



# See it to Believe it!

*Helping make  
new skills seem easy.*

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Summer time is one of the best times of the year for gymnasts. No school, less pressure and the excitement of learning new skills are just a few of the things I liked best about summer gymnastics, not to mention putting a beam over the pool at my coach's house and missing on purpose just to get out of the hot sun! Along with the fun of these new and more difficult summer skills comes the fear of the unknown.

**Can I do this trick?  
Am I ready?  
What if I fall?**

These are just a few of the questions that may come into your mind when you attempt something you've never done before. This article will teach you a tool to help you overcome any fear beasts that come your way. It's called Mental Imagery.

Do you ever rehearse events or skills in your mind before you do them? Have you ever "seen" routines in your head the night before a big competition? That's mental imagery! Mental imagery is visualizing exactly how you want to perform your skills. It's kind of like a dress rehearsal for your body. Mental imagery is one of the most widely used research tools in sport psychology. In some research studies, gymnasts were divided into two groups. One group actually practiced a skill, while others practiced the skills some but also spent time visualizing each skill performed flawlessly. Guess what happened? The athletes that imagined the task even with less practice did just as well as the athletes that practiced (Hall, 2001) but did not visualize the skill. Whenever you imagine something perfect in your mind, you ►



are creating what's called "muscle memory." As you imagine the skill, the muscles in your body are actually "firing" tiny impulses. This trains them to do the exact same thing when you are actually performing the skill. Your muscles "remember" how they reacted to your imaginary new skill, and then do the same thing when you are ready to go for it!

## How to "See it to Believe it"

### Step 1 Relax

Your visualization will be more powerful if you are relaxed. Be sure you take several deep breaths and relax all the tension in your body before you begin. Breathe deeply into your abdomen not simply into your chest.

### Step 2 See Everything

Your imagery should be as vivid as possible. Use all five senses. Hear the sounds of the skill or your teammates, see the colors of the gym, see your coaches, notice what you are thinking. Be sure you imagine all of the details. What does each body position look like or how does it feel. Don't leave out the little things, hands to toes. See it all!

### Step 3 See it or Feel it

When you do visualization, choose to either see the skill like you are watching a movie or simply feel the skill inside your body. Maybe try a little of both and notice which one feels more real to you. You can also switch off and get both experiences.

### Step 4 Inside vs. Outside

Do you see the skill from outside yourself, like watching TV or do you see it from inside your head? Both can be beneficial. Research suggests that when you are first learning a skill, it may be better to see the technical aspects from outside yourself, but after you have trained the skill, move your imagery to inside your body (Pie, et al, 1996).

### Step 5 Practice

Finally, practice makes perfect. AND seeing perfect practice helps you create perfect new skills! Start out with five minutes of visualization at a time, and work yourself up to 20 minutes or so. If you see yourself fall or make a mistake, rewind the tape in your head and see the skill in slow motion. Imagine every element perfect, every body position just right.

## When to "See it to Believe it"

There are many situations where visualizing your routines or skills can be helpful. Here are just a few.

### Learning New Skills

Be sure to visualize new skills over and over. See them with perfect body position, incorporating all of your corrections. See them both in slow motion and real time. Don't forget to do all types of progressions. Seeing timers, stacked mats being pulled out, or into a pit is also helpful.

## Making Corrections

Visualization can really help you to make corrections, especially when you are having trouble seeing or feeling what needs to change. Imagine the skill in slow motion seeing the correction. You may even want to exaggerate it in your mind. Freeze the frame or keep rewinding to visualize the correction over and over again. Do this about five times. Visualizing corrections on the spot (actually in workout) can help your body understand exactly what needs to be done so it can make the change.

## Motivation

Use visualization to fire yourself up! See yourself doing a new skill and being hugged by your coach or having your teammates screaming with joy! See yourself competing this skill and sticking it perfectly. Imagine yourself standing high on the podium after competing these skills.

## Self-Confidence

Imagine yourself walking into the gym totally confident. What does that feel like all throughout your body? Use your imagery tool to help you feel exactly the way you want to feel. See yourself strong, confident, and ready to push yourself to the next level.

## "Flipping" Fear

One of the best uses of mental imagery is changing your fear into fuel. If you notice some fear in your body, take the time in that moment to breathe, visualize the skill and remind yourself that you can do it. Also practice turning fear around at home by visualizing yourself having a bad day and turning it around using your breathing and visualization. Imagine yourself pushing through obstacles and coming through strong and powerful on the other side. Practice both psyching yourself up and calming yourself down. Remember that you control your mind, not the other way around!

## Injury

Using mental imagery when you are injured is one of the best ways to speed up your return to gymnastics once you're able to train again. Remember the phenomenon of muscle memory. When you visualize, it helps your muscles remember exactly what to do when you begin doing your skills again. Give yourself visualization assignments and even walk your skills through while you visualize. You'll be surprised how fast your body will remember what to do once you are back in full force.

"See It to Believe It" is something to practice every day whether you're in the gym, out of the gym, in the shower, before bed, riding in the car or right before an event. You can also visualize before your turn, in between events, and as you are warming-up. Many athletes use visualization for non-gymnastics-related issues as well. Visualize yourself making the speech you are nervous about for class or acing your math test. Visually rehearse a difficult conversation you need to have with a friend. Anything in your life that is important or stressful can be "practiced" with mental imagery. Remember, every visualization gets you that much closer to your goal. Whenever you can, create excellence by first imagining it in your mind. Before anyone can achieve greatness, they have to first see the dream. See it and then.....Be it! ✕

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