

Mental Training For Your Climbing Athletes

April 12, 2024

Posted By: **ARNO ILGNER** in [CWA Blog](#), [CWA Summit](#)



Sponsored Content Brought to you by Warrior's Way.

The most challenging moment for climbing coaches is when their athletes are shut down, unwilling, or unable to engage in an activity the coach thought was appropriate.

The youth athlete that boulders V9 and has only redpointed 5.11c.

The thought going through the coach's mind is: "How can 5.11 be a problem when they're so strong?" But it is a problem for the athlete – a mental challenge, not a physical one. So how can coaches solve that problem and re-engage the athlete?

[Register for Warrior's Way Pre-Conference](#)

Climbing, both as a sport and industry, is maturing. All aspects of training need to be addressed to develop athletes so they can give their 'all' in competitions. The physical and technical aspects of training have been robustly developed.

The lacking ingredient is often mental training. This missing ingredient determines the outcomes of all other training. You can't apply physical and technique training if you're afraid or if your mind is telling you that you're not strong enough. So, there's the problem: mental training is missing.

How We Solve It

The solution doesn't just include mental training in programming. It's integrating mental training into the gym culture and community. This integration is developed around shared values.

Mental training is a way to make communities more cohesive. To do this, you create a shared

language for how communities are motivated. Motivation drives decision-making and action.

If you address the motivation, then the community will be moving forward along the same values. There are two key directions for mental training: down and up.

Managing Consequences of Risk (Down Direction)

We know that climbing is risky, and people can get hurt doing it. Yet, we open indoor climbing gyms wanting to share this wonderful sport with more people. You need to find ways that mitigate risk while still allowing members to take them.

All decisions have consequences. You only know those consequences if you've experienced them. The key word here is 'know.' Knowing comes from experience. You know something when you experience it, not before.

In climbing, one consequence is falling. Falling is stressful for members, and they can convert their stress into comfort by practicing falling with qualified instructors. Many gyms integrate some falling practices in their programming. For example, members take a couple of falls during lead testing. Does this way of integrating falling help members understand the consequences?

To answer that, you need to understand motivation. Are you motivated to just check off a box on the lead test form? Is the member motivated by fear to get it over with? Both are **end-result motivations, which aren't sustainable for developing knowledge of the consequences**. A more helpful motivation is process-based. Taking falls is part of skill development.

So, you need to approach falling as developing a skill. Find a way to do it incrementally, introducing a little stress at a time.

Doing it this way allows members to be present for the stress, and to mentally process falling into a skill. They know how to fall because they've experienced a quality way to fall. Incremental falling practice trains your whole gym community. They know more about those risks because of their falling experiences. That helps them take more responsibility for their risk choices.

Coaching Into Risks (Up Direction)

Again, motivation is important to look at. Both end-result and process motivations are important. It's a matter of when you utilize each one. End-result motivation helps you identify goals for athletes. That helps you know the direction to take the training. Then, when you engage in the training itself, you shift to being process-motivated.

Process motivation guides you to engage athletes in risks and stress that gently stretch them. Rather than coaching them into the panic zone, and having them tough it out, you coach them into their resilient zone where they can learn. This helps them process the stress of difficult climbing.

Your athletes need to be able to pay attention to what you're teaching. 'Process' coaching helps them be present for and process the stress you introduce. The mental training aspects of process coaching include breathing, eyes, and body. You coach athletes to breathe to help them process stress. You guide their eyes to direct their attention to the moment. You engage their bodies toward the postures and relaxation/tension balance that's needed.

Learn More: Register for The Warrior's Way Pre-Conference

The Warrior's Way' founder Arno Ilgner will be sponsoring a pre-conference session at the 2024 CWA Summit. They'll go through the specifics of this article, and enhance your CWA Summit experience for a low added cost.

[Register for Warrior's Way Pre-Conference](#)

This gives you a way to track how they're processing the stress you've introduced. You can hear their breathing, notice where their eyes are looking, and see how they engage their bodies. If they're not using their breathing, eyes, and body, then you diminish the stress to a level they can process and pay attention to.

It takes skill development for coaches to be able to do this.

For your gym to be a place where youth and adult athletes can excel, your gym staff must have specific coaching skills to effectively coach members. Process motivation for coaching creates an atmosphere of enjoyment for your staff and members so they learn from your programming.

Systematic Tools

These falling practice and coaching tools could be integrated into your onboarding of members and climbing instruction, such as lead climbing courses, and lead/belay instruction and testing. Make these tools stick by having a shared language that creates a cohesive community.

Here's a shared language you can begin to integrate into your community:

- You know something when you experience it, not before
- Practice falling as a skill
- Take small incremental steps into risk
- Process stress into comfort

- Coach along processes

Your staff will walk the gym floor with a shared language and motivation to get to know members based on their level of experience with falling and difficult climbing. They'll encourage members to coach each other along processes.

And what about that strong youth athlete we started with?

The coach would realize that youth are experiencing too much stress. The coach would assess the athlete's level of comfort with the down and up directions. That would prompt them to do more falling practice or attention training to stay focused on difficult climbing. The athlete and the coach would both experience progress being made, which will fuel more process motivation for both to move forward.

About the Author



Arno Ilgner distinguished himself as a pioneering rock climber in the 1970s and 80s. In 1995, after searching the literature and practice of mental training, Ilgner formalized his methods, created The Warrior's Way, and began teaching full time. Ilgner has taught clinics across the U.S.A. and abroad. He holds a BA in Geology, operated a geological consulting firm, acted as CFO for a company, and attended the Army Ranger School. He lives and climbs in Tennessee..

☐ **2024 CWA SUMMIT SESSION
SPOTLIGHT: EATING DISORDERS
IN INDOOR CLIMBING**

April 12, 2024

**CWA ADDS MEMBERSHIP
MANAGER** ☐

April 12, 2024