

12 STEPS TO A CLINICALLY FITTER BRAIN

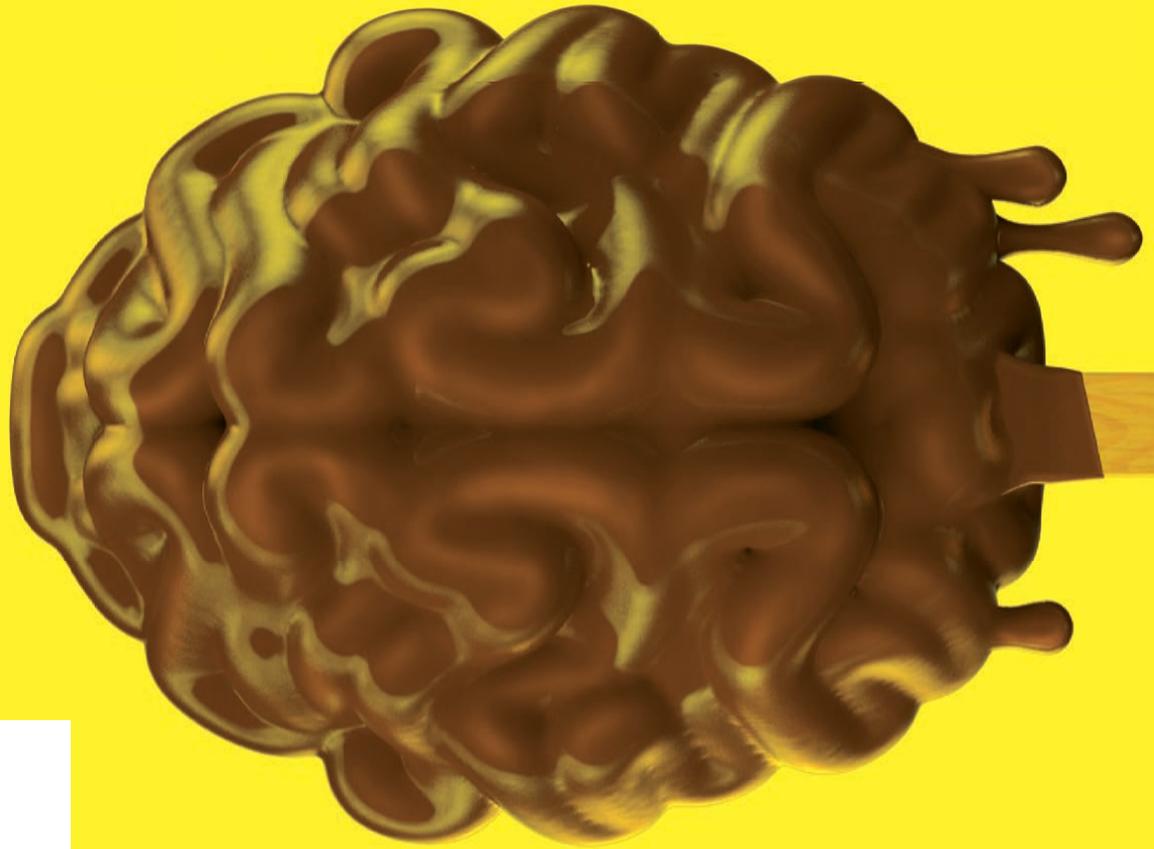
JULY 2018 • 71

The thoughts in your mind have a decisive impact on your nutrition practices, exercise performance and ability to stay motivated. Here's how to power up your outlook so you're in the best possible position to make week-on-week improvements

WORDS

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1 NOTICE SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS

We all have an internal commentary of thoughts that accompanies us throughout the day. Our minds have minds of their own and automatically share their opinions: “You’ll never lose weight”; “You’re too tired to go to the gym.” The secret to peak performance is to realize that just because you have a thought doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily true. The first step is to notice any self-defeating thoughts. The next is to respond with an empowering thought, which can be motivational (e.g. “I can do this”) or instructional (e.g. “Keep your eyes on the ball”). Research reveals that this strategy increases strength and enhances sports skill.

FIT Tip: It might seem odd at first, but create a list of empowering thoughts that you can bring to mind when you’re feeling tired or facing sporting defeat. Professional athletes at the top of their game utilize this technique.

2 ELEVATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Our expectations are remarkably influential. Science has revealed that our experience is based on what we think will happen next. Clinical trials have demonstrated that completely inactive placebos, such as saltwater, can actually relieve pain with similar effects to injecting morphine. The latest research reveals that people’s weight loss is linked to the total amount they expect to lose. All the fears, anxieties, worries and self-doubts that we carry play a role when it comes to achieving the physique you want. Ultimately this means you can only achieve what you believe is possible.

THE FIRST STEP IS TO NOTICE ANY SELF-DEFEATING THOUGHTS

FIT Tip: Become aware of any self-imposed limitations you might be holding on to. Notice when your mind says “I can’t” or “I could never...”. See if you can open yourself to the possibility that you might be able to achieve more than you currently believe.

3 BE MINDFUL WHILE EATING

A scientific review of 24 studies found, when distracted, people eat more food, at the time and later on. Your brain uses visual information to decide how much to eat, relying on your attention and memory. If you don't pay attention to the food you're eating and can't remember what you've wolfed down, you're more likely to consume excess calories. This partly explains why people eat more in groups than when alone. Dine with six friends and you'll eat a whopping 76% more. That's the equivalent of swapping a 230g burger for one that's more than 400g.

FIT Tip: Walk away from the TV, close your laptop, put down your phone, stop driving and instead allow yourself the time to fully enjoy your food. Slow down your eating and if you're eating with friends, focus on your food and the conversation.

4 START WHEREVER YOU ARE

Long-term gains come from long-term change. The key is to create small, daily habits that take you towards your goals. The advantage of habits is that they persist even when motivation and interest desist. You might have heard that it takes 21 days to form a habit – this is actually a myth. The latest research reveals that it takes around 66 days. Studies show that actions that are simpler become second nature more quickly. So start regardless of where you are at in life and soon you'll look back and be surprised at the progress you've made.

FIT Tip: Whether you're an experienced athlete or new to exercise, choose one simple action that you can add to your daily routine over the next 10 weeks. Plan where and when you'll take this action and soon you'll be doing it without even thinking about it. Small actions lead to big gains when measured over the long term.

5 SET UNIQUELY PERSONAL TARGETS

Do you want to run faster, cycle quicker or lift more on a specific exercise? Then all you need to do is try your best. Or is it? A new scientific review investigated the effects of having specific targets

to achieve during workouts, as opposed to being instructed to simply try your best. Analysis revealed that setting goals increases maximal strength, muscular endurance and power. Goals direct your attention, lead to greater effort, and increase persistence. Recent research has demonstrated that those who write down their goals accomplish 50% more than those who don't.

FIT Tip: Whether you are resistance training, in a spinning class or running a 10k, create little goals for the number of reps, watts output or pace that you want to achieve. Pick up a training diary or download an app and record your performance. By setting non-generic goals and tracking your progress, you're more likely to work harder and for longer.

6 MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR REST PERIODS

What do you do between exercise sets? We all kill time in the gym in different ways: checking our Instagram or Facebook newsfeed, texting, aimlessly walking around or chatting to that dude whose name you never asked. There could be a better way. Research shows that imagining performing an exercise results in strength gains of around 10-30%. A study that implemented this imagery technique during rest periods found that focusing on muscle activation, as opposed to relaxation, led to the biggest gains. Improvements could be linked to our brains reorganizing the neural circuits involved in planning, controlling and executing body movements.

FIT Tip: Whether you rest for 30 seconds or 3 minutes, use your rest time to imagine yourself knocking out a few more reps. Your brain and muscles will fire up, allowing you to access even more strength in your next set.

7 ADJUST YOUR VIEWPOINT

There's little doubt your emotions influence your performance. Consider soccer's penalty kick – it's a prime example of one of the most intensely emotional situations in sports. Even the world's greatest players miss when it matters most largely because when you feel anxious, your muscles tighten. Anxiety-induced muscle tension can slightly alter a footballer's kick or golfer's putting stroke, making the difference between hitting the goal posts crossbar or the back of the net and missing or sinking that putt. How we feel is influenced by the way that we view a situation. Research shows players instructed to view a penalty kick as a challenge rather than as a pressure situation reported less anxiety and greater self-confidence.

FIT Tip: When you're stepping up to take a kick in your weekly 5-a-side match or putt for the birdie against your best mate, frame this as an opportunity to use your skills and rise to the challenge of the competition.

8 FOCUS ON THE WEIGHTS

You may have heard rumors about the mind-muscle connection, but it is a very real event. Research has revealed the

LONG-TERM GAINS COME FROM LONG-TERM CHANGE

WE'VE ALL "HIT THE WALL" WHILE RUNNING

focus of our attention during exercise affects the activity of our muscles. However, you may have been told to concentrate on your muscles when working out to become ripped like Arnie. Science suggests otherwise. Studies show that when doing bicep curls, focusing on the movement of the weight bar as opposed to your arms, actually results in greater muscular efficiency and maximal force production. The evidence indicates that this type of focus leads to more effective recruitment and coordination of the fibers within and between your muscles, allowing you to lift even more.

FIT Tip: If you want to maximize your strength, direct your attention to the movement of the weights while you're working out.

9 TRACK THE TRAJECTORY

You're on holiday playing volleyball at the hotel. It's supposed to be a "friendly", but you'd be forgiven for thinking it's the National Volleyball Championships. It's 24-24 and you're about to serve. Your team is depending on you so you concentrate on executing the perfect hand movements. You smash that ball straight into the net, losing the point and your dignity. What went wrong? You focused on your body. Research has shown that you're more accurate when you focus on the intended trajectory of a ball rather than your form. This external focus has been found to enhance precision, whether throwing darts, Frisbees, taking a free kick, basketball free throw, or that crucial holiday volleyball serve.

FIT Tip: When you're playing sports, allow your form to automatically flow. Focus on the intended trajectory of the ball and you'll be more likely to hit that target.

10 OVERCOME THE WALL

We've all "hit the wall" while running – that sudden fatigue and feeling that all the energy has drained from your body. Your legs begin to slow and your determination to achieve your personal best disappears. Truth is, your mind plays a significant role in this phenomenon. Research has revealed runners who expect to hit the wall are actually more likely to do so. Analysis has found that daydreaming while running increases your chances of fatiguing, while focusing too much on the discomfort that you're experiencing makes it harder to recover during the race.

FIT Tip: While running, make brief, regular "internal checks" on your breathing, thirst, perspiration and body. However, direct your attention outwards most of the time, particularly when you begin to tire during an event such as a race. Take in mile markers, your split times, water stations, spectators

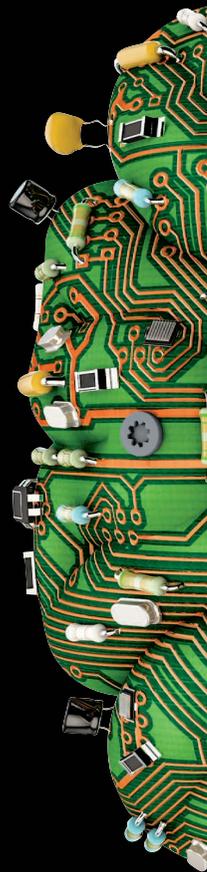
and the general atmosphere. This will give you the greatest chance of achieving optimal performance and breaking that PB.

11 RETRAIN YOUR BRAIN

Your brain has evolved to scan the environment for threats. This "negativity bias" has ensured the human species' survival, but it can deplete your motivation. Too often the focus is placed squarely on the "negative": body parts you don't like, a fat loss plateau or the entire tub of ice-cream you smashed. You can become demoralized and then give up on your health, body or performance goals. The key to staying motivated for life is retraining your brain to focus on the small wins. Acknowledge and celebrate the improvements you're making, whether with your nutrition or workouts. Olympians use this technique to stay driven during months of intense training.

FIT Tip: At the end of each day note down three things that went well, whether related to eating well, being active or anything else. This science-based strategy will retrain your brain to see the positive, recognize the progress you're making and leave you feeling happier.

YOUR BRAIN HAS EVOLVED TO SCAN THE ENVIRONMENT FOR THREATS



12 HACK YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS

Subconscious forces drive your eating habits. We all unknowingly pick up cues from the environment and while you might think you're too smart to be tricked into eating 31% more ice-cream by the size of your bowl - it does happen. Science has taught us that we're all affected by subconscious influences because even office staff eat 48% more chocolates and underestimate how much they eat when a bowl is placed in front of them rather than six feet away.

FIT Tip: Restructure your environment. Thankfully this doesn't involve taking apart and reassembling all your IKEA furniture. Reduce mindless desktop dining and night-time grazing by keeping your kitchen surfaces and desk clear of snacks. Use smaller plates and bowls. Put everything you feel like eating on your plate, rather than keeping serving bowls in front of you at the table. You'll be less likely to eat food just because it's there.

