

The power of the mind

by Adam Blomberg

What if you could trigger your brain to turn into 100% climbing mode next time you step onto that hard route or boulder? Just like that, and you have full focus and no fear from first to last move. It sounds like fantasy, however it's not. Adam Blomberg has looked into how the brain works under stress and how you can deal with it to become a better climber.

Few realize that the fastest way to improve your climbing can be to take control over your own mind. The mental aspects of climbing are widely recognized but few climbers actually train and develop their mental and psychological skills in a structured way. Those that are mentally strong already "have it" while the rest of us have to live with it and fight through stress and



Erik Heyman during mental relaxation on top of the world, Kvaloya, Norway. © Malin Holmberg

fear with sweaty palms, racing hearts and shortness of breath. Well, it does not need to be like that, the mind can be trained as the body can, however the rules are different and therefore the techniques used will be different.

The zone

The ideal state of mind is when we are 100% focused on the task at hand, not disturbed by things happening around us, by our own thoughts or by feelings of fear, anxiety or doubt. This state of mind is usually termed the zone, the place where we have access to all our strength, our best technique and where we are fully concentrated on climbing. In the zone the performance climber will be sending harder than ever and the traditional climber will take control over difficult or scary climbing without excessive fear and anxiety. The problem is that for most climbers getting into the zone happens on chance. What we want is a button to press that gets us into the zone. The good news is that there are buttons that can and will accelerate your mental training and improve your psychological ability.

The brain

The brain under stress is the challenge. Under high stress situations (which climbing is so full of) important parts of the brain will shut down and old programmes will automatically take over and steer our climbing. Somatic behaviours like high body tension, increased heart beat, intense breathing, tunnel vision etc are the effects of such programmes. Feeling these effects will give room to negative thinking, which in turn will give room for anxiety, doubt or fear. This is the reason why we, when pressed, time after time either fail or have to push through wasting our psychological energy. We often claim that we not are strong enough, too short or too long, when most times the answer lies in our mind. This is the way the brain works under stress and it may

be difficult to change. However, what we can do is to replace “bad” programmes that limits us with “good” programmes that helps us get into and stay in the zone.

Practical mental training

We act according to our mental map of the outer world, not according to what the world really looks like. This is the reason why we as climbers need to have clear and positive mental images of a successful climb in our programmes. This is what will steer us. To be able to programme the brain we need to relax body and mind. The more relaxed we are the more access we have to our memory circuits in the brain. The technique described here to create positive climbing images is called anchoring. The idea is to anchor the good feeling of the perfect climb in our brain and then, when starting off on a climb, we will release this good state of mind by pressing a simple trigger.

Set the anchor by following these steps:

- Choose a unique and simple trigger, e.g. the clipping of a karabiner, pressing your toes upward etc.
- Relax as deeply as possible, sit or lie down, assure no outer disturbances, music may work for you.
- Create an inner movie of yourself climbing the perfect climb (make it as real as possible: you have to be able to see it, feel it and smell it)
- Set the anchor when the feeling is at the highest by pressing your trigger. Timing is essential. Repeat it a number of times.
- Make this part of your regular training a couple of days every week. Each session will take you about 20-30 minutes.

The release of the anchor should be the final thing you do before setting off on a hard red-point, an on-sight attempt or during competition. Assure that you have a good mental ritual before you start that hard climb, warm-up, relax, visualize the moves, boost your confidence and then get into the zone by releasing the anchor by setting off your trigger, then go. Divide the climb into sections, climb the first section, stop, rest and relax, then release the trigger and go for the next section, continue like this until you finish the climb or you fall off.

After a successful climb (= where you felt in the zone) always keep the good feeling and stack it on to your anchor by pressing your trigger a number of times. By doing this you will make it stronger and more reliable.

The way of training for climbing is obviously through climbing. Red Pointing is the ideal way to progressively increase the mental strain. Use the anchoring technique by setting of your trigger every time that you are red pointing a route. Then you can test your mental progress when onsighting as climbing towards the unknown is the ultimate challenge. Start to train your brain. I promise that you will improve yourself and you will enjoy climbing more than ever....