

# Harnessing Your Nerves

There are countless players in golf who have literally burned out and left the game well before they needed to. They had talent and ability to play for years to come, yet their internal relationship to the game had deteriorated due to incessant stress and self induced pressure. Notice I said self induced.

There is no pressure inherent in the game itself. We must create it internally. Ask Jack Nicklaus. He always said he would much rather be putting with everything on the line than watching someone else do it. He said it is far more nerve wracking watching than actually doing it. He felt less pressure being the one doing it than watching it.

Pressure is self induced. We must operate our minds in a specific way to produce the internal stress responses that get our nerves bouncing. It can begin with our internal dialogue in a certain tone of voice that leads to unconsciously flashing pictures of possible scenarios that induce stress. Then we might get a rush of butterflies in our stomach while our eyes dart around quicker than normal.

There are specific sequences everyone goes through to create any state, including stress and pressure. Some people do not feel any stress at all when it seemingly should be the greatest. Imagine that.

Since we design our internal environment through our habituated thoughts and feelings (pictures, sounds and feelings) it is imperative that we consciously design constructive, effective and fundamentally supportive states. Being confident and relaxed in any situation can be learned. Just watch a surgeon who has a person lying on the operating table hemorrhaging profusely with the heart monitor beginning to flat line as he calmly assesses the situation and acts with cool precision.

Stress and pressure are self induced. Here are several causes of nervousness in the game:

- Your desire to win – when you have a chance to win all of your years of habituated images around winning and losing generate a nervous response. All your thoughts of what it means to win or lose and how each of these will affect you causes internal representations that either help or hurt your performance.
- Fear of failure – previous memories of loss and failure reside beneath your awareness and influence your behavior when you're under pressure.
- What others might think – This could be related to the fear of failure yet it deserves its own category. Our desire to belong and be accepted is fundamental to all people. Our sense of belonging can be threatened if we lose. And even if we win. Winning brings with it its own set of issues. Many people don't address this when planning their goals in the game.
- Anchors – every experience we've ever had is stored within our unconscious vault. We have specific experiences that have created memories of ineffectiveness, or of being under pressure and not dealing with it very well. If you are about to hit a shot, and as you look at the flag you recall a flash of a feeling of failure, then your unconscious will immediately look for any state that is "similar" to that and add to it. Try making a nice fluid, confident swing now!

## States are Like Magnets

States are like magnets and our “in the moment thoughts and feelings” are like metal filings that gravitate to our core state. If we are standing over a shot and we, even for the briefest of moments, flash an image of a negative result into our mind, then a corresponding internal state will be made available to you by your unconscious mind.

In simple terms your internal magnet (core state) attracts any thoughts and feelings (metal filings) to it and magnetizes them. It doesn't matter if our thoughts and feelings of failure, or losing, or of hitting a poor shot, are brief. Their corresponding state is pre-magnetized with them. Now all the power of your core state is available for you to experience in the moment.

(This is one of the major reasons golf is such a challenging game. It is always about us. If you pursue this game for any length of time you come to the realization that golf IS an inner game. You can run but you can't hide. Your primary self image as a player dictates your overall experience of the game and how you will perform when everything is on the line.)

Our internal representations cause our nerves to dance and our bodies to produce stress responses.

It doesn't matter if this occurs in your golf game, or asking for a raise from your boss, asking someone out for a date or while making a business presentation. Your experience is created by your habituated internal representations which in turn generate your behaviors which create your results. Your inner game is the game!

How can you design a confident and resourceful inner game? How can you begin to habituate calm, centered, relaxed and focused states when the potential pressures are greatest?

The promise of peak performance coaching is to have your own personal zone(s) available to you and make it automatic. To make it unconscious. Your goal with the many exercises in this book is to become Unconsciously Competent. You don't even need to know that you know. You just act.

Along the way to personal mastery over your states there will be times when you become nervous on the golf course. Whether it's performance anxiety, how you'll look in front of your friends/colleagues, the pressure of a competitive match/tournament. With consistent application of the tools you're learning these occurrences will be minimal, yet when you do experience nerves there are several things you can do.

Monitor your breathing when you sense nervousness. How fast are you breathing? Likely very quick short breaths. Long slow breaths are essential when seeking to relax.

The interesting thing about the term “breathe” is that most everyone assumes this refers only to inhaling. Allowing our breath to remain in our lungs for a few moments AND focusing on how we exhale is equally important.

## **The Power of Your Breath**

In many forms of yoga, breathing is an essential aspect of experiencing deep meditative states. So without question properly controlled breathing can induce inner calm.

Yet rather than simply asking you to take deep breaths to calm your nerves, I want you to apply the following breathing procedure that is part of many exercises in this book. It warrants repetition.

It's as easy as 4-5-6:

- Inhale for a count of 4.
- Hold for a count of 5.
- Exhale over a count of at least 6.

This process moves you deeper into relaxation quicker than merely taking deep breaths. When we need to access a calm state a.s.a.p. we require a method that is in excess of what we need.

What I mean is this. Say you're scheduled to run in a 100 yard race. Practicing on a 110 yard track is a superior method. It stretches you and makes you run through the finish line not just to it.

Take a golf swing for example. How well do you play if you hit at the ball instead of through it? This applies to most every objective we may have. You want to move through and beyond.

If you are very nervous then taking a few breaths isn't going to do much good. Yet taking breaths in the manner described above quickly lowers your heart rate, calms your mind AND improves your focus. I prefer to use it during the planning stage of my pre-shot routine.

After some practice you will be able to stroll around your putt, assessing your read and the break, all the while breathing with the 4 – inhale, 5 – hold, 6 – exhale pattern.

## **Be the Ball**

Another great idea is to hold a golf ball in your hands while awaiting your next shot or putt. Simply squeeze it firmly. Hold it for a few seconds then release your hold on it and just notice the sensations in your hands. Do this a few times and you'll be amazed at the increased sensitivity in your hands. This improves feel which is what tends to leave first when we're nervous. Nerves tend to affect the small muscles first.

In a full swing the big muscles slow down and we don't make a full turn while the smaller muscles in our hands and arms whip back and through completely disconnected from the movement of the rest of our body.

In putting this is where the yips come from. The tiny muscles in our hands and wrists jerk uncontrollably when we're nervous. This, perhaps more than any other reason, causes players to leave the game of professional golf. Nervousness during putting shows the most. Our feel is destroyed. Our sense of distance is distorted and even the ability to hold the putter face square through impact on a 4 foot putt becomes a challenge.

With the above drill of squeezing the golf ball, holding and releasing it, we return feel to our hands and relax the small muscles. You will find these two exercises serve you well in pressure situations where you are nervous.

Telling ourselves we shouldn't be nervous or repeating "I'm not nervous, I'm not nervous" is denial of your current reality. My approach to peak performance and inner game mastery involves a serious self assessment and an honest self appraisal.

Accepting what is a prerequisite for excelling at your inner game. Walking around in denial and trying to pretend everything is fine when it clearly is not is a recipe for disaster, in my view. Once we admit where we're at emotionally and psychologically we are in a position to make a change toward what we want.

## Body Tension/Relaxation Technique

The most pervasive exercise one can do involves a similar procedure you have become used to by now. Lay in bed and do your pre-exercise routine and get completely relaxed. Once settled follow these steps:

- Squeeze your toes and hold for several seconds. Then release.
- Clench your calves, hold and release after a few seconds.
- Do the same with your thighs.
- Repeat this process throughout your entire body.
- Once complete tense your entire body, hold for a few seconds then release. Repeat this last step 2 more times.

This process is excellent for providing you with feedback around tension and relaxation. It directly helps in developing awareness of what it feels like to be completely relaxed and at ease and the contrast with tension.

This exercise is wonderful. Not only is it incredibly relaxing it creates a perfect physical state for your mental imagery exercises. Your body and mind are one so when you deeply relax your body your mind follows suit.

Make sure you take some time to enjoy this state. By the way, if you are a person who has a challenge falling to sleep occasionally, you will love this exercise. Falling asleep is effortless when we learn how to deeply relax our bodies.

Every process you're doing feeds into each other. By doing them all you will find nerves, emotional balance, anger, anxiety and many other areas, all improve on their own accord. You will simply notice one day that you are integrating so many of these powerful processes that your overall state of mind has changed for the better. Each of us has a different time frame for this eureka moment yet it will come!

An extension of nerves, in terms of its influence on your game, is performance anxiety. The next section goes into this more fully. The beauty of the methods you're learning is they are decidedly practical and can be used right away for immediate results. Mostly, though, this entire training is structured in a way for your maximum integration and accelerated learning.

Prepare for a brand new game that will amaze you and annoy your partners and opponents!

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