

Peak Performance in Combat

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“Relax Rangers, take your time and just slow down. Never forget, in combat, slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.” — **SSG Joshua Enyart, 1998**

Combat is one of the most stressful and dangerous endeavors imaginable. Throughout history, warriors have had to cope with the stressors of the battlefield and outperform the competition, both physically and mentally. For many years, the U.S. military has screened, prepared, and employed its men and women with the ultimate goal of making them as good at their jobs as possible. Rightfully so, the U.S. military takes its role in improving the performance of its warfighters seriously.

Some studies have indicated that research into other high-stress fields might have some validity to service members operating in combat environments.¹ As such, there are cognitive tools Soldiers could apply to improve and sustain peak performance in combat. This article seeks to address the question: what are some of the things that warfighters can do to achieve peak performance in combat?

What is Peak Performance?

The centerpiece of personal performance is the individual. Many factors determine an individual's performance level including physical make-up (nature), environment (nurture), and decisions made throughout his/her life (choice).² The military builds upon this foundation, first with training and then with real-world experience. How well warfighters balance the “performance triad” of sleep, nutrition, and activity will affect their performance throughout their careers.³ Ultimately, the overall goal of both the service member and the military is the same: for the service member to achieve peak performance and win when it counts.

Peak performance is a state of optimal cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning. Cognitively, people are at their peak when they have focused attention, ignoring unimportant things and allocating brain power to the task at hand. Emotionally, warriors are at their peak when they control how they feel, displaying confidence, determination, and control. Of course, physical peak performance involves nutrition, rest, and level of overall fitness. Additionally, people are at their peak physically when they exert the right amount of effort without becoming over aroused or anxious.⁴

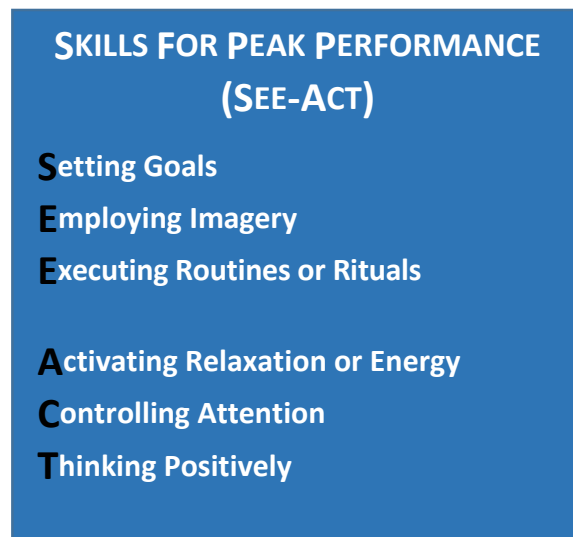
In sports, when athletes are at their best cognitively, emotionally, and physically, fans often label them as being “in the zone.”⁵ This is the mental state people enter when they are hyper-focused, energized, and fully immersed in their present activity. When in this state, people commonly lose self-consciousness, feel in full control, and may even feel time slowing down.⁶

Although sports is much different than war, arguably, peak performance is vitally important in combat where it can literally be the difference between life and death. Warfighters performing at their peak can better assess the situation, make decisions, and perform the right tasks at the right time. Additionally, individuals performing at their peak are less likely to succumb to stress and “choke” when it counts. Fundamentally, combat involves violent competition with other human beings. With all other things being equal, warriors who can better handle anxiety will have a marked advantage over their enemy. Simply put, if warriors are able to achieve peak performance, they are more likely to complete their mission and come home alive.

Achieving and Sustaining Peak Performance in Combat

Often, the field of psychology comes under criticism because of its focus on problems and disorders. However, in recent decades, interest in the positive aspects of psychology has grown.⁷ There is an increasing body of research into how people at the top of their fields can optimize their performance under conditions of high stress. Professional athletes, much like police officers and firefighters, differ from warfighters in many ways.⁸ However, all have to face stressful situations and must perform complicated physical and mental tasks. Arguably, performance psychology applies directly to military service members.

Research has suggested that psychological skills training could improve a service member's well-being and intrinsic motivation by building higher self-esteem, confidence, problem solving, and reducing feelings of helplessness, loneliness, anxiety, and anger. This article will focus on six skills that warfighters can use to reach peak performance: setting goals, employing imagery, executing routines or rituals, activating relaxation or energy, controlling attention, and thinking positively (or the acronym SEE-ACT).⁹



Setting Goals

The first cognitive tool that this article will discuss is setting goals. Setting goals is a psychological process of control. Goals may be outcome, performance, or process based.¹⁰ The U.S. military is already mission-focused and bases much of what it does on setting goals. In a similar way, individual service members can also set goals to improve their own level of performance. For performance purposes, process-based goals are typically more effective than outcome-based goals.

Process goals can help a person focus on the present and are more within the person's ability to control. For example, instead of platoon leaders focusing on how many casualties their patrol will take (outcome), they should focus on setting a goal within their control, such as completing pre-combat inspections or executing battle drills (process).¹¹ After identifying the process goal to achieve, leaders should next attach a specific time frame to achieving that goal (today, short-term, or long-term). Additionally, they should set performance goals that are positive vice negative, achievable yet challenging, and easily measurable. Finally, as leaders achieve their goals, they should set new goals to stretch their performance to higher levels.¹² Whether a warfighter is an Infantryman leaving the wire or a fighter pilot in the cockpit over Afghanistan, setting goals is a valuable skill that can lead to better performance.

Employing Imagery

During training or before a major competition, professional athletes commonly employ imagery to achieve peak performance. Imagery is the set of mental visual pictures of oneself proceeding through a series of actions.¹³ Imagery can go beyond just pictures and incorporate the other senses as well. For example, top fighter pilots have employed this technique for many years in what they call “chair drills.” For these drills, pilots go in a quiet room, close their eyes, and rehearse commands and movements using their chairs. Research into the use of imagery indicates that it has positive effects including improving self-confidence, task completion, concentration, and coping. A warfighter can also apply this technique to learn from past mistakes and decrease anxiety.¹⁴

To use the imagery tool, all Soldiers have to do is vividly picture key tasks they want to accomplish in their mind. Effective use of the imagery technique has seven elements: physical, environment, task, timing, learning, emotion, and perspective (PETTLEP).¹⁵ Those using imagery should imagine the environment using all five senses. Then they should visualize themselves accomplishing each task in order, first in slow motion and then in real time. They imagine the emotional component through answering the question, “how do I feel.” Finally, they should imagine the task from the first person and an outsider’s point of view. If Soldiers apply the technique of visualization in this manner, they can begin to improve their performance both on and off the battlefield.



Pilots often use “chair drills” to apply imagery methods to prepare themselves for combat.

(Photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung, USAF)

Executing Routines and Rituals

Although combat situations rarely unfold exactly the same twice, research has indicated that if service members execute routines and rituals in the right way, they may be able to improve their performance. Routines are a specific set of mental and physical steps that can initiate or sustain peak performance.¹⁷ A warfighter can use a routine before, during, or after combat situations. Routines can also help service members know where to put their attention when recovering from a disruption. For example, when Soldiers have misfires with their M4s, they follow the steps of SPORTS. They slap the magazine, pull the trigger, observe the round, release the charging handle, tap the forward assist, and squeeze the trigger.

In many ways, the military is already built on routines and checklists; service members can tap into the power of routines for their own benefit as well.

Some people argue that rituals are important because they can help a person “psych up” or “wind down” emotionally.¹⁸ Let us say a pilot listens to a Metallica song one morning during physical training and later that day flies a mission where everything just went perfect. The pilot then adopts the habit of listening to that song every morning for good luck. Although his fellow pilots might consider this silly, listening to the Metallica song helps him prepare mentally and returns him to his optimal mental state. It is a matter of debate just how beneficial rituals are.¹⁹ However, if rituals work for some people, they may have value for others.

Activating Relaxation or Energy

Research has indicated that warfighters should activate relaxation or energy at the right time to perform at their peak. Most service members can already get themselves hyped up to perform difficult tasks but may have difficulty when trying to relax. The ability to relax and perform at a high level despite stressful circumstances is the centerpiece of performance psychology.²⁰

When a person is “on stage,” increased anxiety and muscle tension can lead to performance problems. The benefits of structured relaxation techniques are that they can refocus attention away from negative thoughts, reduce anxiety, prevent fatigue, improve sleep, and assist in pain management. Physically, focused relaxation reduces sympathetic nervous system activation, muscle tension, heart rate, cortisol levels, and blood pressure. Relaxation also increases activity in the vagal area that contributes to the brain’s higher mental and motor functioning, which improves a person’s ability to adapt to change.²¹

There are a variety of structured methods that service members can employ to relax under stress. Relaxation coupled with a positive attitude helps reduce anxiety and improves performance.²² Diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation are two powerful tools that any service member can use to cope with anxiety and perform at a high level.

Perhaps the easiest method warfighters can apply to handle stress is diaphragmatic breathing, often referred to as combat breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is simply deep breathing using the stomach instead of the chest. To apply this technique, take in a breath for a count of five, hold for a count of five, release for a count of five, and repeat five to 10 times.²³ For years, civilian and military marksmanship experts have advocated similar methods as a tool to improve focus and improve the ability to employ their weapons in combat.²⁴

Another simple and effective technique is progressive muscle relaxation (see box on page 12). Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and then releasing each major muscle group in the body for a count of 10. Many research studies laud the physical and mental benefits of progressive muscle relaxation.²⁵ Although it may be impractical to close one’s eyes, to loosen clothes, or get comfortable during a firefight, tensing and releasing the major muscle groups can improve functioning. Arguably, progressive muscle relaxation is a valuable technique that any service member could easily employ before or after stressful experiences to relax both physically and mentally.

As a complement to relaxation training, Soldiers can use biofeedback devices to assist them in achieving a state of relaxation. The advantage of these devices is that it gives direct and immediate feedback on the state of relaxation to the person. Armed with information about their physiological state (e.g., heart rate, skin temperature, etc.), Soldiers can quickly see the state of their relaxation and make the mental adjustments to bring them to a greater state of relaxation more quickly. This direct and immediate feedback helps sharpen focus during relaxation training.

Controlling Attention

If warfighters are successful in controlling attention, it allows them to quickly recognize cues and respond to circumstances as they unfold. In combat, sometimes attention is best focused narrowly on a specific individual task (e.g., reading a map, performing first aid, etc.). Other times, a Soldier should focus on broader tasks in the external environment (e.g., scanning a sector of fire, leading a convoy along an unplanned route, etc.). Much like focusing a telescope, a warfighter should focus attention in and out in the right way at the right time.²⁶

The key to controlling attention is the awareness to recognize cues that trigger specific actions while ignoring distractions. For example, let us look at a Marine in a firefight in Afghanistan. As he scans his sector and engages enemy targets, his attention is wide and focused externally. The second he hears the sound of his bolt locking to the rear (the cue), he depresses the magazine release and shifts his attention to the steps of a magazine exchange. Once the bolt rides forward on his weapon (the cue), he taps the forward assist and he begins to scan his sector again. If the Marine has trained at this task repeatedly, his actions are almost second nature, and little conscious thought is needed.

Related to controlling attention is the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the idea that one should be present in the moment and acknowledge his or her own feelings, thoughts, and sensations. Arguably, mindfulness is similar to a term already commonly used in the military: situational awareness. Research suggests that mindfulness decreases accidents while increasing memory and creativity. Researchers also assert that mindfulness can decrease stress and even increase a person's general health.²⁷ Additionally, recent research into mindfulness showed that it could actually change the brain physically for the better. This research indicated that mindfulness could increase the density of brain matter in the anterior cingulate cortex and the hippocampus resulting in better attention, self-regulation, thinking flexibility, reduced stress, and increased memory.²⁸

Thinking Positively

Elite military schools such as Navy BUD/S (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL) and Army Ranger School purposely push students beyond the edge of their preconceived physical and mental limits. In these programs, just like in actual combat, the service member may have a moment of doubt. They may engage themselves in negative dialogue such as "this is impossible" or "I just can't do this." Research has indicated that if service members engage in negative self-talk such as this it can cause their decision making and physical performance to falter, turning negative thoughts into a negative reality. Conversely, thinking positively can have a favorable effect on performance.²⁹

Research has indicated that positive self-talk can help warfighters increase their attention, mental toughness, learning, and overall functioning. Self-talk can also help service members control anxiety and help get them psyched up to perform difficult tasks.³⁰ In essence, positive self-talk is simply repeating positive and affirming statements beginning with "I am."³¹

Employing positive self-talk as a performance-enhancing tool is simple. First, select the purpose of the self-talk as either instructional (e.g., "step one is ..., step two is ...," etc.) or motivational (e.g., "I am going to do this"). Then, all a person has to do is repeat the statement mentally or out loud beginning the words with "I am." At the advanced level, service members can use cue words to trigger certain sequences of activities in their mind (e.g., "I am focusing," "I need to go now," etc.).³²

On the firing range, instructors will often use whistles or megaphones to inform firers to begin their sequence of fire. One technique some advanced marksmanship instructors use instead of an artificial signal is to yell the word "fight" to initiate the sequence of fire. The idea is that in combat if service members say the word "fight" in their own mind, it will trigger the appropriate sequence they learned in

training. If warfighters employ the method of positive self-talk and use cue words, they can perform their assigned tasks more effectively, even under stress.

Conclusion

To maximize every warrior's performance in combat, all branches of the military should train their people on the fundamentals of SEE-ACT.³³ Whether it is on a ship, in a plane, or on the ground, combat is hard. Killing and living under the threat of being killed will always be stressful but will forever remain a part of the warfighter's job. Commanders and trainers should educate their young warriors on these skills and encourage them to employ these methods to reduce anxiety and improve performance.

Additionally, Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines should take responsibility for achieving their own personal level of peak performance and apply these techniques throughout their careers. Service members do not need to be under fire on the front lines to feel stress. As such, these techniques could help any service member, from the private to the general officer. Simply put, if service members apply the SEE-ACT skills, they can do their jobs better, increase their odds of surviving combat, and come just a little closer to becoming all they can be.

Notes

¹ Patricia A. Deuster, Ph.D.; COL Francis G. O'Connor; CDR Kurt A. Henry, U.S. Navy; Lt Col Valerie E. Martindale, U.S. Air Force; Col Laura Talbot, U.S. Air Force Reserve; LTC (Retired) Wayne Jonas; and COL Karl Friedl, "Human Performance Optimization: An Evolving Charge to the Department of Defense," *Military Medicine* 172 (2007): 1133-1137.

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⁵ Mark B. Andersen, "The 'Canon' of Psychological Skills Training for Enhancing Performance" in *Performance Psychology in Action: A Casebook for Working with Athletes, Performing Artists, Business Leaders, and Professionals in High-Risk Occupations*, ed. Kate Hays (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 11-34.

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¹³ Andersen, 11-34; Hallett & Hoffman, 212-230.

¹⁴ Ibid, 212-230.

¹⁵ Dave Smith, Caroline Wright, Amy Allsopp, and Hayley Westhead, "It's All in the Mind: PETTLEP-based Imagery and Sports Performance," *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 19/1 (2007): 80-92.

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¹⁷ Hallett & Hoffman, 212-230.

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Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Step 1. Assume a comfortable position. You may lie down; loosen any tight clothing, close your eyes, and be quiet.

Step 2. Assume a passive attitude. Focus on yourself and on achieving relaxation in specific body muscles. Tune out all other thoughts.

Step 3. Tense and relax each muscle group as follows:

- **Forehead - Wrinkle your forehead, try to make your eyebrows touch your hairline for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Eyes and nose - Close your eyes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Lips, cheeks, and jaw - Draw the centers of your mouth back and grimace for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Hands - Extend your arms in front of you. Clench your fists tightly for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Forearms - Extend your arms out against an invisible wall and push forward with your hands for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Upper arms - Bend your elbows. Tense your biceps for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Shoulders - Shrug your shoulders up to your ears for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Back - Arch your back off the floor for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Stomach - Tighten your stomach muscles for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Hips and buttocks - Tighten your hip and buttock muscles for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Thighs - Tighten your thigh muscles by pressing your legs together as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Feet - Bend your ankles toward your body as far as you can for five seconds. Relax.**
- **Toes - Curl your toes as tightly as you can for five seconds. Relax.**

Step 4. Focus on any muscles which may still be tense. If any muscle remains tense, tighten and relax that specific muscle three or four times.

Step 5. Fix the feeling of relaxation in your mind. Repeat as needed.

Taken from the American Medical Student Association Website, <http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/musclerelaxation.cfm>