

# Mental Blocks

(Information provided by our Gym Counselor, Amy Martin, a licensed psychotherapist, and our CEA RVA tumble coaches)

## Why do they happen?

Typically there are 3 reasons for a mental block.

- 1) The athlete experienced an injury or fall.
- 2) The athlete saw a friend or teammate fall or get injured.
- 3) There is something going on in the athlete's personal life.

## What is happening to the athlete?

The brain's primitive functioning shuts down the ability to tumble, but the athlete wants to throw the skill. The brain is very powerful and the nervous system was in overdrive so the brain shut down the ability to tumble until the mental block is worked through. The athlete is unable to verbalize the reason they can't throw the skill. This is not something the athlete can "will" themselves to get over and they are not being stubborn.

## What can parents do to help?

- Talk to your athlete's coaches and try to offer your thoughts on what has been going on with your athlete. Let the coaches do their job by allowing them to help your athlete work through the block, especially if the block began after an injury/fall or witnessing an injury/fall.
- Lower your expectations - don't force or push the athlete to throw the skill and don't yell at your athlete to "just throw it."
- What you say matters. It can take 10 positive comments to undo 1 negative comment from a parent.
- Emphasize process over results. Praise efforts not results. Be your athlete's biggest cheerleader for all of their effort and attempts.
- Support - hug, kiss, give high fives and fist bumps and wipe away tears.
- Love unconditionally - tell your child you love him/her over and over again. Explain that you are going to love him/her whether he/she throws and lands the skill or not.

- Focus on the positive and fun.
- Don't ask your athlete why they can't throw the skill, they aren't going to be able to answer you.
- Don't get so frustrated that you tell your athlete you won't pay for cheer/tumble anymore if he/she can't throw the skill - this will add to the pressure/stress and worsen the severity or length of the block.
- It may be helpful for a parent not to watch tumble classes or privates for a while. Sometimes the athlete feels pressure with a parent watching. Some athletes want a parent to watch so switch things up a bit - tell your athlete you will watch but only the last 15 minutes of the private. Ask your athlete's coaches for input on this - what do they think would be helpful?
- If you do stay to watch - it is your job to smile, clap and offer only positive affirmations. If your athlete is working hard to get a skill back and they look over to find their mom or dad with a horrified look on their face it is crushing for their spirit and that can worsen the severity and length of the block.

Young children and some teenagers are unable to verbalize their feelings well. Part of their experience of the block is on a subconscious level and that their parent will not love them or will abandon them if they fail. This is not something the child is aware of so the above steps are necessary to assure the child continues to feel loved.

### **What can the athlete do?**

- Be kind to yourself.
- Be patient with yourself.
- Forgive yourself and tell yourself "it's ok to have a mental block and I will get through this."
- Focus on the skills you are comfortable throwing and continue to work those skills. Get in the gym! Don't avoid the gym!
- If you attempt the skill you are blocking and are unsuccessful 3 times, do something different that you are comfortable with for a while until you are ready to return to the blocked skill. Working the "safe" skills will help to build your confidence and remind your brain that you can do the skill.

- Try the blocked skill with a coach spotting you - make sure you use good technique.
- Try the blocked skill on the tumble track with good technique to keep reminding your brain that you can do the skill.
- Talk with your coaches and determine if you feel better tumbling with your teammates or alone - this varies for each athlete. Some athletes get energized by their teammates throwing skills and yelling words of encouragement when it's their turn to tumble others are too stressed for group tumbling and find it easier to focus and concentrate alone. Your coaches will work with you to help determine which is the best setting for you and this may change over time. It's important to talk to your coaches and tell them what you are feeling.
- No negative self talk. You are not allowed to think "I can't" or "I will fail." Only positive thoughts, even if you don't believe it, you will believe in yourself again if you keep saying you can do it. It takes practice to change thought patterns so keep saying it until you believe it.
- Place positive messages all over your room, bathroom, kitchen, wherever you spend a lot of time. Check out Pinterest and search cheer quotes.
- Condition - if you are conditioning at least 3 times per week your body will be ready to throw the skills.
- Use words associated with each skill, example: "1, 2, set, squeeze" this helps with focus on the word rather than what is going on in your mind which will result in your body doing instead of not doing.
- Visualize yourself doing the skill 10-20 times each night. Do your visualizations in bed each night, imagine yourself doing the skill, mark it in your bed, squeezing each muscle group as you would if you were doing the skill out on the mat.
- If you can't visualize yourself doing the skill yet, watch a video of yourself doing the skill 10-20 times each night. If you don't have a video of yourself doing the skill, take a video of your coach spotting you doing the skill and watch that. It's ok that you have a spot, it's not about the spot, it's about reminding your brain that you can do the skill.

- Do NOT watch any "cheer fails" on You Tube. Do NOT put any images of anything negative associated with tumbling in your mind.
- Use a notebook and document your conditioning, visualizations and attempts at the skill. After each practice, tumble class or private write down something you did well. Read these things before you go to a private, tumble class or practice and it will remind your brain of all the things it does well.
- Designate a word that makes you laugh. Tell your coaches and teammates this word. Have them yell this word out to you if you are standing still, thinking too much and not throwing the skill. Think of something that makes you laugh out loud each time you do it or say it.
- Mindfulness exercises - this is something Amy can direct you on - they are different for each athlete.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation coupled with deep breathing before each private, class or practice. This will help you relax and reduce stress. Amy can direct you on this.
- Cognitive Restructuring exercises. Amy can direct you on these.

These suggestions will work if you are committed to doing them. It took a long time to learn a skill, it takes a long time to change thought patterns and train your brain to remember that it can do the skills your body can do. The amount of time it takes to come back from a mental block varies from athlete to athlete, but the more committed you are to following the above steps, the quicker you will recover.