

The Power of Cyclotherapy

By Marvin Zauderer

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We're so often looking for ways to improve ourselves so that our performance and enjoyment in cycling will improve. In addition to working so hard on your cycling, though, how about letting cycling work more deeply on you? Cycling, like all sports, can be a force for learning, change, and growth...which you can bring right back to the bike.

The focus in this Sport Psychology column, over the past couple of years, has been on ways you can improve the mental side of your game. The basic idea: with stronger mental skills, you'll have better performance, less stress, and more fun on the bike. I hope the column has been useful to you, at least occasionally, thus far – feel free to tell me what you've liked/disliked, want more/less of, and your own experiences with any of the mental skills we've covered.

In last month's column, on [Integrating Body and Mind](#), we explored a number of ways you can improve the connection, communication, and balance that your mind has with your body. And, we looked at some examples of how this can improve your cycling performance.

This month, we're going to stand Sport Psychology on its head. (Which is probably a good idea, since I just came back from a hard ride, and I'm feeling a bit light-headed.) Although the usual goal for us Sport Psychology types in our work with athletes is to improve sport performance, sometimes we use athletes' experience in sport to help you grow, heal, change and apply all of that outside of sport. I think of it, for us cyclists, as *cyclotherapy*. And I imagine many of you can relate: how often have you found riding to be terrific therapy, for whatever you're facing in yourself and in life?

As I pointed out in the article on Integrating Body and Mind, there can be transformative psychological power for you in physically active experiences, particularly if your mind and body are well-connected. And, of course, you're going to bring any improvement in yourself and your life right back to the bike. So, rather than our usual mode of learning "how to use your mind on your mind," let's look at some ways that cycling can help your mind directly.

Riding The Climbs and Descents in Life

Stress happens, as does each of its siblings in the Anxiety Family: anxiety, nerves, fear, tension, worry, and pressure. But fortunately, you're not shipwrecked on a desert island with the Stress Family Robinson – you have your riding.

Lazarus and Cohen, in the book *Human Behavior and the Environment: Current Theory and Research*, note that anxiety usually arises "in the face of demands that tax or exceed the resources of the system." Now *there's* a description of a significant percentage of life.

Most of us have had the experience of cycling reducing the surges of stress we experience in everyday life; that's not news. But regular cycling can go deeper. Dr. George Brooks, one of the nation's leading exercise physiologists, says in his book *Exercise Physiology: Human Bioenergetics and its Applications*, "Exercise has been shown to have both acute (state) and long-term (trait) effects on indices of mental health, such as trait anxiety..." When you look at yourself – and perhaps your parent(s), or siblings, or grandparents – do you see more than just surges of stress, perhaps a pattern of being more consistently "tightly wound," more prone to stress by nature? If so, anxiety may be a trait rather than just an occasional state. But contrary to what some believe, people *can* change, and do. Regular cycling may not turn you into a Buddha, but it may chill you out a bit – permanently.

But let's look deeper than the physical side of cycling. We've looked quite often in this column – for example, in the articles on [Managing Emotions](#), [Handling Pressure](#), and [Breathing Techniques](#) – at managing your bouts with anxiety on and off the bike. However, managing, reducing, and eliminating anxiety are not your only options: Anxiety always carries important information. It might be a message that you already understand clearly, like, “I'm anxious on descents because I crashed once before, and I'm afraid of crashing again.” Or, it may be a message that you haven't yet heard clearly, such as “I'm afraid of how bad I'll feel if I fall short of my goals,” or “I'm stressed about not being fully in control of what's going to happen next,” or “I have an anxiety problem that goes far beyond cycling and I need to attend to it.” We confront ourselves and change when our motivation outmuscles our fear. If, because you're motivated to have your performance and enjoyment of cycling increase, you sit with – and consciously work with – the stress that comes up for you in cycling, you may learn some very useful things about yourself. And you may find yourself applying that learning outside of cycling.

For better and for worse, stress is one of life's most frequent experiences, and one of the most pervasive causes of stress is *loss*. Think of all the losses we can experience: losing cycling if we're ill or [injured](#), losing physical capabilities as we age, being laid off or fired from a job, going through separation and divorce, experiencing the death of a loved one or friend, and so many more. As author Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and others have pointed out, we tend to go through several stages in the experience of a significant loss, and some form of depression can often be one of those stages.

Physical exercise can have remarkably positive effects on depression, in part because of the positive effects it can have on three neurotransmitters proven to play a role in depression: serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. Of course, there are medications that also can have positive effects on these neurotransmitters, and sometimes medication is a necessary part of recovery. But James Blumenthal, one of the country's leading researchers on the impact of exercise on depression, says in the September 2007 issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, “The efficacy of exercise in patients seems generally comparable with patients receiving antidepressant medication and both tend to be better than the placebo in patients with Major Depressive Disorder.” Cycling may help you not only with the stressful climbs but also the stressful descents in life.

The Long Road Back

Some time ago, the University of California at Berkeley proposed creating a “Student-Athlete High Performance Center” adjacent to the football stadium. The purpose of the center, according to the University, is to provide facilities for “over 400 student-athletes” who “currently train and work in dangerous, sub-standard conditions under the stadium's stands.” Unfortunately, building the center requires removing a number of very old trees, and there is also significant concern – apparently, as yet unproven – that a Native American burial ground would be violated by the construction. For almost two years, protesters have lived in the trees in order to prevent them from being harmed.

Last week, a California Court of Appeal [denied requests](#) for additional delays in the project, a tree service began cutting trees, and the remaining four protesters were isolated in a single tree. According to the San Jose Mercury-News, one student observer said, “They're these huge, 100-, 150-year-old trees. You hear them crack and creak and fall over, and it makes you sick, rips apart your stomach. And this is all so people can do sit-ups in air-conditioning.”

While I suspect there are many people, sadly, who don't “get” the protesters' pain over the harm being done to the Earth (and perhaps, to another culture) by the construction, I suspect there are also many who don't fully “get” the potential value of sport. It's not only about athletes' fun, spectators' entertainment, and the organizations' revenue. It's about sport – like marriage, career, parenting, spiritual practice, and so much else in life – being a crucible that can forge a better person, a person who can be a force for good on this planet. And at a time when we need that more than ever.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “there are no bad babies born in this world.” And yet, so many forces – such as poverty, trauma, parental judgment and disconnection, genetics – can leave kids with deficits in self-esteem, [self-confidence](#), and self-worth. These deficits present opportunities for growth and healing for most, if not all, of life. I’m certain that at least *some* of those young men and women in the athletic program at UC Berkeley will be changed for the better by their experience in sport; they’re not just “doing sit-ups in air-conditioning.”

In a similar way, cycling can be a “long road back” from whatever has taken its toll on *your* sense of self over the years. The new skills, accomplishments, and meaning you get from cycling; the improvements in self-discipline and self-regulation you make; the coping strategies you discard and “reprogram” in yourself; the ways in which you improve your self-regard – any of these can contribute to more strength and solidity within you.

When Partying Becomes a Problem

Substance abuse is a big problem in this country. According to the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2007:

- 19.9 million Americans age 12 and older were illicit drug users
- More than 20% of Americans age 12 and older participated in binge drinking
- 22.3 million people were diagnosed with substance dependence or abuse

If you have a problem with drinking, prescription medication, or illicit drugs, your cycling can become an important part of your recovery: it can help you move from substance use having control over you to you having control of your use.

One commonly-held model of substance abuse treatment/recovery is the “brain disease” model. According to Dr. Arnold Washton and Dr. Joan Zweben, authors of *Treating Alcohol and Drug Problems in Psychotherapy Practice*, this model holds that addiction is “a complex brain disease.” In this case, the positive effects cycling can have on the neurotransmitters noted above, on endorphins, on the stress hormone cortisol, and on energy can all be great aids to reversing the disease process. Not to mention that cycling can be an effective distraction from depression, anxiety, boredom, or other common triggers for substance use.

Another popular model for treatment/recovery is the “self-medication” model, in which use, according to Washton and Zweben, is seen as addressing the self-regulation challenges that arise from deficits in one’s sense of self – deficits that frequently originate from a very young age. Cycling, as noted above, can strengthen one’s sense of self, and in turn, reduce any need for self-medication.

Whatever the explanation for substance (ab)use, cycling can play an important role in recovery. If you’re interested in this topic, you may enjoy Andy Dieden’s book, *The Sports Lover’s Guide to Recovery: Strategies and Rules of the Game*.

The Elusive “Zone”

Ah, the feeling of being “in the zone.” Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi coined the term “flow” to describe this state. It’s a feeling of deep satisfaction, tremendous efficacy, and complete immersion in every moment of experience. Our sense of self tends to fall away (sheesh, and after all of our work on our Self!). Time becomes something very different. And all of this is legal!

In cycling, flow is an experience of optimal performance. However, it can be exceedingly difficult to make flow happen. It’s more that you can create the conditions under which it’s more *likely* to happen. [Concentration](#) and focusing exercises, meditation and mindfulness practice, yoga, and martial arts seem to exercise this “muscle” within us and increase our ability to enter a state of flow. And of course, so does riding itself.

In all of your “cyclotherapy sessions,” I wish you safety, learning, fun, and everything else that you seek. See you out there!



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