

The Psychology Of Performing - Part 2

P/M Brett Tidswell, Principal of Piping, Australian Pipe Band College.

Introduction

It is often the case at a high level that very little separates performers. A psychological advantage can often make the difference between a mediocre effort and a top grade performance. When competing this can often be the difference between those in the prize list and those who miss out.

This second article covers more advanced techniques of visualization and suggestion to help instill the positive aspects required to get the best out of a performance, (at any level) and to remove any doubts or negativity which may prevent you from performing to your full potential. These techniques can also be used to help you to focus during a performance, and to alleviate external distractions or those created in your own mind.

The techniques to be discussed often take a lengthy period of time to work, so don't expect instant results. Before starting however, it is important that your objectives must be clearly established in your own mind.

Goal Setting

As with the best prepared system of any type of activity, (for example, technical or performance orientated practice) it is important to set a series of goals. It is best to put these on paper, check them off as they are achieved, and modify them as you progress. These can be defined as short, medium or long term goals, or more specifically as Paul Meyer states in "Attitude is Everything", **S.M.A.R.T.** goals.

Specific - A specific goal has a much greater chance of being accomplished than a general goal. To set a specific goal you must answer the six "W" questions:

- *Who: Who is involved? (me, the judges and the audience).
- *What: What do I want to accomplish? (play in the next solo competition).
- *Where: Identify a location (do not only identify the location, but picture it in your mind).
- *When: Establish a time frame (plan steps to be well prepared before the event).
- *Which: Identify requirements and constraints (how many tunes, what tunes, travel details, expenses etc.).
- *Why: Specific reasons, purpose or benefits of accomplishing the goal (sense of accomplishment).

For example: A general goal would be, "Improve your technique". A specific goal would be, "play exercises before each practice session".

Measurable - Establish concrete criteria for measuring progress toward the attainment of each goal you set. When you measure your progress, you stay on track, reach your target dates, and experience the exhilaration of achievement that spurs you on to the continued effort required to reach your final goal.

To determine if your goal is measurable, ask questions such as.....How much? How many? How will I know when it is accomplished?

Attainable - When you identify the goals that are most important to you, it helps you to figure out ways to achieve them. You develop the attitudes, abilities, and skills needed to reach them. You begin seeing previously overlooked opportunities to bring yourself closer to the achievement of your goals.

You can attain almost any goal you set when you plan your steps wisely and establish a time frame that allows you to carry out those steps. Goals that may have seemed far away and out of reach eventually move closer and become attainable, not because your goals shrink, but because you grow and expand to match them.

Realistic - To be realistic, a goal must represent an objective toward which you are both *willing* and *able* to work. A goal can be both high and realistic. You are the only one who can decide just how high your goal should be. Ensure that every goal represents substantial progress. A high goal is frequently easier to reach than a low one because a low goal exerts low motivational force.

Your goal is probably realistic if you truly *believe* that it can be accomplished. Additional ways to know if your goal is realistic is to determine if you have accomplished anything similar in the past or ask yourself what conditions would have to exist to accomplish this goal.

Tangible - A goal is tangible when you can experience it with one of the senses, that is, taste, touch, smell, sight or hearing. When your goal is tangible, or when you tie a tangible goal to an intangible goal, you have a better chance of making it specific and measurable and thus attainable.

Intangible goals are your goals for the internal changes required to reach more tangible goals. They are the personality characteristics and the behaviour patterns you must develop to pave the way to success or for reaching a long-term goal. Since intangible goals are vital for improving your effectiveness, give close attention to *tangible* ways of measuring them. (for example, improved performance can be a way of measuring success in overcoming performance nerves).

Written Affirmations

In the previous article, "suggestions" were discussed. These are positive affirmations that you are trying to instill in your performance. I have seen some people write these on paper, and display them on the refrigerator door, or by their bed. They are read every time you pass by.

A more subtle method, that may be easier to begin with, is to write an affirmation on paper and place it in the front page of your music folder to be read several times before you practice. Make it **big and bold** so that it stands out in your mind. They must be positive, present tense, strong and unequivocal. Not "I can" or "I will" type statements, but more, "I am" and "I do". They might be something as simple as; "my playing is strong and confident" or "I always concentrate during my entire performance".

As suggested in the first article, any negative aspects of a performance can be written down on paper and physically torn up and thrown away or burnt, affirming in your own mind that it is not to remain with you and mar any future performance.

Focussing

When you are playing, and you are completely relaxed, with no pressure, your mind seems happy to leave you to focus on your playing. When you are nervous, and you are trying your best not to make any error, you often interrupt yourself. I am sure you all know the feeling, "that could have been better", "High G is going a little flat", "here comes the difficult bit", " what's happening over there", it can be an endless conversation that your mind has with itself. These distractions affect the quality of your performance. The best results are when you are focussed, relaxed and concentrating on producing the music as you wish to portray it.

There are a number of exercises to help this problem. It can be reduced and controlled using "autogenics", but when it occurs, (and you can never stop it entirely) you have to practice dealing with it. The best method is to focus on something to bring you back to the performance. It could be the sound you are producing, singing the tune in your head, or a "movie" that you create in your mind. I remember reading an old article in a 1950's Piping Times where John MacDonald of Inverness spoke of his thoughts while he played or competed. He said that he thought of the old pipers playing and the places tunes were written about. Some good advice indeed.

Many musicians say that it helps to focus on the manuscript, or picture it in your mind. It is rather taboo to look at this as a cure within the piping fraternity, particularly with Piobaireachd, where the oral depiction of the tune is so heavily encouraged. It may however be the solution that some find effective.

Many musicians find that taking the pressure off themselves to perform at their peak on every occasion actually helps them to focus and relieve some of the mental conversation that is conducted whilst performing, therefore improving their ability to focus. This can be done by taking stock of the results of a good and bad performance. An example is; the best thing that can happen is that you play really well, get a pat on the back, and a couple of weeks later everyone has forgotten what you did! The worst is that you play really badly and look silly for a few minutes until someone else does the same or worse! You live to play again next time, but by giving yourself permission to play badly if it happens, a lot of the mental pressure is removed, leaving you to focus on the music rather than the consequences of a poor performance.

Autogenics

This is a term literally meaning "self creation". It was first developed by a German doctor, Johannes Schultz and details were published in 1932. I first became aware of it as a training tool in the mid 1970's, when it was described to me by an Eastern Block athlete as a psychological tool that could help enhance the performance of athletes, students and musicians. There is much published on the subject and details of the various techniques can be located on the internet. Some points that you need to consider before proceeding are:

- Avoid eating, smoking or drinking before practice as digestion interferes with the relaxation process.
- Ensure that you complete the wake up procedure, (see further for details) and get up slowly as a drop in blood pressure can make you feel faint if you get up too fast.
- If you are undergoing any form of hypnotherapy, you should consult your therapist before attempting Autogenics. It is suggested that it will take about 3 months to fully achieve your results.
- It can be done in bed before you fall asleep without the wake up procedure, but this should not be your only method of practising this technique.

The aim is to achieve a relaxed state where your mind is most receptive to suggestions. You can get the best results from visualisation or suggestions when in a totally relaxed state. This is when your sub-conscious mind is most open to suggestions.

An Introduction To Autogenics

Autogenics must be done in a quiet location. It is best done lying flat on your back or seated with your hands facing upwards, your arms by your sides, but not touching your body. Your eyes are closed.

Start by breathing in for the count of three and out for the count of six. Do this ten times. Keeping track of counting can be aided by thinking of a different finger each time a process is conducted.

You should be starting to relax. To aid this process you want parts of your body to be warm and feel heavy. If you are right handed start with your right side, if left handed start on your left side. Imagine your arm, and feel it getting warm and heavy. Say each of the following to yourself 6-8 times:

- My right arm is getting warm and heavy (6-8 times) then,
- My right arm is getting heavier and heavier (6-8 times) then,
- My right arm is completely relaxed (6-8 times).

Repeat this process for the following body parts, in this order:

- My right arm.
- My left arm.
- My feet.
- My legs.
- My back.
- My chest.
- My shoulders.
- My neck.

Now repeat the following phrases 6-8 times:

- My stomach is soft and warm.
- There is a cool breeze on my forehead. (with practice you will feel it become cool).
- It breathes me (this is a phrase which correctly times your breathing).
- I am completely relaxed (you should now feel warm, heavy and very relaxed).

You should now be completely relaxed and in a state where you will best accept suggestion and visualization techniques and achieve their best results. Keep it simple, not too many suggestions (perhaps no more than 2 or 3 each repeated 10 times) and you may not want to do a visualization exercise at the same time as a suggestion exercise.

Autogenics And Visualisation

The power of visualisation was illustrated in an experiment at the University of Chicago. Students, all with about the same ability in basketball, were divided into three groups and asked to shoot baskets from the foul line. The percentage of baskets each team made were recorded.

The first group was then told not to practice or play basketball for thirty days. The second group was told to practice shooting baskets every day, for one hour, for thirty days. The third group was told not to go on a basketball court at all for thirty days, but to practice shooting baskets in their mind for an hour each day. At the end of thirty days, there were some fascinating results. As you would expect, Group 1, who had not practised at all, had made no improvement over their original percentage of baskets made. Group 2, the group that had actually practised, had improved their performance by 24%. Group 3, who had not set foot on a basketball court, but had imagined shooting baskets in their mind, had improved their performance by a phenomenal 23%, almost the same improvement as the group who had actually played basketball! The reason? The subconscious doesn't distinguish between an actual event and a vividly imagined one. It is medically and scientifically recognized that visualised images actually bring about psychological and physiological changes to virtually the same degree as direct experience.

Well let's apply this to piping. Imagine the hall you are to play in, the audience, how you want to feel, what your instrument will sound like, and finally how you are going to play. This can be refined depending on what you want to achieve, for example, I would imagine playing "A Flame of Wrath" quite aggressively compared to "MacCrimmon's Sweathart" which would be much more sedate. Similarly your frame of mind during the performance of a Strathspey or Reel would be quite different than when you play a Slow Air for example. The basics of the performance are similar, but the frame of mind you are in changes slightly, hopefully enhancing the expression and feel of the performance.

Again what you visualise is perfect, you obviously don't imagine yourself playing with out of tune drones, making a mistake every part and finally breaking down to the delight of a hysterical audience. You are calm and in control of your entire performance and achieving the results you require. You imagine the performance and how you want to play, not the results after the process. I was told of a band that sat around holding hands, picturing themselves holding the trophy at the end of a contest. An exaggeration I am sure, but it is the performance that you want to concentrate on and improve, not how well you run around the hall with the trophy over your head.

The opportunity can also be taken to practice the exercise of visualising the destruction of a previously bad performance or error, to remove it from your subconscious mind as an evaporating cloud, or torn up piece of paper as described in the first of these articles. Always conclude with an exercise using positive suggestions or visualisation.

Wake Up Procedure

Finally, you should go through the wake up procedure:

- Again saying to yourself 6-8 times, "I will be alert and refreshed".
- Open your eyes, and pump your arms several times to get the blood flowing.
- You can then slowly rise.

Autogenics is best practised every day. Either as a stand alone exercise, or omitting the wake up procedure and going to sleep at night.

Diet & Drugs

Since writing the first of these articles I have been made aware of the continuing use of Beta-Blockers to overcome performance anxiety in musicians. I was aware of some pipers trying these unsuccessfully over twenty years ago. Beta-Blockers are prescription medications used to control blood pressure and the physical effects of anxiety, among other conditions. They lower the heart rate and alleviate the "fight or flight" urge. Without delving into the medical issues too deeply, I have been told by a Cardiac Specialist they can have side effects such as decreased heart rate, asthma attacks, fainting, decreased blood pressure, nightmares, hallucinations, depression, fatigue and impotence. They do not help alleviate sleep problems before an event or the negative inner voice that effects your focus, as they only effect beta receptors outside of the brain. They therefore could not be as effective in the long term as an appropriate program of suggestion and visualisation techniques, (which can also assist you to use adrenaline to enhance your performances, rather than trying to retard it's physical effects).

Nicotine and caffeine can contribute significantly in increasing performance anxiety in some people. We had a very nervous piper in our band some years ago, who drank copious amounts of Coca Cola. Some time before a major competition, we encouraged him to drink water instead and it had a noted effect on his performance when the time came. There are many soft drinks on the market that contain significant amounts of caffeine, as well as the obvious beverages like coffee.

You can try eating dairy products, turkey, or drinking camomile tea, which are all rich in substances that are known to enhance relaxation.

Alcohol consumption will have an obvious effect on any performance. This could be the mental and physical effects of the "night before" drinking session, the obvious effect of playing whilst under the influence of alcohol, or the permanent effects of long term alcohol abuse.

Conclusion

The methods described above will work with practice and as with anything else, you will get better at them the more you attempt them. Some will work better for you as an individual than others. They can be used to improve your ability to perform and focus, or to remove a psychological "sticking point". Nerves, poor concentration or just being over excited whilst performing can all be helped or removed entirely.

The greatest percentage of the time that we all spend practising is in effect training the mind to perform, but rarely is this under the conditions in which you will be expected to play. Too often we interfere with our own performance with no external interference and fail to achieve our true potential. In mastering the above techniques you can alleviate the effects of many distractions of your own self creation and also limiting the effect of external distractions by improving your ability to focus, hopefully helping you to achieve your full potential when performing or competing.