



You prepare your gear, you prepare your horse, you pack the truck or float, but do you consider your mind in your preparation for a competition? Being mentally prepared for what's ahead in your sporting endeavours is equally as important as your physical preparation, according to registered psychologist Sara Chatwin. We spoke with Sara to find out why looking after the mind should be an important part of your training programme, no matter what level you're competing at or what your goals are.

WORDS Laura Hunt

PSYCHOLOGIST

Sara Chatwin

Sara is a registered psychologist and social commentator who runs her own busy Auckland-based psychology practice, Mindworks. Sara has a Bachelor's degree (with a double major in Education and Psychology) and a Master's degree with first class honours from the University of Auckland. Sara also holds a Sports Psychology Certificate from Auckland University of Technology, and works with many amateur and professional athletes across New Zealand and Australia to help them prepare mentally to perform to the best of their ability in their chosen sport.

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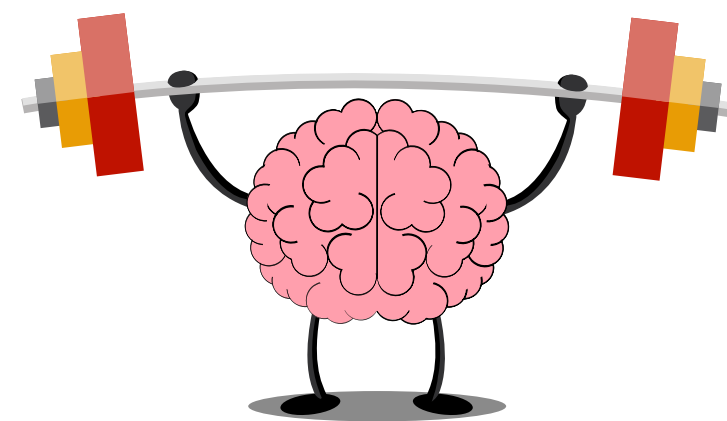
SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Why does it even matter?

In recent years, the area of sports psychology has gained popularity and more attention across the globe, with more and more amateur and professional athletes turning to the help of a sports psychologist, or including some mental conditioning exercises as an integral part of their preparation for competition.

Why is it so important? According to Sara, a healthy mind supports a healthy body, and without having your head in the right place, all your hard work in other areas of your preparation can go to waste. "To be on top of your game and produce the best result that you're capable of, whatever level you're competing at, you need to produce mental fortitude and strength," says Sara. "You can have any amount of talent, the best horse, everything else can be right, but if your mind isn't in the right place, you won't produce the best results."

As a passionate advocate for sports psychology and the need to look after the mind to get the best results in the sporting arena, Sara is pleased to see the area getting more attention globally, and more recently in New Zealand too. "In America and Australia, it's commonplace for athletes to use sports psychology, but we have had great tough sportspeople in this country who haven't always needed this kind of support. It's always been more about the physical side of the sport."



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It's for everyone

Sports psychology and thorough mental preparation for competition isn't just something for elite professional athletes to use or consider. Sara sees athletes across the board, from elites to amateurs. She works with men, women, and children who just want to improve their game, get better in their sport and get more enjoyment out of it.

"Psychology can give amateur athletes the ability to get the most enjoyment possible out of their sport, so it can be a stress relief and a great part of work-life balance," says Sara. "People identify when their mind, attitude and behaviours like negative self-talk and other stresses and frustrations are undermining their success in their chosen sport, and psychology helps to put strategies in place to cut out those problems. When the mind and body are in sync, you get amazing outcomes!"

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Does it work for equestrians too?

"Yes! I work with many equestrians who really benefit from the techniques and strategies that can be put in place to help them overcome any problems or sharpen up their performance," says Sara. "The addition of working with another animal brings a level of difficulty that other sports wouldn't have, so it's particularly important in equestrian sport to have your own mind focused."

Britta Pedersen is one well-known dressage rider who has experienced the benefits of sports psychology with her own riding. Britta says she has been very interested in the psychology behind competitive sports and how it can help athletes both in and out of the competition arena. She has worked with Sara for many years, which she considers to be a real contributor to both her competitive and professional success.

"I'm very proactive on things like short and long term goal setting, vision boards, affirmations (I have a set of affirmation boards taped in the truck at shows and repeat them to myself at least three times a day!), post-show reflections, debriefing and moving forward plans," she says.

Britta started seriously working with a sports psychologist at around 19 or 20 years of age for many reasons, such as pre-competition self-doubt, but mostly she wanted more in the toolbox to help her mentally prepare to be cool, calm and collected in the ring.

"The work I have done towards mental strength and improving my mindset for riding has helped me enormously in both my competitive equestrian career and professional life. The area where I improved a lot was the warm-up. I learnt how to create an effective warm-up for me and my horse, with everything planned out and strategies to quickly adapt if things started to go wrong."

Britta recommends sports psychology to everyone to help develop personal goals, visions and strategies. "Being able to identify your weaknesses can be a terrifying experience, but it doesn't need to be. If you can work with a skilled psychologist, it will have a positive impact on your career and believe me, your horse will thank you!"



Common problems hindering performance

Sara explains that every person is different, and the athletes that she helps have a range of different barriers or issues preventing them from achieving what they want to, or are capable of, in their chosen sport. "Everyone comes to the table with a different set of issues, and there are many strategies I will use to work through those issues with them. Everyone is human, and a lot of things that come up are very normal and common. While someone might be a super human in the sports arena, they still struggle with the same day-to-day problems as anyone else."

Below are a few common issues that Sara often helps people with.



Motivation

Some athletes get bogged down in the day-to-day repetitiveness of training. "The same old grind and putting in hard work to their sport every day can pull people down. I encourage people to make sure they have some time out for themselves, give themselves a rest and a reward, whether it's a massage, day off, walk with the dog, whatever. You also need to have supportive people around who want to help, and their influence can be the make or break on those days when motivation is really lacking," says Sara.



Organisation

One of the hardest things for some athletes is getting organised and ready for competition. "In New Zealand, we have so many physically gifted athletes with incredible talent and natural ability, but they just struggle to get themselves organised, and their game lacks as a result. I work through step-by-step strategies with them and almost act like a watchdog, like a parent who puts rules and regulations into place. Good habits need monitoring, but so do bad habits when we are trying to break them!"



Nerves & Anxiety

Nerves that arise for a range of reasons are very common amongst athletes at all levels. "There are different strategies that we can use to overcome nerves, including visualisation and relaxation techniques, and mind-calming techniques," says Sara. "It's also important to use positive psychology. Athletes need to be positively prepared to give their best performance possible. I will get them to watch old videos of great performances and remember positive experiences and make sure they are surrounded by positive people."



Sleep

"Sleep issues come into play often when people are putting themselves into a competitive arena, along with dealing with usual day-to-day stresses, so you've got to find a way to make life more manageable. I recommend no alcohol and caffeine at least two hours before your intended sleep time, and no scary or upsetting movies, literature or music before bed. Just take the time to really relax and wind down in the couple of hours before you plan to go to sleep."



Elitism

With elite or semi-professional athletes, Sara explains it's sometimes easy to forget they are still human beings. "These people are dealing with the usual issues that we all face like financial, professional, relationship problems, as well as their commitments to their sport, and sometimes it all becomes too much, so they will look to sports psychology to get them through."

If a rider is experiencing any of these problems, it's not something that can be fixed overnight. A lot of mental work is about building habits and strength through repetition. Just as you wouldn't go out and jump a 3* cross-country course without being physically fit, you need to invest time in advance to prepare your mind too. "I really feel that people need to put a tapering programme into place weeks or months in advance of an event. It's about the body and mind being ready, and one doesn't work without the other."

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PUTTING SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY
into practise

As an amateur show jumping competitor herself, our writer Laura Hunt told Sara about nerves that she's struggled with for years, due to worrying about bad things happening in the arena – before they've even happened. Sara quickly identifies that Laura's nerves stem from negative thought patterns, and tells her to focus on positive thoughts and being surrounded by positive people.

"You need to strongly focus on not allowing those negative thoughts to come into your brain and keep sending consistent and repetitious positive messages to yourself about how you're going to perform. Keep training yourself that way, to not let the negative thoughts get back in."

Laura also tells Sara about how she feels nervous worrying about people on the sidelines watching, and wanting to put in a really good performance in front of them. Sara explains that this is human nature. "It is very common, but you need to make your performance about you – it's not about the other people. A performance is a personal thing, so if you feel good about what you've put into it, that's great. Keep focusing on the positives and what you've achieved for YOU, and if you keep doing this repeatedly, your perceptions will eventually change and you will feel significantly more satisfied."

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SARA'S
top tips

- Be organised and have everything you need prepared well in advance – this will make such a difference to your performance and focus at the event
- Look after yourself. Your health, your nutrition, physical fitness and mental confidence is incredibly important.
- Put some relaxation strategies in place. In any training regime, there needs to be some time out and rest for you. It might be hard to let go sometimes (particularly true when you're looking after a horse!), but you can't forget to take the time for yourself. You've got to make that time! ■

WANT TO FIND OUT more?
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