz, *Gold on Ice*, 1999.

¹⁴Martin Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Free Press, 1990.

¹⁵DeAngelis, Barbara. *Are You The One For Me?* Random House, 1996.