



HOW TO TRAIN YOUR BRAIN

BY ANNETTE O'NEIL

Think about the skydivers you've met over the years who drifted away. Nothing happened, per se; they just ... well ... disappeared. Some of this attrition is natural. The pressures of finances, family and career come into play. But have you wondered how much attrition owes directly to repetitive stress injuries on these athletes' minds?

That might seem like a stretch. After all, we all know that air sports are sports, despite the (notably shifting) cultural emphasis on beer over burpees. If we train toward becoming a better air sports athlete, we tend to train the body. We hoof it to the gym to strengthen our shoulders. We get our landing gear in gear with a bunch of squats. We unroll the yoga mat day after day with an eye toward earning a little insurance against a biffed swoop.

Even so, it's the stuff we keep between our ears that's the biggest liability. It certainly has the highest (and most dangerous) failure potential. So why aren't we training that? If you take the time to look, you'll notice that the top players in sports, as well as corporate executives, have a mental trainer of some kind on the team. If you don't have these techniques in your quiver, you are already behind.

Enter Katja

Katja Seyffardt might have some light to shed on this.

Seyffardt is a mental trainer by profession. She's a sunny, graceful woman with an easy, magnetic smile, based at the Olympic Training Center near Berlin, Germany. She's a multi-air-sport athlete and instructor (skydiving, wingsuiting and BASE jumping) who's been skydiving since 2002.

"People always think about training their body, but they forget the nervous system and brain," she remarked. "It is like that's an entirely new world. It's not. Or, at least, it shouldn't be."

Seyffardt was inspired early to start down her professional path as a mental trainer. Her origin story in the discipline begins when she was a very young, very nervous scuba diver with a keen interest in psychology. "I asked myself why something I loved to do scared me so much," she recalled, "and I wondered how I could make it easier for myself."

As she worked toward her divemaster and instructor ratings, she devoured books on the subject and learned a small-but-mighty toolkit of different mental-mastery techniques for herself. When she started as an assistant instructor, she started teaching these methods to her scuba students in Germany and abroad. More and more, she started seeking certifications in these methods. Within a few years, Seyffardt had a thriving, fully fledged mental training practice. She's been at it ever since. (She even took a near-dropout to a fifth-place finish at the Rio Olympic Games in 2016.) These days, her client base includes not

just Olympic athletes and business executives but also a few skydivers and BASE jumpers.

Under Pressure

"Often, [athletes] are faced with so much fear and stress that they really don't know how they can go further in what they really want to do," she noted. "It is so rewarding for me to give them those keys to their inner realms and see them walking off successful. This really makes me happy."

In air sports, those inner realms are crowded indeed, even behind the calmest faces in the game. A long philosophical conversation underlies every individual decision to throw oneself into jumping and flying, and it's generally considerably more complicated than the desire to, say, play golf.

"Across the board, my clients deal with a lot of performance pressure," she said, "and it's not just coming from the outside; it is also from themselves. Every one of them has a very high standard for their own performance. They know they need to be very mentally fit and very stable."

Here, stability doesn't mean "the state of not being crazy." It means the fortitude to keep an even keel, even as the subject's situation rocks them like a little kid in a crowded wave pool.

"A person will always have times of high motivation, when things run very well," she continued, "but then there are other times when you train really hard, and things are not rolling out as you planned, or maybe you're coming back from an ugly injury. That's when you need this strength the most: when distracting thoughts and emotions come in and yank you away from optimal performance."

The Toolkit

Seyffardt's work involves, in essence, training the stability muscles of the mind—those deep, subtle, essential places that succumb to strain most easily. She's certified in a bevy of methodologies to that end: neurolinguistic programming (NLP), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, the Zurich Resource Model (ZRM), Wingwave and several others, a list she adds to regularly. As she describes it, the work is a highly individualized cocktail of these methods to help her clients to calm the mind under stress, pay better attention to their reactions and access the kind of deep self-knowledge that allows a person to step outside of toxic old stories and patterns and get past the blockages they create.

Another benefit of mental training, of course, is accelerated learning—a subject of much interest to those of us who spend significant time and cash in the resource-intensive environments of the sky and tunnel. Neural science has long since proven that our mind changes through training. When you learn something new, acting on that new knowledge



Katja Seyffardt

is a slow process. You have to take the time to think it through. As the nervous system makes the right connections, you'll get faster and faster. Mental training encourages those connections and speeds up the process, which is worth its weight in gold when it comes to (ahem) tunnel time.

All that being said, Seyffardt insists that investing energy in your brain's lift capacity isn't just about peak performance in sports. "These aren't simply skills for jumping or for diving, but for [an athlete's] entire life," she said enthusiastically. "These methods are useful for every subject in sports, work and daily life. And people who learn them always pass those on to the people around them." Seyffardt herself uses these tools every day. She can't imagine life without them. "To get a stronger mind, you need to train it and you have to overcome stressful situations. It is permanent self-optimization work."

According to Seyffardt, that permanent work starts slowly, with a period of trust-building (either between you and the mental trainer or, if you're working independently, with yourself).

"People come to the table with different stress levels," she continued. "Some people view a challenging situation and they get excited. They want to be in that situation. Other people may have nerves that aren't quite so strong, so eager. They have different stress behavior. No matter where on the scale you start, you have to work yourself toward these situations, and you have to get to know your own unique reactive profile. This is why you train in advance—not only physically but also mentally—so you can work step by step, bringing yourself into higher and higher stress situations safely. You get to know yourself more and more, and you learn to react in a stronger way to bigger challenges."

A New Way to Look at Emotions

"Somatic marker" is the psychological name for what we experience as an emotion. Every thought we have gives us an emotion. We don't choose it. It is trained. We're raised in a certain way, with a certain ethic; we've had experiences. Because of that, our unconscious mind has built up a certain pattern for nearly every situation we encounter, and each pattern influences the behavior that follows. Overhearing an unpleasant conversation while you're packing your parachute? Check your opening. Drowning in unchecked insecurity across from someone on the plane you really want to impress? Good luck with your exit.

"The brain works very simply," Seyffardt explained, "and it works through pictures. If a marker is triggered, in milliseconds those deeply encoded patterns will be rolling out. We'll react automatically. Mental training works to give us more control over those reactions. If you want to change a certain behavior, you need to become more sensitive to your reactions, which requires consistent training over time."

Finding "Now"

When Seyffardt takes on a skydiving client, she focuses on the utility of mental training for both safety and performance. In her experience, competitive jumpers and hobbyists alike benefit from both, because almost everyone she meets arrives with the same, universal problem.

"Most people don't live in the present," she said. "Most of us are constantly either in the past or future."



If you're living in the past, you might have regret that you didn't get the chance to train more with your team, or you might keep thinking, "Why didn't I suck it up and buy a new wingsuit for this season?" or, "Why do I always forget to charge my Flysight?" and the jump that's happening right then suffers. If you're living in the future, you're already ruminating the results of an action you haven't even taken yet. The catch is that you're standing squarely in your own way, and most likely you aren't even noticing you're doing it.

"When your mind is in the past or future, it is not in the now," Seyffardt continued. "The only performance window you have is the now, and you need to train your mind to be in the now to have 100-percent performance."

Safety, too, requires real presence.

"Accidents can happen to anybody, of course," she said, "but sometimes when accidents happen involving skydivers who have thousands of jumps, we're very surprised. How can that be, when that person was in the sport for so long? But that person always was, like most of us, predominantly trained to react when things go well. If you don't train and visualize things going very wrong and learn to calm your nervous system and be entirely present in the moment, it seems like a foregone conclusion that you would make a mistake that doesn't seem to match your experience level."

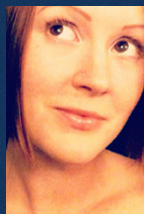
Relearning Attention

Another near-universal weakness (that our current technological environment is doing everything to exacerbate) is a downright atrophied ability to use our precious capacity for attention. In the dopamine-chasing rush to click and scroll, we've sold that attention to the highest bidder with no nod to its value, and, in doing so, degraded our working memories with a flashing, pinging forest of distractions. As bit players in this epidemic of flighty-headed fidgeting, it's a rare thing indeed to see someone who's able to simply sit still and be 100-percent engaged with the task at hand, whether that's at a restaurant table, in the driver's seat or on the plane.

"If you have your attention on the wrong things, that's going to take away your energy and your strength. You have to do the work to find out where to put your attention and how you can bring that attention back to what's important," Seyffardt advised. "Only then can you recapture what you've lost."

After all, a strong mind is the heart of what's important. Finding and pursuing what's important—the signal among the noise—can make the difference between unmemorable and remarkable jumps; between going through the motions and engaging in deeply felt, connected experiences; between gray, featureless days and the kind of skyward-gazing life you want. And this goes way beyond jumping. In every moment of every day you'll ever enjoy as a living person, your mind is the only common denominator. Maybe it's time to take it to the gym.

More information about Katja Seyffardt, along with some resources to start your own investigation into mental training, is available at her website seyffardt.de.



About the Author

Annette O'Neil, D-33263, is a multidisciplinary air sports athlete: skydiver, BASE jumper, paraglider and speed-wing pilot. Location-independent, she travels the world full-time as a freelance writer and producer. In her spare time, she loves flopping around on a yoga mat and carpetbombing Facebook from Instagram.