



## **Mental Tennis Strategy: 11 Steps to Mastery**

As an individual sport, tennis is a game that requires great mental fortitude. The sooner you are able to master your mental tennis strategy, the better off you will be as a player, regardless of your level.

Mental strategy in tennis relates to how your mind and your court performance are interconnected. Your performance on the court on any given day can impact how you feel and produce either positive or negative thoughts. Likewise, your mental state can have an effect on your performance. The key to success is to use positivity to set your mind up to win and focus on your tactics and technique so that your performance does not negatively affect your thoughts.

Mental strategy perfection takes time, and while you can certainly improve it by staying disciplined and using these tactics, even the most skilled players experience setbacks. What's important is that you are always striving to improve.

From stress to pressure to choking, we'll cover many of the common thoughts and feelings that you might encounter as a player during a match. We'll take a look at ways to best deal with these thoughts so that you can perform at your best.

# 1. Handling Stress

Stress can be triggered by a multitude of reasons. It is always self-imposed. The fear of losing or the thought of embarrassing yourself in front of other teammates or club members can often trigger a stress reaction.

The first thing is to recognize that it's very difficult to go into a match completely relaxed. What's more, it's probably not advisable, at least not in a competitive sense. Stress is probably necessary to some extent in competitive situations.

The key is to manage it. Some level of stress can lead you to play harder and perform at your maximum potential. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it can turn from a positive to a negative factor very quickly.

There are a few steps you can take to manage your stress. Instead of focusing on any negatives and setting yourself up to lose, focus on the positives. Visualize your strengths, not your weaknesses. Think like a winner.

One thing that will really help you feel more confident is practicing your weaknesses on a regular basis prior to the match. If you practiced hard to improve your deficient stroke, you will feel much more confident in your ability to execute during a match.

Have an objective game plan before you start a match. If you already know what your strategy is going to be prior to the match, you will be much more at ease. At that point, it just becomes a matter of executing.

## 2. Avoiding Distractions

In tennis, there are two types of distractions. One is external the other is internal. One you have no control over, while the other you can control. That is, as long as you learn to focus and shut out that negative voice in your head.

External distractions can range from weather, noise, court conditions, to pressure others put on you. While these distractions are out of your control, how you react to them is entirely up to you.

If you isolate these distractions and instead focus on your game, you can put yourself in a good position to prevail. Don't use the fact that it's hot or cold or that the courts are in bad shape as an excuse. Block these things out of your mind.

Instead, you should focus on what you can control. Concentrate on the shot you are making, fully. Once the shot is done, forget about it. It's done. At that point focus your full attention on the next point and what you need to do to execute the shot properly.

If you missed your shot previously, let it go. Make a mental note of how you can improve the stroke next time and move on to your next shot. By the same token, don't admire your shot either. Once it's over, move on.

Avoid getting upset with yourself for making an error. Don't waste your energy on negative thoughts. Instead, you want to use your mental energy to focus on executing your shots as best you can. Preserve your mental energy for what counts.

Finally, don't get distracted by what your opponent is doing. If they hit a fantastic shot, great for them. You should instead focus on what you are doing and how you can play the ball better.

### 3. Winning and Losing

The thought of winning or losing a match can put a tremendous amount of pressure on a player. Often the pressure can be so intense that it can cripple your game. Even on shots that you have been hitting with regular consistency during practice.

Rather than thinking of winning or losing, a more constructive approach is to focus on progress. If you play a match where you improve your game, that's a win regardless of the actual score or outcome.

This will take a lot of pressure off your shoulders and allow you to focus on the execution of your shots. If you are giving it your all, executing your shots well, playing high percentage shots, and at the same time improving, that is all you can ask of yourself.

You should strive, every time you set foot on a court to get better. If you are able to play your strengths well and at the same time improve on those aspects of your game that need improvement, you will have succeeded.

Progress is incremental. There is no reason to expect a complete transformation in your game from one day to the next. Rather, you should think of daily steps towards reaching your goal and improving your mechanics, game tactics, or mental strategy.

Become process-oriented rather than outcome-oriented. If you focus on the process of hitting your shots well, the outcome becomes automatic. You will begin to win matches because you are following the process.

## 4. Mental and Physical Connection

Your thoughts can play a major role in the way you perform physically. If you fill your mind with uncertainty, fear of losing, and other negative thoughts, your body will react accordingly and these thoughts will materialize.

The problem is, sometimes this can even happen subconsciously. If you sense your opponent is better, or if you are not feeling your best, these thoughts can cause physical responses which can cripple your ability to play.

But just as negative thoughts can cause a physical reaction, so can positive thoughts. If you visualize yourself doing well, hitting your shots consistently, performing your strokes the way you did during practice, your body reacts positively to this reaffirmation.

What's more, often this visualization can, in fact, become engrained in your mind. If you visualize yourself doing well, playing the best tennis ever, your mind will register this and potentially translate the information into physical performance.

Before a match begins, take some time to visualize the tactical approach you intend to use. Imagine yourself performing your strokes at a maximum of your ability, placing the ball where you intend to, playing high percentage tennis, etc.

This is one of the reasons that focusing on incremental improvement is beneficial. You don't need to worry about how good your opponent is, stress over having to win or avoiding losing. You simply need to execute to the best of your ability.

## 5. Nerves

Nerves are a natural part of the game. The key is to learn to use them in a constructive way. If you let them get the best of you, you'll freeze up and perform poorly. If you harness them in a way that gets you pumped to play at your best, you'll reap the benefits.

First, accept that everyone gets nervous during a match. This isn't a bad thing, on the contrary, use it as a spark to get you playing your best tennis. The fact that you are nervous means that the match is important to you.

In order to grow as a player, you need nerves. Without nerves, you would not try as hard or care about your performance as much. In other words, you would not grow. Embrace this fact and use your nerves to push you to perform better.

To positively channel your nerves, visualize yourself playing tennis at your best. If necessary, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Again, imagine yourself performing to the best of your ability. Reinforce the notion that you will perform at a high level.

Drown out any external interferences that might affect your focus. You don't want your mind wandering off to things that are happening outside the court. At this moment it's important to be focused on your match.

## 6. Pressure

Like nerves, feeling pressure is part of the game. Just remember that situations do not feel pressure, only people do. Rather than focusing on winning or losing, focus instead on your individual style and on executing your shots consistently.

Rather than feeling stressed by the situation, love the battle. It's an opportunity for you to perform at your best. Embrace the opportunity. Don't feel threatened by the opportunity, instead, view it as a challenge.

The best athletes in all sports love pressure because they know it is the opportunity for them to shine. This is where they have the opportunity to show just how good they are, the moments that separate them from other athletes.

You too can use pressure to showcase your talents. You don't have to be an elite athlete to benefit from the opportunities pressure situations create. Just remember, in order to not get too rattled, focus on what you can control. That is, your tactics and technique.

Use the technical and tactical skills that you've learned during practice and prior play and apply them to your game. By staying automated and focusing on your execution, you eliminate the feeling of pressure to a great extent.

The more automated you can become during pressure situations, the better. Don't be too reliant on conscious thought. Tell yourself you enjoy pressure situations and then just let yourself go on autopilot from that point on.

## 7. Managing Mistakes

During matches, practice or any other situation, you will make mistakes from time to time. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes and not dwell on them for long, just accept it and move on.

Remember that growth is not possible without mistakes. View mistakes as an opportunity to learn what you need to improve on. Adapt your game in order to manage the mistake by making an adjustment to your stroke, technique, or strategy.

You may not be able to fix the mistake from one shot to another, which can lead to additional frustration. But, as long as you keep working on it and improving through incremental steps, eventually you will overcome it.

It's important to stay positive during this process and not become overwhelmed. Quiet the voice in your head that is telling you that you are playing poorly or that you made a mistake. Negative thoughts can have a detrimental impact on your performance.

Usually, you can find some good in the error, it's better to focus on that. For example, maybe you hit the ball long, but you are making it a habit to hit deep. This habit will eventually allow you to reap rewards over the long run. It's a step in the right direction.

In these situations, you can tell yourself you made a "good error", one that will allow you to get better the more you play. Remind yourself that next time you will improve on this so that you continue to grow.

From this point, try to automate your game and adapt to your mistakes. Do this without over analyzing or passing judgment on yourself. Stay positive and maintain a good balance between your mental, emotional, and physical performance.



## 8. Choking

Everyone chokes from time to time, what's important is that you develop the skills to cope with it once it surfaces. Don't think too much about what you are doing, allow your natural instincts and the techniques you've regularly practiced to take over.

Thinking too much throws off your natural rhythm and movement patterns. Instead, allow an automated response to take over. You've practiced your shots over and over, let those instincts take over on their own.

Control your eyes and what you are looking at. There is a direct relationship between what you are thinking and what you are looking at. If your mind is filled with distracting thoughts, fear or negativities, this will manifest itself during play.

Rather than focusing on irrelevant thoughts, make sure you are completely focused on your next sequence and, once play begins, on the ball. This will force you to concentrate on what counts rather than thoughts that might lead you to choke.

When you feel pressure, don't try to change your game. This is what often leads players to make mistakes and choke during key moments. Instead, play your style up to the maximum of your ability.

If negative thoughts enter your mind, let them pass through. Don't attach to them or they will take over. Visualize times in the past where you've executed your shots perfectly. Imagine yourself playing at the highest level.

Regardless of the outcome, always maintain a positive self-image and inner voice. Remember, you are free to win and free to lose, as long as you play up to your maximum ability. Make that your priority.

## 9. Adversity

During a match, it's possible you will not agree with something your opponent is doing. You may even feel they are cheating or being a bad sport, whether real or not. In these situations, don't react, but rather try to respond in a calm, collected manner.

By doing so, you will put yourself in a better position to win. If you get upset and let anger take over, you will begin making unnecessary mistakes, overhitting the ball, etc. and it could cost you the match.

If you feel strongly about something your opponent is doing, approach the net so you can both talk about it. Express your position in a non-confrontational manner to make them aware of your point of view.

For sportsmanship reasons, it's best to do this in between games. This also allows you to cool off a bit which should result in a more constructive discussion. If for some reason it can't wait, suggest to your opponent to come up to the net to talk.

Always be prepared for adversity. If you allow it to startle or surprise you, it will take over and by the time you are able to recover, it might be too late and the match may be out of reach. For this reason, know how to respond to it ahead of time.

If you pre-plan how will handle an adverse situation and maintain a grounded mindset, you will put yourself in a better situation to win a match and have more fun. Particularly if your opponent is not able to do the same.

## 10. Good Sportsmanship

Good sportsmanship is important in the game of tennis, just as in any sport. As long as you are playing your game to the best of your ability, there is no need to aggravate your opponent with unnecessary celebration or intentional bad calls.

Some might argue that these mind game tactics can be effective in demoralizing your opponent. While this may be partly true, think of the negative repercussions it can have for you in future matches or against others.

You don't want your opponents to take your competitiveness personally. Try to avoid letting your opponent or the competitive moment take over. It is possible to be a winner and liked by your opponents at the same time.

Stay humble, despite your successes on the court. The combination of excellence with humility is a beautiful thing. This is the goal you want to strive for as a player. This is the true culmination of your growth as a player.

## 11. Positive Thinking

Staying positive in tennis is crucial to your development as a player. Positive thinking is productive, it tells your body that you are ready to take on the challenges that lie ahead and to play the best match you can.

If you imagine yourself playing at your best before a match, chances are you will perform at your best once the match begins. That's because your mind and body are interconnected. One affects the other in either a positive or negative manner.

Given that you have the choice, why not chose positivity. You are more likely to perform at a higher level, you will avoid aggravation and stress, nerves, and match pressure will not be able to get the best of you.

Make it a habit of visualizing yourself at your best before a match. If you are nervous or feel pressure, this is the best time to take a few deep breaths and imagine yourself performing at the top of your game.

Use something specific to reference, a shot you made last time that blew away your opponent or a stroke that you were hitting with consistency during practice. Just bring those thoughts to mind and imagine them in the context of your current match.

If negative thoughts come along, let them pass and remind yourself that you have learned from your mistakes so that you can feel confident in your ability to perform today. If nothing specific comes to mind, remind yourself of the process of getting better with each time you play.

## Closing Notes

Tennis is a game where mental awareness is key. If you approach a match with the right mindset from the start, it can go a long way in providing you the results you are seeking. That result should always be the incremental improvement of your game.

As long as you are continually building on the stronger aspects of your game and learning something new with each match or practice session, you are moving in the right direction. Winning or losing becomes secondary if you approach things this way.

That's not to say that focusing only on incremental improvement and on the technical and tactical parts of your game will not result in winning down the road. It will, and in fact, the process will become much more automated.

That's because you will have perfected your strokes and execution and will have mastered the strategic and tactical aspects to such an extent that they will require little thought. You will be playing on autopilot and dominating your opponents at the same time.