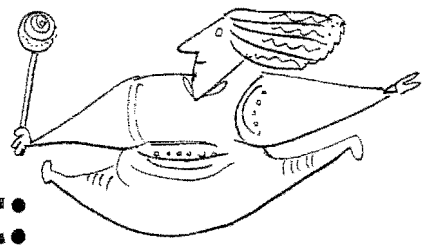
By Maureen Neihart



Preparing for High Achievement:
Mental Rehearsal

Terry Orlick, the well known sports psychologist, once said that when your performance falls apart, it usually falls apart in your head first. That's why mental rehearsal is a common performance enhancing strategy among elite achievers. It's the use of imagery to mentally practice.

Mental rehearsal is thought to work by focusing attention and lowering sensory thresholds. Reviews of the research on imagery and performance note three robust findings:

- mental rehearsal is better than no practice at all
- mental rehearsal in combination with physical practice is more effective than either in isolation
- mental rehearsal has greater benefits for cognitive tasks (e.g. concentration, focus, confidence) than for motor tasks.

A simple way to introduce students to the concept of mental rehearsal as an achievement tool is to ask them to describe what their ideal performance might look like. For instance, what would your performance look like if you studied well? If you could play your musical instrument as well as you'd like? If you skied a great run? Ask students to imagine they're watching a video recording of themselves giving a great performance at anything they'd like to be able to repeat. What do they see?

Begin with a picture in mind. Ask your students to think about what it is that they want to improve. Each of us is most motivated to give our best effort in the things that interest us most, so begin there. What do they really like to do? What is it that they most want to improve?

Invite them to recall a time when they gave what for them was a great performance. What did it look like? Ask them for details, especially sensory details. Adding details of color, sounds specific to their performance situation, and all the surrounding environmental features that typify their particular performance situation will increase the effectiveness of their mental rehearsal.

Mia, a talented fourth grader with ADHD, is inconsistent with her homework. There are days when she completes all of it and makes a good effort, but more often are the days when her work is incomplete. She often starts, but doesn't finish.

When Mia is asked to think about her "best homework performance," she bites her lip and takes a moment to reflect. Then she brightens as she recalls a night not too long ago when she got all her math homework done in record time. Asked to pretend that we have a video recording of herself giving that "performance," Mia says that she was seated at the dining room table with only her math book, her pencil, and a piece of paper. Her father was in the next room, fixing dinner, and her mother and siblings weren't home yet. There was a television program that she really wanted to watch, so she had a timer set for twenty minutes in front of her because she needed to finish the work in that amount of time in order to watch her program. When she finished before the timer, her father checked her work and she remembers smiling because all her answers were correct.

As she talked about it, Mia said that she thought that having a timer and a deadline—something interesting to get to next—helped her to keep her focus. She also thought it helped that her siblings weren't around. "When they're around they're noisy, and I can't think."

Mia was encouraged to try repeating the components of that "great performance." The next time she did her homework she would:

- work with a deadline and a timer
- work alone without any distractions and keep just the work she's attending to in front of her
- work toward some reward that she can earn quickly
- have a parent check her work before she turns it in

By remembering what her best performances look like, Mia can learn to repeat her best achievements by recreating the same scenario. She won't always be successful because she's young. Learning to image vividly and to control those images takes time and practice.

The popular saying, "think positive" is supported by the research on imagery and mental rehearsal. Like other mental skills, it improves with practice. Students shouldn't begin using this skill two days before a high stakes evaluation or an important competition. Since mastery is a matter of practice, the more opportunities you create for your students to practice, the better they will become at it. ■

Ungerleider, S. (2005). *Mental training for peak performance.* London: Rodale.

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HEADLINE ILLUSTRATION BY JON PEARSON