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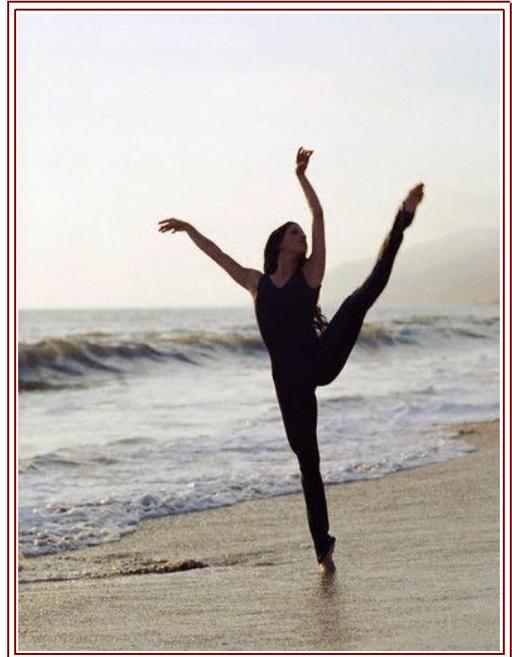
by June Kaminski, MSN PhD(c) 2005
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Relaxation Techniques

Another common thread among accomplished athletes is that they make their activity appear to be effortless. Much of this image is due to the athletes' ability to relax during physical activity. As you become more skilled doing an activity, you tend to eliminate unnecessary muscular contractions, those that don't contribute to your motion.

For example, a "death grip" on the handlebars of a bicycle does little to move the bike and much to cause fatigue in the neck, shoulders and arms. As with all mental techniques, you can learn relaxation with practice. A good time to increase your awareness of a relaxed state is during your imagery training. As you settle down to practice your imagery, focus on the feeling of your body relaxing. During your workout, do an inventory of your body by checking for and releasing tension.

Focus on letting go of unnecessary tension and releasing your movements, rather than forcing the movement with tense muscles. Remember that relaxed, loose muscles are powerful, quick and efficient. Relaxation methods clear your mind and loosen your muscles by easing tension. They can include breathing exercises, meditation, progressive relaxation, as well as certain activities such as walking in nature or practicing free dance or yoga.



Guidelines for Practicing Mental Imagery

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit or lie down. Begin by gradually relaxing your body and letting go of the thoughts of the day.

Focus on your breathing and the easy rise and fall of your chest.

Starting with the top of your head, relax each body part by exhaling and feeling a wave of relaxation flow over the area.

Move down the body, relaxing your face and neck, shoulders and upper back, arms and hands, lower back and stomach, gluteals, thighs, lower legs, and feet.

Once relaxed, begin your mental imagery by seeing yourself doing an activity with correct technique, relaxed and powerful

Keep the sessions short (5 to 10 minutes) initially, and end the session if you find yourself unable to focus or drifting into sleep.

End your imagery training with a final reminder of your vision.

Tell yourself to come back to the present place and time, and slowly move your hands and feet

and open your eyes.

Practice your images regularly (daily) and make them more complicated and longer lasting as your imagery skills improve. You can begin to practice fitness images with good technique and focus, using positive statements to maximize your performance. Make the images as real as possible. It can be very useful is to make an audiotape with your imagery training on it to use during your imagery. Remember that the images need to focus on what you can control to improve your performance. With dedicated imagery practice, you will workout more efficiently and will approach your sessions with the confidence you need to perform your best.

Although the above four techniques are described separately, they work best when used together. For example, beginning with a relaxation exercise helps clear your mind for an effective session of mental imagery. Keep in mind that these techniques, like fitness activities, take practice. But once you learn them, you'll wonder how you ever worked out without them.