

PRACTICING IN THE ZONE

By Harry A. Olson, Ph.D.

The “Zone”, The “Sweet Spot in Time”, the “Winning Feeling”. Athletes have different terms for it, but they all mean the same thing.

It’s the Peak Performance State, the moment which every athlete craves. It’s that blessed moment when everything flows in perfect harmony. Body, mind and spirit are in total sync and performance is flawless. Only when in the Zone does the athlete have the best chance to win.

You’ve been there. Perhaps you were with a client, or working up a plan, or engaging in a sport or hobby. The state came on you “by chance”. You didn’t expect it, but it felt great. When the activity was over, you said, “Wow”. You hoped – perhaps prayed – that it would come back the next time, but it eluded you.

Such is the Zone for most people. It happens to come willy-nilly, when it wants.

Actually, such is not the case. It comes when certain mind-body conditions are right.

The Zone can actually be triggered. But first, let’s define what we’re talking about.

Anatomy of The Zone

The Zone has certain specific characteristics that all work together:

- Automatic behavior – you can’t force the Zone, you just let it happen.
- Natural coordination of all mental and bodily systems – everything works smoothly in sync.
- Increased concentration and dissociation – focus is narrowed upon the task at hand; distractions are eliminated.
- Absorption – you’re living in the moment. There is no thought of past or future.
- Perception changes and time distortion – time seems to speed up or slow down, depending on the nature of the activity. For example: a client interview may seem to fly by, while a racecar driver will feel like he has all the time in the world to make a dangerous move.
- Peak experience – you feel exhilarated a natural high.
- Hemispheric shift – at the moment of peak performance, the left side of the brain relaxes its analytic functions and erupts in a burst of alpha waves, which help relaxation. The right hemisphere, the more creative, intuitive side takes over.
- Diminished pain experience – any injuries will be felt less, headaches may go away.
- Amnesia – you won’t remember all the details afterward.
- Decrease in planning function – you operate more on intuition and gut feeling.
- No struggle or felt stress.

Practicing In The Zone

Wouldn’t it be great if you could be in the Zone routinely when working with clients, or when you’re on the phone, or on the golf course?

You can increase the probability of the Zone’s occurrence, and can actually learn to trigger it when needed. Doing so is not complicated, but it will take consistent practice. Here are some steps to help you get there.

1. Practice the desired skill to the point of comfort. For the Zone to kick in, you need to have reasonable proficiency in the skill itself. You won't have a Zone experience making a cold call if you have no idea of what you will say. If you have your script or process down pat, however, then your probability of success is much greater.
2. Regularly visualize yourself performing at your peak in the desired activity. Spend a few moments each day getting relaxed and then mentally rehearse yourself going through the desired activity from beginning to end, in as much detail as possible. See yourself performing smoothly and flawlessly, being totally focused and in the moment, doing and/or saying just the right things, etc. Consistently visualizing a specific process over time actually creates new neural pathways in the brain that increase the probability of new behaviors occurring more automatically. In behavioral terms, you're creating a new response habit.
3. Anchor this image with a trigger cue. I was working with a marathoner who needed more endurance. He visualized himself running up a steep hill, and when he wanted more energy, he'd close his eyes and tell himself, "Go - Go - Go". After sufficient practice, when he ran the marathon for real and came to the hill, he quickly closed his eyes, told himself "Go - Go - Go", and he got the energy boost he needed.
 With a financial advisor, I suggested that he visualize a surge of power coming from touching his client's doorknob, up through his arm, throughout his body. The cue can be anything simple, either physical or visual. It can be as simple as pressing your left thumb and little finger together. The trick is to visualize it or suggest it to yourself while doing the mental rehearsal.
 This is nothing more than Paired Association Learning, like Pavlov used when he trained his dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell. You want to train yourself to click into the Zone on command for a specific desired activity.
4. If you need help, get some coaching. If you're unsure how to proceed or want to make sure you're doing it right, a coach can help. You need someone who is skilled in mental training techniques, Neuro Linguistic Programming, or similar methods. Such a coach need not be local. Much coaching, even with methods such as these, is done totally effectively over the phone.

World class athletes know that their performance in competition is too important to leave to chance. The vast majority of them have learned how to bring on the Zone under pressure.

Don't you deserve the same advantage?

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