

mental muscle

HOW TO HARNESS YOUR BRAIN
POWER BY KELLY JAMES-ENGER

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAY RUSOVICH
MODEL: MIKE FREGIA

Challenge your muscles beyond their normal limits, and you'll gain mass. Keep your heart rate elevated by exercising for at least 20 minutes several days a week, and you'll improve your cardiovascular fitness. Consume enough protein, carbs and healthy fats, and you'll get the vitamins, minerals and other nutrients you need for maximum fitness.

But have you considered the importance of your brain?

Your brain. That's right. That mass of gray matter sitting above your shoulders right now holds the key to reaping more results from your workouts, says Michael C. Meyers, Ph.D., F.A.C.S.M., director of the Human Performance Research Center at West Texas A&M University. "Typically the brain leads to the body—it's as simple as that," Meyers says. "The more advanced [and] the more cutting edge the brain is, the more advanced and the more cutting edge the body will receive as far as training [goes]."

So engage more than your body—harness your mental muscle by trying these eight techniques:

Know your goals

Making serious progress in the gym requires focus and commitment. "Number one, you need a sense of purpose. What are you in [the gym] for?" Meyers says. "People say, 'I want to build a bigger body.' Well, that's like saying, 'I want a car.' Let's get down to brass tacks—make, model, year, options. What is it you really want? If you mentally don't have a sense of purpose, then physically you won't have one. That's like trying to figure out where you're going without a map." Your goals should be specific objectives about exactly what you hope to gain over a certain period of time—say, six months or a year—will be. [See "Ready, Set, Goal" in the June 2003 issue of *Muscle Media* for more info on goal setting.]

Plan your attack

Got your goals in place? Now it's time to face up to your shortcomings. Sure, you love training your chest, but face it—it may be your puny calves that require some serious attention. "You have to be critical of what you look like, and be critical about what you want to improve," Meyers says. "Just saying, 'Hey, I want to bodybuild' is not enough."

The current training trend is periodization, where you structure your program into series of cycles. During each cycle you vary your workouts, mixing up reps, resistance and sets for maximum results. This plan may be adjusted to reflect your progress, which requires constant self-analysis. "You're basically adjusting your plan, but it takes a lot of discipline. Even athletes who



**"FOCUS ISN'T
ENOUGH. YOU HAVE
TO PUSH IF YOU
WANT RESULTS, AND
THAT MEANS A 'BLUE-
COLLAR MENTALITY'
WHEN IT COMES TO
YOUR GYM TIME."**

are disciplined don't want to be this disciplined," admits Meyers. "You're creating your own coach, and a lot of people would rather be coached and not worry about the thinking so much."

Talk yourself through it

When it comes to thinking, consider the ways you can use self-talk for maximum performance, suggests sports performance coach Tom Holland, M.S., C.S.C.S., of Greenwich, Conn. "There are three different types of self-talk. You can do it for effort, you can do it to change your mood, and then there are process cues," Holland says. Process cues are words or phrases that athletes often use in competition to maintain focus but you can use them during training as well.

Proper form during weight training is critical, and process cues—which help you connect mind and body—can help you maintain that. "Think the words in your head that are going to help you perform that skill better," Holland says. Words like "slow" and "squeeze" are good choices for lifters. Process cues can also help you push through a tough set, too. "Effort" words like "push" or even obscenities can help you maximize your effort.

Focus your efforts

Of course, focus isn't enough. You have to push if you want results, and that means a "blue-collar mentality" when it comes to your gym time, Meyers says. "That means intensity, sweating, putting the work in," he explains. "Now, along those same lines, you need to

learn to mentally work more efficiently. Bodybuilding's a thinking man's game as well, so if I want intensity and I have this blue-collar mentality, do I just think in terms of adding more weight or could I also reduce recovery time?"

Many guys spend too much time between sets when cutting recovery time would boost the intensity of their workouts without making any other changes. "Think more efficiently in terms of intensity and you can get a tremendous workout—bodybuilders in many cases haven't done it," Meyers says. "They're spending three hours in the gym, and when you take apart their program—which I have with a lot of them—there's a lot of wasted time."

Be creative

Remember, there's more than one way to build the physique of your dreams. Too many guys stick to the same training regimen day after day instead of harnessing their creativity and coming up with something different, Meyers says. "We tend to think Schwarzenegger spent six hours [training], but in many cases he spent less," he says. "You want the maximal amount of effort in a minimum amount of time."

Think beyond free weights. Consider competitors in strongman contests, who spend a lot of time training by doing full-body activities like dragging cars down the road. "There is more than one way to build your body and it's not necessarily free weights," Meyers says. "When you look at the world's strongest man contest, they're lifting cars." That





kind of training can refresh and recharge you mentally as well as make you stronger.

Change your attitude

Everyone has days where they just don't feel like hitting the iron. That's where you bring in that self-talk again to trick yourself. "Use words in terms of replacements," Holland says. "Say you're walking in the gym, thinking, 'I feel horrible and I feel tired.' Take that negative word and replace it with a positive—I feel great,

I'm ready to work out."

If you imagine yourself cutting open a lemon and biting into it, your mouth will begin to water automatically, reminds Holland. "Think of the application to fitness!" he says. "If you think something and you elicit a response from your saliva glands, you can do some thing for weightlifting." Hate cardio? Use your imagination the way one of Holland's clients does—he pretends he's a famous actor who has six weeks to get in shape for a demanding role. With that focus, he finds it easier to train hard.

Visualize success

Simply imagining doing a workout can produce results—recent research found that people who imagined exercising their finger or elbow flexor muscles for 15 minutes a day, five days a week, improved their strength by 13 to 35 percent. Another study of Canadian athletes found that the highest-performing athletes spent more time using imagery practice, or visualization, than recreational-level competitors.

"A lot of professional bodybuilders visualize themselves getting bigger as they're doing the exercise, they visualize as they're doing a bicep curl [that they're] actually growing," Holland says.

"There are huge connections now between this stuff that the mind perceives, the body believes." You can visualize your workout beforehand—sit and listen to your favorite music to get psyched up and literally picture yourself going through an exercise you don't like. Imagine yourself mastering the exercise before you do it, and you'll get more results.

Visualization is key, agrees Meyers. "Say you want greater intensity, and you want to do a bicep curl most people grip that bar and they try to bring the hands up," he says. "But I visualize flexing the elbow because that's where the bicep inserts, so if the elbow bends, guess what? Your hands come up, so I refocus on what joint I need to move." This kind of mental imagery enhances your lifting technique as well.

Think positive

There's something to be said for looking on the bright

side—a positive attitude is usually essential for high-intensity work. "You've got to keep pushing the body," Meyers says. "Once you quit progressive resistance training, the body plateaus and it always plateaus first with the mind." In other words, if you believe you can only do six reps, that's where you'll remain stuck. You need a combination of self-efficacy—belief in yourself—and mental imagery to blast through that plateau. Try thinking something like, "I'm going seven this time—there's no doubt about it," Meyers says. "It may be an ugly seven, but I'm going seven."

Your subjective belief in your own abilities may affect how you feel post-workout as well. In one study,



exercisers were given fitness tests on stationary bicycles and divided into two groups. One was told their results placed them in the top 20th percentile for fitness; the others were told they were in the bottom 20th percentile. A few days later, they were reminded of their earlier performances and asked to exercise again.

Exercisers who believed they'd performed well experienced more positive well-being post-workout than those who believed they'd performed poorly. In other words, your beliefs in your capabilities influence how you feel after training. That's why it's smart to record your workouts—tracking your progress will prove that you're getting stronger, increasing your self-efficacy.

The bottom line? Harnessing your brain along with your muscles will help you reach your potential. "A lot of us haven't reached our true peak," Meyers says. "Peak performance is based on peak mentality, and keeping your brain at that high level is very, very important." **←→**

**"PEAK PERFORMANCE
IS BASED ON
PEAK MENTALITY,
AND KEEPING
YOUR BRAIN AT
THAT HIGH LEVEL
IS VERY, VERY
IMPORTANT."**