

Top Five Problems That Affect Your Mental Game

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Golf is a game that is played by the body but won with the mind. Taking this maxim further, we need to identify and acknowledge our most common mental faults before we can address them. Golfers often complain about various problems in their mental games and here are the five most common: (1) I don't play my best when it matters most to me, (2) I lose confidence in my putting (3) I can't cope with my nerves, especially on the first tee (4) I'm stuck in a slump and (5) I lose concentration at different times during a round of golf. We shall deal with each mental fault in turn.

1. I don't play my best when it matters most to me

Every golfer would like to have ultimate personal control on the type of game she plays. And in an effort to gain such personal control, they tend to practise constantly. This practice is laudable when it serves a purpose but we often find that golf practice is long and lazy rather than short and focused. This long and lazy practice does not present the same challenges that are experienced on the golf course which results in a much poorer performance when it matters most. Here are two ways to challenge yourself in practice: First, practice shots from lies that are typical on the golf course (e.g., uphill lies, downhill lies). Aim at a target and see how many times out of ten you can land the ball close to your target. Set a challenging target for yourself and then work to improve upon it. Second, organize a skills competition with a friend to encourage the thoughts and feelings you might experience on the golf course when you are competing. For instance, you might choose 5 targets to hit on the practice range in a competition round with a friend. The winner is the person who is most consistent after three competition rounds. These simple adjustments to your practice will help you practise how you intend to play.

2. I lose confidence in my putting

Putting is a difficult skill in golf with much more failure than success experienced even by the best golfers in the world. If we try something (i.e., putt a ball to hole) and fail often (i.e., the ball does not go in the hole) it is easy to undermine our confidence. In other words, we tell ourselves "I don't seem to score every putt so I must not be a good putter". This is an inaccurate and unhelpful view of one's putting. If we accept that putting is challenging and change how we perceive "success" and "failure", our confidence in our putting improves. Always begin and end a putting session with a diet of success. This might mean putting ten two-foot putts in a row or stroking ten putts from the centre of the putting green to land on the fringe. This diet of success increases one's confidence to persist at more difficult putting drills.

3. I can't cope with my nerves, especially when I am on the first tee.

Feeling nervous is a natural part of human existence. Our emotions have helped us survive for thousands of years but they're not always helpful for playing golf. We feel nervous because something is important and valued by us (e.g., to show others how competent we are in golf) but the outcome is uncertain (i.e., it might not land on the fairway). On the first tee, we may feel nervous because we want to land the ball in the fairway but we are unsure if we can execute the skill as we would like to do so and those around us might suggest we are not "good golfers". The most sensible advice on the first tee is to choose the club that you feel gives you the best chance of landing the ball on the fairway – this choice really is yours. When we hit with the club with which we are most comfortable we gain confidence and control. You'll increase the chances of landing the ball in the fairway and play confident golf.

4. I'm stuck in a slump

All golfers at all levels experience down times. At the highest level, these slumps are well publicized and while some last a few months (e.g., Rory McIlroy), others are protracted (e.g., David Duval). One of the first things to do when you *feel* you are playing poorly is to establish whether this is fact or fiction because it is easy to be mistaken about what we *feel* and what is *real*. For instance, one professional golfer confided "my approach shots are excellent but my putting is awful – I just can't shake it off". When we examined this notion, it became apparent that his percentage of *greens in regulation* hit was around 60% while his more successful colleagues had percentages closer to 75%. Interestingly, he typically averaged 29 putts per round, just above the tour average. This information prompted the golfer to think differently about his golf and work more on his approach shots. Identify your weaknesses and work upon them to make them strengths.

5. I lose concentration at different times during a round of golf.

Concentration is often described as "interest in action". In other words, it is easy for us to concentrate when we are interested in what we are doing. Sometimes, however, we can allow ourselves to be distracted by troublesome thoughts and feelings (i.e., internal distractions) or by wet and windy weather (i.e., external distractions). These distractions mean that we are shining our *mental spotlight* on things that are not helpful to execute the task at hand. All golfers need a reliable pre-shot routine to assist them to focus on the shot at hand. A routine ought to be established and practiced consistently to be effective for competition. A simple routine is to plan your shot, focus only on the back of the ball and swing smoothly. It will help you to focus on one shot at a time.