

# **Part II: Stress Management from the “Inside Out.”**

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The following article is Part 2 of a two-part series of the prevention of burnout and management of stress.

Most treatment models take an external approach to the prevention of burn-out and stress management. For example, an individual is taught coping strategies to manage their internal state of tension and stress. Relaxation and guided visualization are examples of two external techniques.

In my treatment approach, I integrate external and internal stress management techniques. In part I, “Stress Management from the Outside In”, a stress /recovery model was outlined where energy is expended and replenished in the mental, emotional, and physical realms. This model is based upon the existence of stress and tension and takes an external treatment approach.

The “inside in approach” is used to prevent and minimize the development of stress and tension. This method utilizes cognitive behavioral therapy techniques to identify and modify an individual’s core beliefs and internal dialogue to enable a state of peace, quiet and fulfillment on an internal/body level.

This approach is extremely effective in optimizing athletic performance as well. Athletes are taught to become aware of underlying core beliefs that serve as a basis for their negative self-talk and decreased performance. By helping athletes discover their negative and positive core beliefs, they learn to figuratively ‘clean house’, keeping only those beliefs that serve and enhance performance.

A core belief is a belief about yourself that you hold deeply within yourself. It is often beyond immediate awareness and originates from early childhood experiences.

Examples of negative core beliefs that impact athletic performance:

I am helpless.

I am powerless.

I am out of control.

I am weak.

I am vulnerable.

I am inadequate.

I am ineffective.

I am incompetent.

I am a failure.

I am defective. (I do not measure up to others)

I am not good enough (in terms of achievement)

Like a moral belief, core beliefs serve as a centrifuge which leads the direction you take in your life. For example, one adult athlete, who I shall call Debbie, struggled with seeing herself as a proficient athlete. In grade school she was often picked last during PE class and scored poorly on the physical performance evaluations. These early childhood experiences resulted in Debbie developing the belief that she was non-athletic and inadequate when it came to sports. In her 30s, she began cycling recreationally and was invited to join her friend's racing team. Debbie thought to herself, "Oh, she's just being nice. I'm not good enough to race on a team." Debbie's interpretation of her friend's invitation was based upon a belief of being non-athletic and inadequate. Debbie actually did have talent and struggled with seeing herself as proficient enough to race with a team. With her friend's encouragement, Debbie hesitantly joined the team and underachieved during competition. Debbie's belief that she was inadequate caused her to feel a high degree of stress and fear when racing. This led to Debbie shifting her mental focus on avoidance of a crash which then on a physical level caused her to ride tight and over-react (i.e. break frequently) to the ebb and flow of the pack. Her core belief of being inadequate led to negative self-talk. "I'm not strong enough to remain with pack, I better not go down, and I'm going to get dropped" caused Debbie to ride towards the back of the group and hesitate at the time of the break-away. This thought pattern resulted in being dropped by the group and placing in the bottom of the field. Debbie interpreted her poor performance as evidence of being inadequate.

As a performance enhancement coach, I teach athletes how to identify core beliefs and corresponding negative self-talk that result in poor performance. When an athlete realizes that negative core beliefs are learned and can be purged, a sense of personal empowerment and internal locus of control often arises. An athlete learns that they have the power within their mind to prevent stress and optimize performance.

In terms of the example of Debbie, she learned to challenge her negative beliefs by identifying evidence to the contrary. Utilizing guided imagery and visualization, she was directed to replay the race where she handled her bike proficiently. Debbie imagined herself riding strong, towards the front of the pack, keeping with the break-away, and winning at the sprint. She was directed to create positive self-talk that reinforced her belief that she was a strong, capable bike racer. Finally, Debbie was taught a cognitive behavioral method to stop fear based thoughts and images to prevent her body from becoming tight and over-responsive to the changing dynamics of the pack.

Debbie's performance issues were addressed from both an internal and external perspective. She first learned an inside approach to enhance her performance through the creation of positive beliefs and self-talk. She was then taught the external technique of guided imagery and visualization to cement her positive self-image. In our work, Debbie came to the realization that a huge component of her strength and power on her bike originated in her mind. Her belief in herself gave her the upper edge over her opponents, not a new set of lightweight wheels.

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