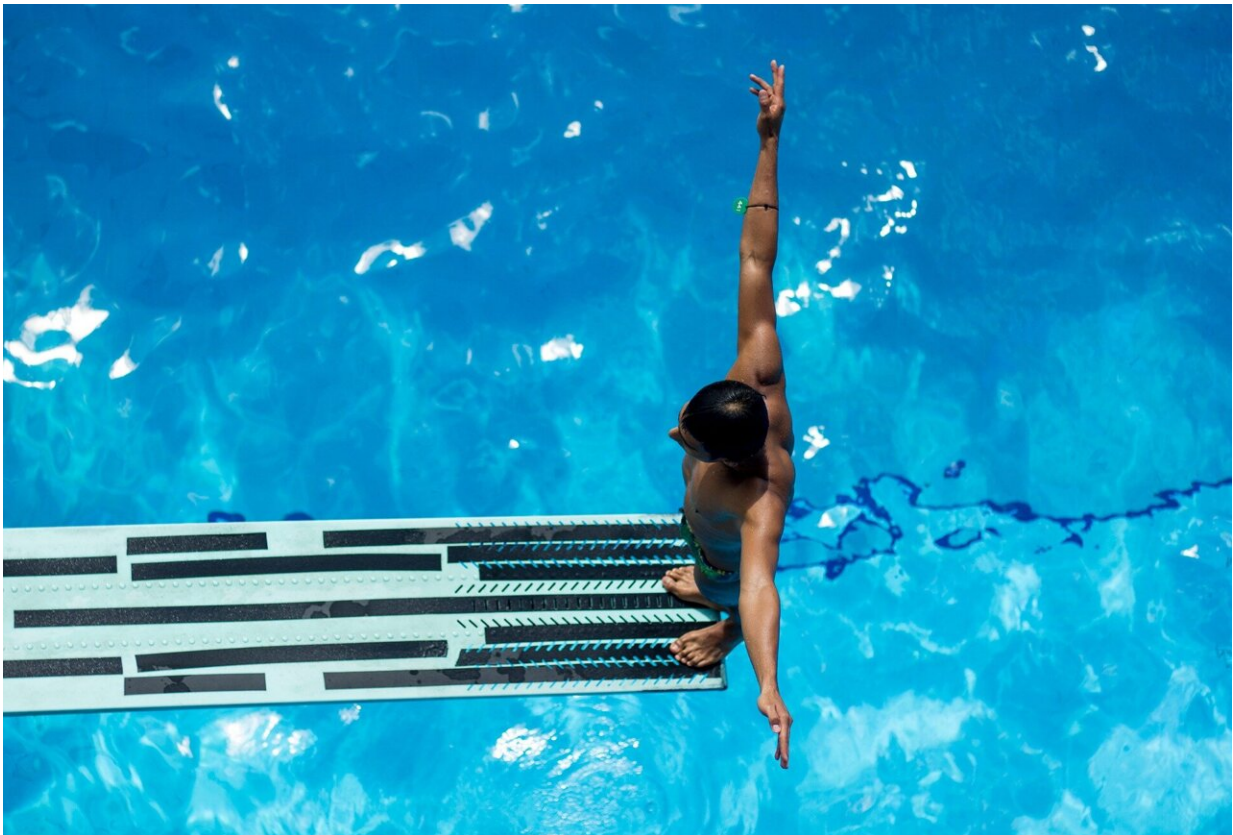


The psychology of Olympians and how they master their minds to perform

July 31 2024, by Mike McGreary



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Participating in the Olympic Games is a rare achievement and the pressures and stressors that come with it are unique. Whether an athlete is battling to win the breaststroke or powering their way to gold in the

modern pentathlon, psychology will play a vital role in their success or failure in Paris this summer.

In recent Olympics we have seen the mental toll that competing at the highest level can have on athletes. US gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from five events at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to [protect her mental health](#) and 23-time gold medal winner Michael Phelps has described the [mental crash](#) that hits him after competing in the Games.

When even small errors can cost them a medal, how do athletes use psychological principles to master their minds and perform under pressure?

Resilience

The ability to recover from setbacks, such as disappointing performances or injury [is crucial](#). The role of mental processes and behavior such as emotional regulation (recognizing and controlling emotions such as anxiety) allows Olympians to maintain focus and determination amid the global scrutiny that comes with competing on the world's biggest stage.

Resilience is not a fixed trait but rather a [dynamic process](#) that evolves through an interplay between individual characteristics, such as personality and psychological skills, and environment, such as an athlete's [social support](#). A [2012 study made in the UK](#) investigating resilience in Olympic champions highlighted that a range of psychological factors such as positive personality, motivation, confidence and focus as well as feeling like they have social support helped to protect athletes from the potential negative stressors caused by competing in the Olympics. These factors helped to increase an athlete's [resilience](#) and the likelihood they will perform at their best.

Social support means that athletes don't have to feel like they are going it alone. If they can call on strong networks of family, friends and coaches, it provides them with additional emotional strength [and motivation](#).

Resilience empowers Olympians to draw upon [individual skills and traits](#) and protects them from the negative effects of stressors that inevitably come with competing in the Olympics. For example, a rower may need to solve problems such as changing weather conditions. Resilience allows them to maintain composure and adjust to the conditions, for instance by modifying their stroke technique.

Being present

Staying in the present can help athletes avoid being overwhelmed or consumed by the significance of their event or distracted by the disappointment of past failures and the pressure of high medal expectations.

To help them remain in the [present moment](#), athletes may use a variety of strategies. [Mindfulness-based meditation](#) and breathing exercises can help athletes feel calm and focused. They may also use [performance visualization](#) to rehearse specific movements or routines. Think of a basketball player visualizing a free throw shot.

Similarly, many athletes will have well rehearsed [pre-performance routines](#) which can create a sense of normality and control. For example, a tennis player may [bounce the ball](#) a certain number of times before serving. Staying in the present will help to reduce athletes' anxiety, maintain focus on the task and allow them to fully experience (and hopefully enjoy) the atmosphere.

Protecting their mental well-being

Failure can be devastating and athletes can have complicated relationships with winning. For example, some athletes experience [post-Olympic blues](#), which is often described as the feeling of emptiness, loss of self-worth and even depression following an Olympic Games, even if the athlete has won a medal. British cyclist [Victoria Pendleton](#) wrote for The Telegraph in 2016 [describing this phenomenon](#): "It's almost easier to come second because you have something to aim for when you finish. When you win, you suddenly feel lost."

Olympians may be champions, but like the rest of us they will need to prioritize the fundamentals such as getting adequate sleep and downtime to recharge mentally. [An Australian study](#) conducted in 2020 highlighted the relationship between maintaining mental well-being and increased athletic performance. To ensure this, Olympians will be working closely with support staff such as performance nutritionists who will ensure they have a [balanced diet](#) which meets the physical needs of their event, helping to protect both physical and [mental health](#).

They will also be working with sport and exercise psychologists throughout their training in preparation for the Olympics to manage challenges as and when they experience them. If an athlete starts struggling with performance anxiety ahead of the Games, they may practice mindfulness or [cognitive restructuring](#), which are techniques that help people to notice and change negative thinking patterns.

Olympians and their support team will need to take care of both the person and the athlete to protect their well-being. When they protect their well-being, they are offering the best chance of both achieving their best performance during the Games themselves and avoiding the [post-Olympic blues](#) when they are over.

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