

Mental Focus for Judo

If you're serious about learning a martial art like judo then you have to develop mental focus.

Mental focus can be thought of as the ability to deal with external and internal stimuli in an appropriate way for the situation at hand. It's a skill not an innate ability which means it can be taught, learned, practiced and developed. It is one aspect of mental toughness.

If you've watched "The Karate Kid" you may remember Daniel waxing the car, sanding the floor, painting the fence. One thing he was learning was the repetitive movement to perfect a physical skill, but the other was learning and perfecting the mental focus to be able to make those skills automatic or appear to occur as a reflex.

For the aspiring or active competitor, here is how I view a day of competition from a mental focus perspective.

For me, there are degrees/levels of focus on the day of competition.

- First level is awareness and thinking through the day, using a routine, being relaxed but a bit on edge at the same time.
- Second level is during warm-up where you get past hearing your heart beat and the tight chest where your breathing hasn't caught up with your uchikomi work. You start sweating and start to block out surrounding people warming up.
- Third level is standing in the chute or at the side of the mat to go on deck. Here you may talk to other people but you're really not there, you're in that calm place inwardly focused.
- Fourth is the match where you see and hear nothing but your opponent, sometimes not even the referee! You don't think just DO. Every time there's a matte you release and refocus ready for hajime. If you don't do the release and refocus your field gradually shortens and you start making mistakes as your mind gets fatigued.
- Fifth is when the match has been awarded and you release to let your mind relax and then go back to the second level for the next match.

What I have described in this are the three main components of mental focus – attention, view and intensity.

Take, for example, a workout in the dojo. There are times when you are aware of everyone around you and enjoying warming up and then there are times when you are thinking only about that step or the pulling arm for a technique. Your attention varies from a wide to narrow focus depending on the task.

Sometimes your view is focused on the external stimuli like the person who is using you to practice uchikomi. As a good partner you are trying to provide enough resistance but not too much, making comment to help your partner with a technique through observation and feel, or maybe you are watching someone demonstrate before you try a technique. Other times you focus internally, as in randori where you do different things to unbalance your opponent so you can try your throws, or in

newaza based on reactions from your opponent and what you feel and react to rather than consciously think about. So depending on the task or part of the task your focus is either external or internal.

There are times when you are relaxed in a water break seeing everyone around you and chatting or you've just finished a set of speed uchikomi and comment to your partner, or maybe you're resting between randori sessions. Then there are other times when you have a single narrow focus on making sure your knees stay tight as you apply an armbar or you catch that exact moment when your partner steps so you sweep correctly with your foot. Here you're either focusing with more or less intensity depending on what you're doing.

One thing which tends to be a limiting factor in maintaining optimum focus, and especially optimum intensity, is how long you can maintain that level before mental fatigue becomes an issue. This is often seen more clearly with children than adults. Adults may be polite and patient despite getting bored by lengthy demonstrations while children vote with their feet and start fidgeting or messing around. You see this in clinics and seminars where there is SO much information and SO little time for even the smartest, most experienced people to consolidate the information through successful practice, and thus learn and retain the information. Having video taken at these sessions and being able to review later is invaluable and necessary to get the most out of the experience.

For anyone to enjoy learning and developing in judo they need to be able to switch between levels of focus according to the activity. If you can practice skills in the dojo you can then work on making them successful in randori and, if you choose, take them into competition to the highest level. Conversely, if you don't practice something in the dojo, and then under pressure of randori, your chances of reproducing it in shiai are limited - more luck than skill.

The added benefit you get in releasing and relaxing mental focus is the physical muscle relaxation from the mental release that enables you to keep going and get the most benefit from the workout. In competition this mental and physical relaxation is what enables you to refocus and reenergise throughout the day to still look fresh and peak for finals.

To reiterate, this focusing, as well as releasing, is a process which is learned. To learn and retain it you have to understand the various degrees of focus you need for different aspects of your judo and then practice them regularly. To be able to have optimum mental focus under pressure you have to be able to trust that it's automatic. Thinking about what you should be doing is a distraction you cannot afford even in club randori. In competition lack of correct mental focus becomes an increasing handicap and detriment to performance as the level of competition moves from local to National, World and Olympics.



Kaori Matsumoto -57kg Olympic Gold, London, 2012

Here are some things you can do to help you understand and practice your optimum levels for attention, view and intensity components of mental focus.

1. Keep a diary and note down aspects you try and the feedback you get.
2. Pick one aspect to start with e.g. wide to narrow focus.
3. Consciously take in the whole dojo for a session or part of it and then consciously zero in on just one aspect.
4. Remember that you will have less mental fatigue from the wide versus narrow focus so don't get down on yourself when you can't do the ultra narrow focus for 5 minutes or even 2 sometimes!
5. Use conscious breathing to help you relax and refocus. This can be done by focusing on breathing out and shrugging your shoulders at matte, when you get up after being thrown or when you finish a round of randori.
6. Set-up a routine of listening to energising music on your way to the dojo, thinking through a throw you're working on or are having great success with. Start blocking out the list of tasks you have at home or work so they won't distract you while you workout.
7. Close your eyes when you practice sometimes so that you can focus on internal rather than external queues. Then remember and practice picking up the internal queues.
8. Spend time when doing uchikomi practice thinking about what each body part is doing and then stop thinking for some repetitions so you can find out how automatic the technique has become.
9. When you bow-in to do randori with someone clear your mind. Every time you start to think about what you're doing, block the thoughts. Block out the sounds in the dojo.
10. When you've been disappointed by a workout session, mentally rehearse about something you do well. Another way is to write down what you were disappointed about and then shred it or burn it and let that help you to mentally let it go.
11. When you've had a great workout session, mentally rehearse the positives and enjoy the feeling.
12. Take time at the end of a workout session to relax both your body and mind. Do some yoga or stretching. Use it as a time to find that calm inwardly focused place.

Finally, your mind is as powerful a tool as your body. Educate it, train it, test it but also learn to relax it. Above all, enjoy your judo!!

Thanks to Mark Lonsdale for his feedback and editorial suggestions.

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