

# POSITIVE MENTAL IMAGERY

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*Improve Your Golf Game  
Easily & Quickly*

## **TENSION**

By Joan King

This month we are going to look at how the human behavior of tension interferes with your ability to learn and play game of golf well.

Tension is the single most common physical cause of making mistakes in the golf swing. Unlike most other sports, the harder you swing at the golf ball in an attempt to hit it further, the shorter it goes. Gripping the club too hard can cause the clubface to close or open at impact. Tight muscles in the shoulders can restrict you from completing the backswing, causing the downswing to be off-plane. The “yips” in putting, chipping and the full swing are a result of involuntary tightening of the affected muscles.

When we look at a professional athlete performing it looks so easy. When we look at golfers on a practice range, their jerky, hurried swings lack the powerful fluidity of the pros.

Let's look at some of the mental ways we create this physical tension:

1. Anxiety causes tension. Anxiety is an emotion of the future. When faced with the unknown, we experience doubt in our minds and tightness in our bodies. Our minds race ahead into a “what if?” scenario. “What if?” I slice it out of bounds or “What if I three-putt this green?” The tension and anxiety in golf seem related to the fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, fear of humiliation, or the fear of not being good enough.
2. Doubt causes error. Self-doubt is a negative part of your personality that questions your ability to create your potential. When the self-talk in your head is doubting your ability, the muscle tightness results in missed shots and putts.

To experience this doubt of your physical capability, all you have to do is think about how you would sit down on a chair. In order to do that you have to let go of physical control, let your body fall downwards toward the chair and have faith that you will land comfortably. This faith in your ability to sit in a chair does not diminish after missing the chair one time. But, if you began to doubt that your legs would support you in this endeavor, you would become hesitant and the motion would be tense and jerky.

3. Trying harder creates tension. Contrary to the hypnotic statement, “no pain, no gain,” golfers need to adopt the saying, “to gain control, you have to let go of control.” The less you try, the more fluid your swing will be. Drinking or putting food into your mouth doesn’t usually cause doubt, but it does require a considerable amount of small muscle coordination. What you can conceive, and believe, you can achieve!

Trying in golf is a compensation for overcoming a part of our games in which we have doubt. As we “try” harder, we tighten our muscles which then interfere with the fluidity of the swing. As you let go of “trying” your unconscious mind will be able to achieve the coordination, timing and tempo needed for your peak performance swing.

4. Execution of technical instructions. Trying to interpret and put the complex technical parts of the swing into action causes doubt in your ability. To hit your best shots, the clubhead has to move smoothly from the start to the finish. Attempting to manipulate or control the club by thinking of one part of the swing prevents your body from working smoothly and efficiently.
5. Self-talk instruction. Telling yourself to “slow down your swing” creates tension because you are thinking, instead of feeling. You will probably find yourself taking the club back slowly and then the tension caused by the thought produces a jerky, off-plane downswing.
6. Being ball-bound causes tension. Golfers make a relaxed practice swing when there is no ball, and then tense up when they are hitting the ball. This tension is caused by focusing too much on the moment of impact and trying to square up the clubface at the ball.

To change this ball-bound habit you need to visualize and feel the motion of the entire swing. One good way to do this is to tee the ball up on the range, hit your favorite iron and swing with your eyes closed. The feedback you will get is what you “feel” instead of what you “see.” Since you won’t know exactly where the ball is you will begin to get awareness of what the swing “feels” like without any tension.

7. Competition. Your desire to play well in competition will determine how much tension you create. If you want to win, but are also afraid of losing, your tension level will escalate. To reduce tension, take your focus off the end result and hit one shot at a time focusing on the feeling of the swing.

8. Playing Conditions. Golfers are constantly talking about the problematic conditions of the golf course. Conditions vary from course to course, hole to hole, and from changes in the weather. A missed shot is usually caused by the tension produced by thinking about the negative results the condition could produce, instead of the actual condition itself. To stay relaxed, it is imperative to keep a positive attitude about the conditions and focus instead on executing a smooth swing.

Some days you will have more tension than others. To become relaxed you have to be aware of the feeling of tension when it surfaces. Practice these mental coping skills to overcome tension:

- Replace all negative thinking with positive thoughts & images
- Slow down your breathing
- Stretch your muscles
- Tighten the tense muscles to their maximum and then release them
- Shrug your shoulders up to your neck & move in circles back and front
- Change your focus from conditions outside you to the preparation of the present shot.

Remember that distance in golf comes from the speed of the clubhead and making solid contact with the ball. The clubhead speed comes from the flexibility of your body when the muscles are relaxed. When the muscles are tightened, the clubhead will be slowed down. This tension will also interfere with the rotation of the club and the path of the swing. Using less effort will produce more clubhead speed, power, and distance.

You concentrate best when you are relaxed. Concentrate on the things you can control. The only thing you can control is YOU. The better you concentrate, the better you play. Your mind becomes more alert because your attention is focused and not divided. You will then feel as if you have more time to perform the necessary swing motion because you are one with the process. You will be relaxed, focused and “in the now.”

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