



Sport Psychology

THOUGHTS GUIDE



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Many athletes aim to control their thoughts, or eliminate negative ones entirely.

They tell themselves things like:

- **“I must think in a certain way. Positive thoughts only!”**
- “I mustn’t think about _____ or _____. I’m going to block these things out.”
- **“I can’t make mistakes. When I make mistakes, my game falls apart.”**

When one puts too much emphasis on thought control, it often creates problems, rather than solving them.

Your brain is a highly complex neural network designed to process vast amounts of information, and this includes a range of thoughts and emotions. **This means that you’re going to have a variety of thoughts that pop into your head while you compete.** When those negative, niggly thoughts make an entrance, it’s not a malfunction; it’s an inherent part of how your neural networks process information.

That being said, we don't want these thoughts getting *stuck* in your head while you compete, right? You've got far more important things to focus on i.e. your routine, gameplan, current moment.

Here's the goal:

1. To recognize your thoughts as just that—thoughts—without becoming overly caught up or attached to them.
2. To quickly and effectively refocus on your actions, despite negative, niggly thoughts popping up.

I can hear you thinking 🙄🙄🙄:

“This sounds great Theo!

But how do I achieve this?”



Managing how you respond to your thoughts takes practice, especially since you need to do so in the heat of the moment, when the pressure is on.

The good news? Once you stop trying to avoid these negative thoughts or feelings, half the battle is won!

Seriously. 🙌🙌🙌

The other half? **When your thoughts aren't where you want them to be, the key is to turn to your body (your physiology, your senses) to get your focus back where it needs to be.**

This works because the brain and body are **deeply connected**, and using physical actions to shift your focus is **more effective** than trying to control your thoughts directly.

When you tell yourself to “calm down” or “be more positive”, you’re trying to change your mental state **with** 🌀 **more** 🌀 **thoughts** 🌀 .

No wonder it often backfires!?

Let's look at an example:

Watch [this video](#) of Dan Carter on Instagram.

SUMMARY OF VIDEO

● ‘Red Head’ is the height of pressure, distraction, and overwhelm.

● ‘Blue Head’ is a state of clarity, focus and being on task.

- At a particular point in Dan Carter’s run up, his thoughts were often: “**Oh my gosh, there are 80 000 people watching me kick this goal. Don’t miss! Don’t miss.**”
- **Thinking like that, his mind was in a state of red.** Rather than focusing on his routine, he was feeling pressured, distracted and overwhelmed.
- To get back into a state of clarity, focus and being on task (what he calls a ‘Blue Head’) he acknowledges and accepts that he was in a state of red.
- **Notice, he doesn’t try to change his thoughts or feelings. His objective is simple: move on with his game and get back into his routine.**

- In game situations, if he had dropped the ball and was running around thinking about the dropped ball, *or how he had let his team down*, he slaps his leg. This is how he accepts that he dropped the ball; and uses it as a trigger to move on with his game.

- **When he's at the back of his run up, before kicking at goals, he didn't want to stand there slapping himself. Instead, he would push his toes into the ground. He turns to his body and specifically to his sense of touch. (We refer to this as grounding or centring).**
 - All of a sudden for three seconds he hadn't thought about missing the kick or the pressure of everyone watching him in the moment.
 - All he had thought about was the feeling of his toes pushing into the grass.
 - Once he's pushed his toes in for 3 seconds, he breathes and returns to his kicking routine:
 - ✓ look out and visualize the ball going through,
 - ✓ look at the part of the ball he wants to kick,
 - ✓ breath again and then from there he goes on to kick the ball.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Dan Carter didn't try to control or change the content of his thoughts. It's not about avoiding negative thoughts or feelings, it's about how quickly and effectively he could refocus on his actions (his current moment).
- He had negative thoughts, possibly every time he played. **He knew it was going to happen, that is why he had a process in place:**
 - When negative thoughts arose during game play, he turned to his body and slapped his legs.
 - **Before kicking at goal, his process was:**
Push toes into ground for 3 sec → really focus on how the grass feels → breathe → visualize ball going through → look at part of ball he wants to kick → breath → kick ball.

IMPORTANT

- **Dan Carter didn't always do these things. And he probably tried many things that didn't work for him.**
- The video shows his **final product**, developed and perfected over time.
- Having a clear, task-focused mind isn't an easy thing to achieve – ***it needs to be practiced***. Be patient with yourself.
- He committed to slapping his leg and pushing his feet into the ground, over and over again. ***He practiced it! That's why it worked.***
- Just because he used these specific tools, it doesn't mean you have to use the same ones.
- There a number of tools/techniques that you can use that don't involve slapping your leg or pressing your toes into the ground.
- I have another **free PDF** on these tools/techniques 😊 .

Regardless of the sport you take part in or your specific challenges, **you simply can't overlook the importance of strengthening your mind to be prepared for when things don't go your way.** Notice I say when things don't go your way. Not if.

- When your thoughts aren't where you want them to be, the first step is to stop and notice that you're not thinking in a way that's helping your game.
- The second step is to turn to your body (your senses) to help you get your focus back where you need it to be.



This process doesn't stop those negative niggles from arising. This process will simply help you manage them better than you did before (and better than your competitors).

Let's find what works for you and practice it! You're going to have to try different things and experiment in real competitive situations to find what works for you.

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