

What You Should Do Every Morning to Boost Stroke Recovery

April 11, 2016



Mental practice is a highly effective way to boost stroke recovery (article dated 12/30/2015), and it's one of our top recommended habits to develop.

Here's why you should use mental practice every morning – and why you'll actually look forward to it.

Sweet, Sweet Benefits

Mental practice, *the act of practicing a movement in your head instead of through physical action*, is a technique that can give neuroplasticity a boost during stroke recovery.

In fact, when you mentally perform a task over and over, it triggers neuroplasticity *the same way that physically repeating a task does*.

For this reason, mental practice has been shown to help **rewire the brain after stroke**, and study after study has shown that *combining* mental and physical practice leads to even better results.

Who Uses Mental Practice?

Musicians and athletes are both notorious for using mental practice to get an edge on their craft.

Eighteen time Olympic gold medalist **Michael Phelps** used **visualization** to help him succeed. Phelps would spend time visualizing himself winning his races, and he would also visualize himself dealing with complications. This way, when complications actually came up, he was already mentally wired to deal with them.

In the music community, **visualization is common advice**. Musicians understand that mentally practicing their pieces helps them play better and overcome stage nervousness.

Musicians and athletes have been at this for eons, proving how effective mental practice can be before the **clinical studies** even began.

2 Ways to Mentally Practice

There are 2 ways to use mental practice.

The clinical studies for stroke recovery used *guided visualization recordings*, so we'll cover that method first. Most athletes and musicians, however, just use *self-guided imagery*, which we'll cover next.

Guided Visualization Recordings

For this mental practice, you'll need to make an audio recording that includes these 3 elements:

- 3-5 minutes of deep relaxation, where you help yourself relax, empty your mind, and regulate your breath
- A full description of the task you want to perform in overwhelming detail
- Continued description of your surroundings using all 5 senses

For example, if you want to work on normal walking patterns, you can set up an audio recording this way:

“Imagine that you’re standing in your doorway. Feel the sturdy hardwood floor beneath your feet. You’re standing tall, and the room feels warm and comfortable. Now imagine that you take your first step forward as you plant your right foot firmly on the hardwood floor. As you take your next step, your body begins to move fluidly across the room...”

And later the details are filled in.

“Feel yourself take each step with intention and grace, and feel the weight of your body move through your heels and into your toes as you push off the ground. Feel your knees bend and straighten and you continue to take one step after another...”

Try to listen to your audio recording every morning, and once you've listened to it at least 3-4 times, try to practice in reality and see how you've improved. (And leave us a comment if you experience really cool – or really underwhelming – results!)

Self-Guided Imagery

In this easier option, no audio recording is required. Simply decide what you want to practice, close your eyes, and visualize.

If you're working on hand movement, then visualize yourself moving through your normal hand therapy routine with good form and ease. Try to incorporate these 3 elements as well:

- 10-20 deep, calming breaths to start
- Detailed physical movement (what your body feels like)
- Sensory details (what it sounds, smells, and looks like)

Try to perform this visualization for 5 minutes every morning.

Motivation + Discipline

When you start doing these mental practices, you'll find that you're more motivated to practice these tasks in reality, which can be a powerful driving force in your recovery.

When you can see yourself doing the things you don't necessarily want to do, it helps develop discipline. Then, whether you see significant improvement or not, you'll find reason to keep going.

Set yourself up for success by making morning mental practice a habit.

It worked for Michael Phelps. It can work for you.

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- [The Game-Changing Habit You Need during Stroke Recovery](#) - 2/8/2016
- [How to Get Motivated to Do Your Rehab Exercises](#) - 1/4/2016