

# Fewer strokes for focused folks

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A video game developed by a McGill University psychologist has already been shown to reduce stress and improve performance among telemarketers by training the mind to ignore negative social responses. New studies now indicate the game could also help golfers improve their performance on the links.

“Many kinds of performance – whether intellectual, creative or athletic – can be undermined by distracting thoughts about potential social evaluation and criticism,” said Dr. Mark Baldwin, whose team created the video game that has since been marketed by his spin-off company, MindHabits. “Among golfers, for example, it is understood that when you hit a bad shot, you have to ‘shrug it off’ and shift your focus to the next shot. You can’t get caught up in self-criticism and in worries about what other people might think.”

Unfortunately, Baldwin said, this kind of negative thought can occur automatically, and so can be difficult to control. He and his team theorized that a specially designed video game could help players develop new habits of positive thought. They tested this theory in a study conducted last year in which telemarketers played the game before beginning a shift. Compared with a control group, those who played the game – which involves locating a smiling face among a grid of 15 frowning faces – had 17 per cent lower levels of the stress-related hormone cortisol.

The idea behind Dr. Baldwin’s research is that the mind can be trained to focus less on negative feedback in social situations and, in effect,

“accentuate the positive.”

“We wondered if this type of attentional training might have beneficial effects in an athletic context,” Dr. Baldwin explained. To answer that question, a new study was conducted in which golfers were recruited at a Montreal-area golf course, before they began their round for the day.

The 26 golfers were randomly assigned to play, on a handheld PDA device, five minutes of either the find-the-smile game or a placebo control game in which they were to find a five-petal flower in a grid of seven-petal flowers.

“Total scores from those who had played the find-the-smile game were on average 5.24 strokes better than those in the control condition,” Dr. Baldwin said. “These findings, while preliminary, are exciting in that they show the potential for significant performance effects as a result of attentional training.”

Dr. Baldwin and his team intend to further validate the study this summer, with a larger number of participants, with experienced golfers and with additional experimental controls. He will present the preliminary results at the Games for Health annual conference in Baltimore, Maryland, on Friday, May 9.

On the Web: [www.mindhabits.com](http://www.mindhabits.com)

Source: McGill University

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