

Improve your hunting accuracy with psychology

By Dr Nicola Davies

Part of your skill as a hunter is natural – the instinct you were born with and have honed over the years. Part of your skill is learned – you practise techniques again and again, until they become second nature. Now, if you're ready to take your hunting skills to the next level, you can explore the mental part of the game – the specific psychological tactics that can help improve your accuracy with the bow.

Concentration

Psychology doesn't just examine how and why we act as we do. It also probes how we can change our behaviours. Sports psychology, in particular, focuses on the mental processes athletes use in competitive games and seeks ways to enhance athletic performance. By breaking down an athlete's routine and examining it minutely, sports psychologists can help athletes significantly improve their performance.

Bowhunting isn't as far removed from athletics as you might think – both require great accuracy and concentration. Sports psychology can help you overcome any anxiety that might disturb your concentration. In particular, it can boost your self-confidence and allow you to push yourself as a hunter. For example, one sports psychology technique involves evaluating and controlling for your natural tendencies as a bowhunter, based on your personality type. By anticipating how you will react and behave in certain situations you can evaluate whether that reaction benefits you or hurts you in the hunt. If it benefits you, then you can take steps to enhance your reaction and achieve better results. If, on the other hand, your reaction in certain situations tends to result in a less effective outcome, you can create a plan to override your natural tendency and create a new, more effective response.

Mental Toughness

If you're a mentally tough hunter, then you are self-confident and able to perform in high stress situations. You may also perform better under time constraints, can concentrate even in the midst of distractions, and trust in your ability to perform well regardless of the circumstances.

However, what if that's not your personality? This is where

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the theories of sports psychology come into play – you can use psychological techniques to change your behaviour and improve your bowhunting skills. Even the famed bowhunter Fred Bear took years to master the sport. Fred describes the challenge: “I hunt deer because I love the entire process; the preparation, the excitement, and sustained suspense of trying to match my woods-lore against the finely honed instincts of these creatures.”

So, what are some of the psychological techniques experts such as Fred Bear might use?

Psychological Techniques for Success

Even before you leave for your next hunt, you can take steps to prepare yourself mentally. Hunting evokes an enormous amount of anxiety and excitement. If you can control that anxiety, you will be better able to focus on your target when the time is right. Some helpful techniques you can explore before the hunt include:

🐾 Goal setting. Know what you hope to achieve from the expedition. The key is to define specific, measurable goals that you can realistically attain. Rather than setting yourself up for failure by deciding you want to kill three deer inside of an hour, set a goal to focus completely on each shot you take. Being clear and specific about your goals creates a road map for your success. As Fred Bear noted, “A hunt based only on trophies taken

falls far short of what the ultimate goals should be... time to commune with your inner soul as you share the outdoors with the birds, animals, and fish that live there.”

🐾 *Arousal regulation.* Timing is critical in hunting. Knowing when and how to react can determine whether a shot flies home or falls short. Every decision you make on the hunt should be made mindfully. Become aware of your arousal levels during the hunt, and work to regulate them. Relax your muscles and your mind to find the perfect balance between anxiety and readiness. Use relaxation techniques to control your arousal, calm yourself, and make rational decisions. When you replace arousal with cognitive clarity, you maximize your window for success. Breathing techniques can be particularly useful here. Bowhunter Bill Lawson says, “When I am shooting, I exhale as I draw the bow, take a full breath as I pre-load into the cam’s wall at anchor, and then get the trigger pre-loaded. From there, I try to shoot within seven to eight seconds. If not, I let down.” The recommended time frame for executing a shot after holding your breath is five to seven seconds – visual acuity starts to decrease after seven seconds.

🐾 *Imagery.* Use imagery prior to the hunt to review the different scenarios you may encounter in the field. Imagery allows you to practice what you will need to do before you are in the stress-filled real-life situation of the hunt. If you take the time to imagine the circumstances of different situations in minute detail, you will be able to carefully consider all available options – a luxury you can’t afford when you are in the field. In the field, there is no margin for error. You only get one shot – literally. However, if you can imagine the possible outcome of your actions ahead of time, you can determine the best course of action to take when everything is really on the line.

It’s important to note that simply imagining yourself as an expert marksman isn’t the intent. Rather, imagery requires using all of your senses to recreate the experience in as much

detail as possible. Using imagery this way can significantly increase your confidence and concentration during the hunt.

🐾 *Pre-performance practice.* Hunting is highly unpredictable. Running through routines you will encounter in different environments helps create the muscle memory and the automatic responses you need to rely on in high-stress situations. When your adrenaline is pumping, it is easy to make mistakes. Making certain movements and routines automatic allows your brain to focus on the specifics of a given situation and make better decisions. To get the most out of your practice, make it as close to reality as possible – for example, shoot 3-D targets within natural hunting conditions. The brain is rewired during pre-performance practice, helping you to focus and maintain a sharp eye for your target. Research has shown that the cerebellum, the part of the brain involved in our actions, is the key reason why practice really does make perfect – by doing the same thing again and again, you hardwire it into long-term muscle memory that is stored in the cerebellum. The cerebellum, although only 10% of total brain volume, holds over 50% of the brain’s neurons.

🐾 *Self-talk.* You will often find yourself alone in the field - with no one to guide you, to calm you down, or to talk you through the best course of action. By designating specific phrases ahead of time, you can help cue yourself to relax, focus, and concentrate. Self-talk offers a way to stay calm, while literally talking yourself through the phases of the hunt. It allows you to partially disconnect from the situation and break it down into a series of events. This, in turn, can make the timing of your actions less emotional and more automatic.

🐾 *Your natural character* is a key part of your hunting personality. By becoming more aware of your natural tendencies and using sports psychology techniques to enhance or inhibit them, you can improve your bowhunting performance and the challenge and sense of achievement you gain from it. 

