

The Psychology of Winning

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Anyone who is serious about improving his game has to combine at-the-table experience with techniques learned from those who have excelled at the game and have outlined their winning methods in print. One part of competitive bridge that is rarely touched upon is the psychology of winning ... the mental attitude needed to succeed. You can sit down at a bridge table armed with the knowledge that you employ a fantastic bidding system, have all the best squeeze techniques at your fingertips, and are deadly on defense, but the “hole” in your armor is your frame of mind. What do we mean?

The opponents who come to your table are experienced and/or successful and the first thought you have is the memory of all the other times these opponents have had the better of you. This is the first step toward undermining your ability to win. Your next thought is “I hope my partner has all the critical decisions.” You are now well on your way to handing the opponents another victory. As your nervousness increases, all the skills you have worked so hard to develop correspondingly shrink.

Congratulations, officially you have reached “basket case status”. The uppermost goal in your mind is to get it over with as soon as possible. If this is the way you think, of course it will be hard to win!

This scenario is an extreme example of what each player faces at some point once he decides to play competitive bridge. Competition can be as terrifying as it is exciting. Successful players learn how to minimize or eliminate the thoughts that undermine their chances for victory. Some talented players never do manage to cope with the pressures of competition, while others with less skill seem to triumph.

The key to overcoming nervousness is unique for each player. The way to determine what works for you is to experiment. Here are some examples you might try:

Since you are destined to lose, you might as well tell yourself to relax and stop worrying about the outcome. Your goal should be to play at least one board flawlessly. Once that has occurred, the other results are irrelevant.

A critical juncture in the bidding, play or defense has arrived and you have no idea what to do. Ask yourself what you would do if someone presented this situation to you as a problem. Alternatively pretend that you are reading the local bridge column and decide what to do.

Just looking at your opponents strikes fear in your heart. Pretend that you are playing the weakest player at your local bridge club. You know ... the one who always gives you good results.

Get mad. A little anger is a good tonic against nervousness. Pretend that the opponents are acting as if they have no respect for your game and are assuming their win to be “in the bag”. Do this regardless of how friendly or polite your opponents might be.

Will any of these approaches help completely eliminate nervousness? Almost certainly not, but the goal should be to get yourself playing at the level you have worked so hard to achieve. Tackling the problem of nervousness is an ongoing process and you have to practice until applying the techniques becomes second nature.

If you learn to cope, even just partially, with nervousness you will be astounded at the results. The next time you reach for a Pass card against better players, ask yourself, “What would I do if this were a bridge quiz?”