

The Mental Side of Shooting

Guest Tip by Dr. Mike Keyes, MD. (Dr. Keyes is a psychiatrist who has worked with the US Team and is a competitive shooter himself. This 'tip' is the first of a series on mental training.)

Today the mental side of shooting has become a familiar and vital part of the game in the United States. However, some of us can remember when even the best US shooters felt mental training was a waste of time until it became obvious we couldn't win at the International level without it. Since then there has been an effort to understand how match stress affects shooters and how to deal with the mental environment of a match. To shoot well in a match, a shooter will need to develop all three parts of the game: Technical competence, physical fitness, and mental toughness. As the shooter progresses in ability and performance, the ratios of each change, but the triad has to be there or the shooter will not perform well and his improvement will stop. The worst obstacle to improvement and high performance is Match Stress. No matter who you are or at what level you shoot (novice, intermediate, master or elite), match pressure will affect you. If a shooter tells you that match pressure does not affect HIM, check his pulse (or in international matches his blood or urine!) At all levels, a shooter must understand and learn to deal with this stress. So - first of all, what is match stress? We will start with the basics. Humans are not designed to be competitive in the way we are in shooting matches. This is ironic, because such competitions came out of warfare, which is actually fairly compatible with human psychology! Matches are different because man is a social animal and we are born, live and die in groups of people and spend much of our time dealing with others. We make friends, we live in groups, we do business, etc. And, we shoot in competition with OTHERS. Therein lies the source of match stress. Man has the quirk of needing to establish hierarchies. This is a primate trait and in human society translates as the urge to be number one or dominate the group. However, society frowns on this ambition in many ways and children are taught to share, to 'be nice' to others, etc. And, when we behave in these 'acceptable' ways - we DON'T KEEP SCORE. Yet, when we are in a shooting match, we DO keep score and one shooter is the winner and the others are not. Worse, EVERYBODY knows exactly where you placed - both in this match and in the general sense of the shooting community. So - when you shoot, you are at a social event (so 'be nice'), yet you are expected to dominate all the others and everyone else has the same mandate. Psychologists call this 'cognitive dissonance' and one result is Match Stress. Match stress doesn't occur when you go hunting (also usually a social event) because there is no absolute standard to meet or pressure to be perfect. Your ego is safe while hunting and is not on the line the way it is in a match. There are dozens of well used reasons why 'the big one got away' that can and do save one's ego! But even small shooting matches cause Match Pressure and high level matches cause an effect that even an elite level shooter may not be ready to deal with. All because you are laying your ego on the line in front of a crowd of peers while trying to meet a standard of perfection most people can't reach and you probably never will! And you thought shooting was supposed to be fun! While the above explanation is somewhat theoretical, the EFFECTS of stress are well known and obvious. For over 100 years scientists have described a 'fight or flight' response to threat which is mediated by adrenaline (and a

bunch of other hormones) and is predictable in its effects on humans. If allowed to escalate, the normal response to threat can lead to paralysis, but the usual response is an alerting effect that still can have troubling consequences for the match shooter. While the adrenaline response to stress makes vision better, makes you stronger and quicker, and puts a burst of energy in the form of glucose into your body, there is more - none of it good for a shooter. We have all felt the physical negative effects - sweaty palms, urinary frequency, rapid pulse, trembling limbs, etc. But the worst effects are mental. The fight or flight reflex sets into motion a whole set of predictable mental conditions including anxiety, poor concentration, and automatic thoughts of possible failure. These intrusive and negative thoughts interfere with good performance. The final result can be a negative feedback loop in which the shooter has a few bad shots, develops anxiety and then has more bad shots as a result. This can continue until performance totally degrades. But - learning the basics of mental training such as relaxation, visualization and imagery can overcome these negative aspects. That will be the subject of next tip!"

Don

[Back to Notes](#)