

## PART 1 – PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION

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#### 1. THE CONCEPT OF WORLDSKILLS COMPETITION

**WorldSkills** is a global movement represented by an organization that recognizes and promotes the values of vocational skills and contributes to the economic development of various professions in countries worldwide. It promotes skills excellence through international competitions and vocational education initiatives. The WorldSkills movement includes **national branches in 89 countries**, creating a vast global vocational network. Each branch works to raise awareness of vocational skills at the national level, promote vocational training and careers, and connect young professionals with industries, businesses, and corporations.

The movement also fosters international cooperation and benchmarking in skills education, particularly through the organization of the **WorldSkills Competition**, held every two years. This competition brings together young professionals (usually under 25) from 89 member countries and regions who compete in more than **60 skill categories**. The WorldSkills movement has a strong and long-term impact: it promotes global standards in vocational education, connects industries, and inspires youth to pursue careers in skills-based professions. It also serves as a valuable platform used by governments and industries to support workforce development. The WorldSkills Competition is a **high-level, Olympic-style event** for young professionals in vocational and technical fields. Competitors are the top performers at the national level and represent their countries. They undergo **rigorous and dedicated preparation**, often over a period of two years, supported by expert mentors in their field. Every two years, a different country hosts the competition, which spans over **four competitive days** and includes more than 60 vocational disciplines. Competitors complete skill-specific tasks within strict time limits and are judged by international experts based on **accuracy, speed, safety, and quality**.

Competitors can be awarded with gold, silver and bronze medals for the three top-performing competitors in each skill. Also, each competitor who scores 700 points or more but doesn't win a medal receives a *Medallion for Excellence* that signifies world-class standards of skill. The highest-scoring competitor from each country receives the *Best of Nation Award* that highlights national pride and top local talent. Additionally, the competitor with the

highest overall score across all skills is prized with *Albert Vidal Award*, an award named after the founder of WorldSkills that represents the most prestigious individual honor at WorldSkills.

Although competitors compete individually, there is a strong sense of **team spirit**. Participants proudly represent their countries, wearing team uniforms, carrying national flags, and engaging in distinctive **team symbols, chants, and cheers**, that are recognised and remembered. Each team and country is presented during the parade of competitors at the opening ceremony.

Competitors benefit greatly from participation: they gain **recognition and career opportunities**, enhance their CVs, and often receive **scholarships or job offers**, sometimes provided by sponsors or national bodies. Some go on to become **WorldSkills Ambassadors**, promoting the movement through global forums, events, social media, and mentorship.

In the years between WorldSkills competitions, the **EuroSkills Competition** is held. It is the European-level version of WorldSkills and the **largest skills excellence event in Europe**. Organized biennially, it is limited to **WorldSkills Europe member countries**, mostly from the EU and neighboring regions. Young professionals compete in around **40 skill categories**, in a format similar to WorldSkills, though on a smaller scale.

## 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION

**Psychological preparation** is a term commonly associated with sports. In today's world, sport is a global phenomenon that, through its fundamental element—competition—connects people, cultures, and communities. It develops under the influence of science and technology, is shaped by globalization and media culture, and stands as an important social occurrence that unites people through passion, emotion, patriotism, and higher goals—all viewed through the lens of competition and athletic achievement.

Modern athletes are today's warriors who, together with their coaches and expert teams, strive to influence every element that can affect performance and results beyond physical training and preparation, as is expected of them at all levels. What often makes the decisive difference between those who stand on the podium and wear the medal around their necks, and those who remain promising, talented, hardworking, and motivated—yet always just one step short—are **psychological skills**.

Psychological skills are developed like any other skill, gradually built through a process of psychological preparation, which is an integral part of sports training alongside technical, tactical, and physical preparation (Barić, 2006). Similarly, every competitor, in any field and any type of competition, must be psychologically prepared in order to fully realize their potential at the crucial moment—during the competition.

Psychological preparation is the process of enhancing psychological skills. Every competitor, in addition to meeting the prerequisites to become a member of the WorldSkills team—which means possessing an adequate level of professional knowledge sufficient to represent their country—must invest significant effort into their individual preparation during the period from selection to the competition.

One component of comprehensive preparation is psychological preparation, which involves consistent and persistent effort aimed at developing mental toughness, as well as cultivating a specific lifestyle of a WorldSkills competitor throughout the preparation period and during the competition itself.

In a broader sense, psychological preparation includes adopting the identity of a WorldSkills competitor, nurturing a particular way of life, and potentially forming new habits that enable more effective professional training during the pre-competition period.

In a narrower sense, psychological preparation entails patient work on mental resilience and stress resistance through the development of specific psychological skills:

- goal setting,
- arousal regulation,
- reducing anxiety responses and increasing stress tolerance,
- using appropriate coping techniques,
- building self-confidence,
- improving concentration, motivation, emotional regulation, and
- fostering a sense of team belonging.

It is a fact that a competitor may possess all the professional knowledge and highly developed vocational skills, but without discipline, achievement motivation, and psychological skills, they will not be able to reach the highest standards set by WorldSkills competitions. Good emotional control and the ability to cope with mistakes are often the factors that distinguish winners from others during the most crucial moments of the competition.

**Psychological preparation** of WorldSkills competitors also involves the development of communication skills and the ability to interact effectively with mentors and members of the expert team. This includes, on one hand, quality interaction with competitors in terms of collaboration, teaching, and mentoring, as well as appropriate communication and motivation throughout the preparation process—especially immediately before and during the competition. On the other hand, it requires competitors to be ready to express their needs, seek help, and request support whenever necessary during the preparation period.

Ultimately, psychological preparation also entails the development of team identity and team spirit among all participants involved in the WorldSkills competition preparation project. Team identity and support are important elements of both motivation and team success, as well as the individual success of competitors. Moreover, this forms the foundation for shared responsibility—both from the project leadership and mentors, and from the competitors themselves.

Psychological preparation is conducted by a qualified professional—a psychologist. Since this is competition preparation, it is natural that the psychologist is a licensed sports psychologist with experience in competitive preparation. The psychologist collaborates and communicates with the mentor to ensure that the mentor's guidance aligns with and complements the psychological preparation process.

Psychological preparation is an active process, and an essential part of it lies within the competitor, who must independently train and apply certain techniques and strategies daily. This both eases the process and helps internalize the psychological skills so they can be used naturally and effectively at the key moment—during the competition.

Psychological preparation includes several components:

- **Group work** with competitors through team workshops
- **Work with experts-mentors** (individual consultations, focus groups, workshops), and consultations with project leadership
- **Individual work** with competitors

- **Psychological support** during the competition

Since competitors come with varying experiences and different levels of psychological skills, group workshops are organized thematically to cover certain areas, ensuring that all participants receive general information and have the opportunity to develop their psychological capacities through various exercises. Possible workshop topics for competitors will be briefly addressed in the following chapters, and this manual can serve both competitors and their mentors as a support tool and supplement in the process of technical skill training as well as in their work on psychological preparation.

Given the well-documented scientific evidence that psychological skills training enhances individual and group performance—from sports to business environments—every responsible WorldSkills competitor should accept psychological preparation as an integral yet distinct part of their training for the WorldSkills competition.

It is worth investing in this area, as experience has shown that psychological preparation, when combined with highly developed vocational skills and knowledge, and supported by a well-structured system, enables competitors to reach the highest standards—and therefore, the highest achievements.

### 3. THE PILLARS OF OPTIMAL WORLDSKILLS COMPETITIVE PERFORMANCE

A quality competitive performance implies a high level of expertise and the application of acquired vocational skills and knowledge in new and unfamiliar conditions and situations. It also involves a high level of efficiency and the ability to meet the demands and standards of project tasks. Furthermore, it includes the ability to cope with competitive stress throughout the entire process, especially the ability to prioritize, as well as to deal with mistakes and unexpected outcomes during the performance. The goal of quality performance is to carry out the project/competition task successfully and achieve a high evaluation of the competitor's work. The pillars of optimal preparational and competitive performance are: training process, lifestyle and good team atmosphere.

#### 3.1 Training of WorldSkills Competitors

The purpose of training of WorldSkills competitors is to develop their competences to the greatest possible extent, to create a solid foundation of professional knowledge, and to train the necessary vocational skills so that competitors can apply them more easily and effectively during the competition.

A well-planned training program for WorldSkills competitors includes:

- Mastering professional standards and rules
- Practicing the technology of vocational work
- Developing an individual preparation plan for the competition (detailed over time, in collaboration with the mentor, including evaluation)
- Defining, practicing, and testing time management strategies (during preparation and competition)
- Practicing how to set priorities within a test task
- Identifying auxiliary procedures (connecting elements) and practicing them until they become automatic
- Becoming aware of personal strengths and weaknesses and developing strategies to address them
- Defining pre-competition and competition routines
- Setting competition goals
- Developing strategies to cope with mistakes and the stress they may cause
- Creating a 'Plan B'

- Adopting principles for analyzing competition performance to be applied at the end of each competition day (individually, with the mentor, within the competitor team, or with the psychologist)
- Practicing and applying self-reinforcement and encouragement strategies (during training and competition)

Additionally, each competitor is required to regularly attend all activities organized within the training camp for WorldSkills competitors, as well as other events between camps.

The training of WorldSkills competitors is primarily focused on acquiring professional knowledge and developing vocational skills. However, well-planned training also includes working on various aspects that enable a high level of application of what has been learned in the critical moment, during the competition.

Psychological factors play an important role both in the preparation process and during the competition. The competitor undergoes a gradual process of self-development, which requires confronting difficult and challenging tasks, personal weaknesses, ignorance, immaturity, mistakes, criticism, and so on. Persistence and patience are key for the competitor to endure through preparations and create the best possible conditions to achieve their competition goal.

The fact is that when equally skilled competitors meet in competition—those with similar levels of knowledge, skills, and effective application—the one who is better psychologically prepared will have the advantage. This is someone who has already developed psychological strategies for handling competitive situations and who has high motivation for achievement, as well as enough discipline not to be carried away by the desire and focus on the result. Instead, they remain disciplined and focused on the process and execution, which ultimately is the only path to achieving good results.

The recommendation for every WorldSkills competitor who aspires to a good result and victory is to begin acting like the best. That means responsibly, purposefully, and persistently working on all segments of their preparation, continuously and disciplined, just as the best truly do. A winner leaves nothing to chance, and it is their quality preparation that gives them the necessary self-confidence and the ability to relax, knowing they have done everything they could. In the competition, they focus on the task and, thanks to thorough preparation, are able to allow their body and mind to do exactly what they have learned and practiced—without forcing themselves or feeling the need for extensive analysis. Good preparation provides the competitor with the wind of self-confidence in their back, even when faced with something completely new and unexpected, as they know that because of their past work, they will manage and believe that they will find a solution to the situation.

### 3.2 The Importance of the Lifestyle of WorldSkills Competitors

Competitive success also brings with it the responsibility of a professional approach to all aspects of life. Lifestyle is the way an individual lives; it represents their attitudes, values, and outlook on life, as well as typical patterns of perception and behavior. Adler (1964) defines lifestyle as a psychological construct that describes the dynamics of an individual's personality, reflecting a unique, unconscious, and recurring approach (or avoidance) to different life areas: friendship, love, and work. Lifestyle is visible in the individualized way each person perceives, behaves, and feels within their specific social environment. Furthermore, lifestyle is a kind of inner dynamic force that provides the framework for realizing individual goals. Humans are intentional beings, and at every moment we act toward a specific goal, even if we haven't fully realized that goal. Every behavior serves a function, and the simplest

motivational force that drives us is to achieve a certain success and realize something we consider valuable and desirable, or to overcome or avoid failure and the demonstration of inferiority. This is achieved through various patterns of action. Our lifestyle is visible through our attitudes and values, our goals, interests, choices, and behavior. Lifestyle can be changed, shaped by the influence of society and the environment in which we live and act, through the help of authority figures, important others, culture, and personal experiences.

For every WorldSkills competitor to effectively carry out their preparation for the competition, an active lifestyle is recommended—one in which there is balance between newly acquired competition related tasks and other daily responsibilities, ideally in such a way that their interaction does not cause additional stress for the competitor. To successfully complete any task, health is necessary. For the competitor to be able to work regularly and with concentration on their task, they need to be well rested, which is supported by the competitor's daily lifestyle. In other words, lifestyle affects the process of preparation for the competition and ultimately the competition performance and result. If the lifestyle is not compatible with the competition goals, the final success is seriously compromised. On the other hand, the positive effects of an adequate lifestyle are visible in terms of better physical and psychological preparedness, faster and more efficient recovery, optimal adaptation to the task's demands, readiness to maximize the use of one's physical and mental resources, greater tolerance for pain, discomfort, and fatigue, better concentration and emotional control, greater dedication to the preparation process, higher work performance, faster progress and learning, and ultimately greater success with lasting stability.

Factors of an adaptive lifestyle for WorldSkills competitors: sleep and rest, physical activity, healthy eating habits, and life role balance.

### *Sleep and rest*

Sleep is an integral part of a regular circadian rhythm and a basic biological need for all living organisms. Sleep has a protective function, and the body defends itself from exhaustion and fatigue by requiring rest and sleep, during which physiological and mental functions slow down, allowing the body to recover and prepare for new efforts. Every person needs sleep and rest, and this is one of the key factors for recovery after strenuous preparations. Frequent lack of sleep and ignoring the body's signals for rest and energy depletion can long-term impair work efficiency. This chronic deficit causes changes at the neurophysiological level: hormone levels change, with an increase in cortisol, the stress hormone; a decrease in growth hormone, necessary for tissue synthesis; and a reduction in glycogen synthesis (Easton, 1999). Psychological changes also occur, such as irritability, mood swings, slowed reaction times, and changes in cognitive functions (Dinges et al., 1997; Van Dongen et al., 2003). It is important to note that not only the quantity but also the quality of sleep and rest is essential, as well as establishing a proper rest routine so that the body gets used to it and the competitor avoids potential sleep difficulties caused by changes in the environment during the competition period. Lack of time for rest can be partially compensated by using relaxation techniques, which can, of course, be a part of the daily rest and recovery routine, especially during intensive preparations or multi-day competitions.

### *Physical activity*

Regular physical activity has numerous indisputable and scientifically proven benefits for physical as well as psychological health (Horga & Barić, 2018). It is essential for every person to maintain and preserve their health, and for a WorldSkills competitor, engaging in some form of physical activity on a regular basis can help in the recovery process, mental relaxation, testing and improving self-discipline, and acquiring the physical fitness necessary to endure the strain and demands of multi-day competitions that WorldSkills competitors face.

Physical activity contributes to the oxygenation of tissues, thus refreshing the body and cognitive functions. Additionally, regular and planned physical activity results in a transformation of the body's status and an increase in physical conditioning, strengthening strength and endurance, as well as enhancing defense functions, which is beneficial for any competitor. At the same time, noticing and tracking such changes has a positive impact on motivation and self-confidence. Engaging in physical activity also contributes to psychological relaxation, especially during the intense preparation period. While exercising, the competitor is distracted from work tasks, relaxes the mind, and replenishes energy. Furthermore, regular exercise helps balance work and rest rhythms, enables easier falling asleep and higher-quality sleep, and increases the efficiency of daily recovery.

Competitors can choose a physical activity according to their personal preferences, but it is recommended to engage in aerobic and rhythmic physical activities due to their positive effects on psychological health. These activities promote abdominal breathing, are conducted at a moderate intensity, have a relatively predictable nature, and are non-competitive. Such activities have more relaxing effects and contribute to improving mood and reducing anxiety and stress symptoms. Despite the above, the most important recommendation is regularity in exercising, and the activity can either be organized or simply a walk in nature. Being in nature adds additional value as it has a relaxing character.

### *Eating habits*

Diet also plays a significant role in the recovery and regeneration of the body, especially during stressful periods, and is generally important for maintaining health. The fundamental processes of energy expenditure required to endure physical and mental exertion are linked to the intake of nutrients that build the body and repair damaged tissues, enable chemical processes and cellular energy production, and protect cells and tissues from potential harmful consequences of corrosive processes caused by physical and psychological stress (Vurdelja, 2006). Properly forming eating habits involves consuming high-quality, nutritionally balanced foods in appropriate quantities, considering the intensity and regime of work, body weight and caloric needs, work schedule, preparation phase, as well as gender and age. Irregular and disordered eating can lead to a decrease in physical capacities and work efficiency by as much as 20-30% (Sekulić, 2000), which is a significant limiting factor. Healthy and balanced nutrition follows three principles: variety, moderation, and completeness (Clark, 2007), and involves consuming nutritionally rich foods that do not overload the body and digestive system (such as sugars and excessive amounts of carbohydrates). It is also important to maintain a regular and sufficient intake of fluids daily.

Insufficient commitment or neglect of the principles of sports nutrition represents a long-term stress for the body, which reacts defensively—by reducing capacity or storing energy reserves that result in an increase in body fat. Proper nutrition provides the body with enough energy to endure the daily preparation efforts, and it is especially important on competition days. The greatest advantage of this is the long-term investment of the competitor in their own health.

### *Life roles balance*

Every competitor who goes through the WorldSkills selection process takes on a new life role. During the (typically) one-year preparation period, they must skillfully integrate this new role into their life so that it gains meaning, while ensuring that their other life roles are not neglected. The challenge for every new competitor is how to structure the time they have available—how to redistribute it so that they can adequately prepare for the competition challenges, despite their existing obligations (educational, work-related, family, informal). Many competitors

struggle with this aspect, especially at the beginning. This is evident in two ways: some dedicate too little time to preparations, especially when the competition date is far off, and then progressively increase their workload, particularly just before joint preparations or the competition itself, which can lead to exhaustion and reduced efficiency. Others start adjusting everything to the preparation process, seriously taking on the new role and overdoing the daily hours dedicated to preparing for the WorldSkills competition, thereby neglecting other commitments, causing deadlines to tighten or resulting in feelings of stress (such as delays, poorer performance in school or at work, fatigue, etc.). As a result, they may feel unwell, irritable, and nervous, which, in extreme cases, could lead to resistance to the preparation process.

The fact is that every competitor voluntarily applied to participate in the WorldSkills team and receives no financial compensation or legal obligation for this, which allows them to reconsider at any moment—though this would not be ideal for the team. Therefore, it is important to prevent burnout and ensure that competitors, in collaboration with their mentors and with the help of psychologists, discuss and create a schedule and preparation dynamics. This will allow them to complete everything on time, avoid procrastination, and prevent panicked exhaustion in the final stages of preparation leading up to the competition.

### 3.3 Good work atmosphere

If a person wants to create something, it is important that they feel good. A positive and good work atmosphere, along with a sense of community and team energy, contributes to the individual energy of participants, fosters motivation and creativity, and allows for more relaxed actions. A pleasant and productive atmosphere, in which trust and support are felt, encourages high-quality performance.

A good work atmosphere is achieved on three levels: the level of joint team preparations, the level of collaboration with mentors, and the individual level of each competitor.

The atmosphere of joint team preparations is influenced by the structure of the program and content within the planned work schedule. Furthermore, the atmosphere is shaped by creating shared team values, frequently referring to these values, and promoting them. Work atmosphere is also supported by work discipline, but this does not mean authoritarian control. It is important that competitors feel relaxed, exchange experiences with one another, with mentors/experts, and program leaders, both within task-related communication and informal conversations. The framework for a good work atmosphere includes team goals, which are easier to realize when there is a sense of team identity and connection. This is developed through work with a psychologist and maintained through collaboration on work goals, wearing shared team features (such as uniforms), and so on. A crucial prerequisite for creating such a work atmosphere on a general level is the professional and well-prepared staff (leaders and collaborators in the WorldSkills project).

The work atmosphere at the level of collaboration between the mentor-expert and the individual competitor develops within their mutual relationship. The expert-mentor, as the more experienced, authoritative figure, is primarily responsible for this process. Creating a preparation plan and defining tasks, along with continuous evaluation (for example, on a weekly basis), helps maintain work discipline. In this process, communication between the competitor and mentor is key. The mentor's professional approach, consistency, discipline, and strict adherence to the defined plan greatly contribute to the work atmosphere. Encouraging and embodying team values at the individual competitor level, through discussions, specific tasks, and communication, is also crucial. A good relationship based on trust, with a degree of flexibility to adjust to the competitor, space for humor, and the

shared resolution of difficulties and uncertainties, forms the basis for a good, pleasant, and motivating work atmosphere.

A good work atmosphere at the level of collaboration with the mentor-expert also translates to the individual level of each competitor. Apart from the general schedule created with the mentor, each competitor should structure their own weekly and daily work plan. It is important to have an overview of the required knowledge and professional skills in relation to the competition demands, as well as individual experience and capacity. Besides the fact that it is recommended for the competitor to strictly and consistently adhere to the work plan for competition preparation, it is also important to eliminate possible distractions from the work environment just before starting work, establish "golden time for preparation" (it is recommended to choose the same time every day), and briefly evaluate progress in relation to work goals. It is also crucial for competitors to maintain a positive mental attitude during daily training, as this will also help them perform in the same manner during the competition and improve their everyday work.

In this segment, competitors are also assisted by being aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, setting progressive goals in relation to these, and aligning with the general goals of the preparation process.



**THINK:** Which aspects of your own preparation, based on the previous text, could you improve or pay more attention to? Rank them hierarchically

#### 4. COMPETITIVE MENTAL FRAMEWORK

Competitors are individuals with different experiences and prior knowledge, varying levels of skills, but also different psychological characteristics.

A competitor's expertise may be high, but if it is not paired with confidence, concentration, motivation, emotional control, discipline, dedication, and a drive for achievement, a high level of performance and quality will be lacking despite the competitor's potential.

Psychological demands vary depending on the competition skill, so the process of psychological preparation should, in part, be individualized according to the needs of the competitor as well as the demands of the project task.

The competitive mental framework represents the *mindset*, the psychological state that should be aimed for to perform well in the competition.

The *optimal competitive mental framework* for a WorldSkills competitor includes:

- discipline
- focus on the process rather than on the result
- mental and physical relaxation
- high self-confidence
- readiness to face challenges with enjoyment
- good concentration
- resilience after making mistakes
- a sense of good energy, physical strength, and endurance
- a positive attitude
- high achievement motivation
- creativity and resourcefulness
- belief in one's expertise and preparation, and familiarity with all parts/requirements of the competition task

The competitive mindset develops during the preparation phase and must be patiently and consistently trained and refined so that it can be expressed at the key moment—during the competition. The ability to regulate emotions and calm pre-performance anxiety or nervousness is often the key factor that distinguishes top-tier competitors from the rest.

To develop an optimal competitive mindset, good cooperation between the expert and the competitor is essential.

Both should be aware of the competitor's characteristics and technical capabilities. This should be considered in relation to the required level of the competition, overall and for each competitive day. Competitive confidence is largely built through:

- familiarity with the technical instructions of the project task
- successful solving of tasks from previous competitions
- and keeping up with and adopting new knowledge and skills in the field in order to implement them into one's solutions.

Participation in smaller competitions prior the main WorldSkills event can be very helpful. At these events, the competitor can test the application of their pre-competition and competition routines, assess their current level of readiness and the effectiveness of their preparation process, and become familiar with the competitive atmosphere—something especially important for competitors without prior competition experience. They also improve their psychological skills under situational conditions and learn about their strengths and weaknesses.

For better effectiveness of preparation process it is essential to define competition goals, work strategies, and approaches. Equally important is to provide a detailed evaluation and analysis after the competition is over.

In cooperation with the expert and psychologist, the competitor may identify their strengths as well as their areas for improvement that need further development before the target competition. Communication and observation of other competitors and teams are also valuable learning opportunities.

The competitive mental framework can be improved—it partially depends on personality traits, but largely on psychological preparedness and the development level of psychological skills. There is no typical psychological personality profile of a winning competitor; rather, a winning mindset results from strengthening weak areas and learning to use and present strong points as effectively as possible, which contributes to a successful outcome.

The relationship between these psychological characteristics affects how a competitor works and approaches tasks, which is important information for the mentor-expert to consider in the teaching process, giving instructions, and providing feedback, as well as motivating the competitor.

As always, communication is a key factor in this segment, and both members of the pair—the competitor and the expert—can benefit from the support of a professional psychologist.



**THINK:** Which psychological skills are important for success in your profession? How would you rate yourself on each one? What do you need to improve that rating

	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

## 5. STRUCTURING THE PREPARATION PROGRAMME FOR WORLDSKILLS COMPETITOR

Creating a preparation plan and program for WorldSkills competitors is one of the most important parts of the competition preparation process. This includes defining goals, work content, and a time frame, as well as transitional checkpoints where the completed work will be reviewed (and recorded), and if necessary, adjusted based on that evaluation. In this way, the competitor and expert create a framework for the competitor's preparation, communicate more easily, express or recognize needs, and the monitoring and evaluation clearly show the competitor's progress. Besides saving time for both the competitor and mentor, this plan reduces uncertainty by contributing to a sense of control, which helps reduce pre-competition anxiety.

When creating the program, it is useful to follow certain guidelines, outlined below. The program itself can be presented in a table, as a mind map, or in bullet-point format.

The expert-mentor and competitor jointly create the preparation program, and both collaborate with a psychologist in the psychological preparation program. In doing so, the following elements should be considered:

#### 1. Identifying the competitor's needs and priorities regarding WSC preparation

- The initial step is a discussion and joint analysis between the mentor and competitor to determine what the competitor already knows, their areas for improvement, how familiar they are with the psychological preparation process, and what their expectations and needs are in this area.
- In collaboration with a psychologist, priorities for developing the individual competitor's psychological skills are defined. The competitor is expected to be committed to this part of the preparation from the beginning, as psychological preparation is a process that requires time for noticeable effects to emerge.
- Cooperation between the psychologist and expert is recommended to exchange information and apply certain techniques/strategies within the technical training that also support the competitor's psychological development.

#### 2. Setting preparation goals

- The preparation plan should structure long-term, short-term, weekly (and at some stage, even daily) goals for each segment of training. It is also important to plan the timeline and deadlines for achieving these goals.

#### 3. Monitoring progress and changes in technical and psychological skills

- In a preparation period that spans several months, it is important to track the competitor's level of psychological skills. This can be done through self-observation, self-assessment, targeted interviews with a psychologist, questionnaires and rating scales, and communication with the mentor who observes and tracks the competitor's reactions to new learning, mistakes, willingness to ask questions, ability to cope with emotional pressure, and performance under stress.

#### 4. Evaluation of outcomes according to preparation phases

- Besides evaluating content, observed changes in the competitor should follow a time-based dynamic so that the entire program can be completed effectively and on schedule. It is beneficial to plan transitional checkpoints to verify task completion, and to plan content in a table format, visually marking completed items (e.g., with a red checkmark). This provides the competitor with a daily reminder of the plan and a source of motivation. It's also helpful to keep such a plan in a visible location.
- The competitor can also track their progress using a weekly work journal. Each week should include 1–3 goals to focus on, along with space to record comments and notes from daily self-reflection (e.g., "What went well today?", "What could I have done better?", "What should I pay extra attention to?", "What is important to remember?", "Which method was most effective?", "How did I feel?"). These reflections can speed up the learning and training process and help focus attention on what matters most.

The expert can also use a similar approach to plan and evaluate the competitor's progress.



## EXAMPLE OF A PROTOCOL FOR WEEKLY GOAL ANALYSIS

	THE LEVEL OF DAILY GOALS REALISATION 1-10	SATISFACTION LEVEL 1-10	COMMENT, INSTRUCTION
Weekly goal:			
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			

## 6. PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING

In the following section of the manual, the most important areas of psychological preparation that every WorldSkills competitor should go through—regardless of their vocational discipline—will be briefly addressed.

These thematic areas do not necessarily need to be covered in the given order; some goals and segments may partially overlap, and certain techniques can be used for different purposes. Each WorldSkills competitor will devote more attention to a specific segment that is personally a priority or more necessary for them; however, it is recommended to go through all the topics and apply them during the preparation process for the competition, as well as during the competition itself.

The basic starting point is the active participation and contribution of each competitor in this segment of preparation. Neither the psychologist nor the mentor-expert is someone who can “increase” a competitor’s level of psychological skills needed for a successful competition. Rather, the main responsibility lies within the competitor themselves, their motivation, and their decision to discipline themselves and thoroughly include psychological skills training in their preparation, with the support of a psychologist. The role of the mentor-expert is also important, as they know and monitor the competitor well and can help them more quickly and easily identify

personal strengths and areas for improvement in psychological skills, all in relation to the demands of the competition.

### *6.1 Beginning of the mentor-expert and competitor cooperation: the relationship*

Most competitors begin working with their mentor at least about a year before the upcoming major competition. It is possible they already know each other or have previously worked together in preparation for another competition, but in most cases, this is their first collaboration.

Since this is a one-on-one relationship, the success of the preparation greatly depends on the quality of the relationship established between the competitor and their mentor. Therefore, it is important that they get to know each other well as soon as possible—sharing experiences, goals, expectations, uncertainties, etc.—because their relationship forms the foundation of the entire preparation process. It also creates the conditions for good, open communication, which is crucial throughout the preparation period as well as during the competition itself.

By definition, this is an unequal relationship between two active participants—an older and more experienced mentor-teacher and a younger, less experienced competitor who voluntarily agrees to be the learner. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to clearly define the framework for communication from the beginning, explicitly allow questions and open dialogue (not assuming it's understood, as some competitors may be shy, inexperienced, or hesitant and need time to open up—time that is limited).

The mentor-expert's task at this stage is to clearly present the preparation plan and training program, to familiarize the competitor with the system they have designed, as well as the methods for evaluating and testing what is learned, and the schedule and means of mutual communication and joint meetings. It is also important for the mentor to clearly state their expectations from the competitor and share any past experience with previous generations of competitors, if applicable, and to express confidence in a successful outcome and good cooperation.

At this point, it would also be valuable to highlight certain values the mentor considers important and wishes to cultivate in the competitor—values aligned with the leadership and team of WorldSkills mentors (e.g. dedication, discipline, determination, a positive attitude, etc.). These values should be regularly reiterated, reinforced with examples, and incorporated into tasks designed to develop them.

While it is crucial for the competitor and mentor to get to know each other well initially, establishing trust is equally essential to building a solid foundation. For a competitor to gain (or begin building) trust in their mentor, communication is key—but the most important component is the mentor's professional expertise, which the competitor needs to witness firsthand. This is best achieved through the mentor's thorough preparation and professional approach to the work and their collaboration.

The competitor's task at this stage is to communicate openly and honestly, be willing to ask questions, and seek help from the very beginning. Competitors are expected to show professionalism, respect deadlines and agreements, complete assignments, and contribute individually by showing extra effort, creative solutions, presenting alternative ideas, etc.—all of which indicate their motivation and commitment.

The better the mentor-expert and the competitor know each other, the more easily they will be able to cooperate. They will be more confident in predicting each other's reactions during training and preparation, which enables better adaptation and ultimately leads to a better outcome. Good communication is especially important during

challenging moments—when things are not going well, or when there is time pressure or increased stress. These situations should be discussed in advance, and a course of action agreed upon for when they arise.



**Discuss your expectations with your mentor/competitor. Think about the best way for you to interact and cooperate during the preparation process. Agree on a general plan and timeline for the work.**

You can build the conversation around the following questions/statements:

- As a mentor/competitor, what matters to me is...
- From this competition, I expect...
- From the competitor/mentor, I expect/need...
- I usually find it hard or get demotivated when...
- When learning something new, it helps me most when...
- What do you consider to be your greatest strength as a WSC competitor?
- What currently represents the biggest opportunity for improvement?

**It is also important to discuss the pattern of behavior and communication in situations of potential disagreement, failure to meet agreements, unmet plans.**

## 6.2 Values

Quality management of processes and people is management guided by values. Individual team members function better both individually and within the team when there is a shared team mission and clear values that guide all participants. These are a set of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about what is good and desirable, shaped through the process of socialization and mutual interaction (Rokeach, 1973).

Values unite all team members and their actions; leadership, experts, and competitors can be recognized as Team, among other things, by the values they promote and demonstrate as a group, which they believe in and live by. On an individual level, values represent what is important to a person, guiding them in various life situations, and are our personal principles and beliefs. Within the preparation for the WorldSkills competition, it is important to define what the team values are that we want to develop and base the preparation for WorldSkills competitors on.

According to the opinions of the competitors and experts, the following values stand out for the WSC team:

- Work ethic
- Knowledge, expertise
- Discipline

- Commitment
- Responsibility
- Positive attitude/approach
- Excellence
- Perseverance and patience
- Independence
- Resourcefulness and creativity
- Respect
- Professionalism
- Passion
- Ambition
- Unity and support
- Enjoyment

The importance of values is most visible from a motivational aspect, as values form the foundation of motivation and guide our behavior, even when we are not fully conscious of them. A more successful competitor sets goals in accordance with their values and is more dedicated to such goals. Moreover, values help us in the process of evaluating ourselves, our actions, and our surroundings, serving as a sort of reference framework for evaluation.

Since people have different value systems and it can sometimes be difficult to understand the behavior and attitudes of someone whose values differ from our own, at the beginning of the process of joint preparations, it would be advisable to encourage competitors to become aware of their own values and promote shared values, so that the preparation process is somewhat standardized and the motivational foundation and framework for the work and actions of competitors, as well as mentoring by experts, are similar.

However, the key is not in defining certain words and repeating them, but in implementing their meaning in practice on a daily basis, through the standards, behaviors, and actions of each competitor, each expert, and every member of the professional team and leadership. Based on values, all individuals understand how their actions and contributions fit into the whole and why they are important for the overall goals and mission for the any national WorldSkills organization.



**Choose and hierarchically order 6-8 of the above-mentioned values that you consider the most important from the perspective of a WorldSkills competitor. Define what your responsibility is in each of them (how it is put into action) and to what extent you consider it developed in yourself at this moment. Reflect on what would be needed for these values to become more recognizable in your behavior.**

My values	My responsibilities	0-100%

### 6.3 Setting goals

If we want to manage someone's motivation, the key tool is goals. Differences in the behavior of competitors can be the result of their high or low motivation or different goals. Motivation is a key factor in the dedicated work and progress of every WorldSkills competitor. In order to maintain motivation at a high level throughout the entire preparation process, it is important to have a good motivational framework, and these are precisely the goals.

Although people say they have some goals (life, daily), the fact is that very few truly know how to set goals effectively. A well-set goal is one that serves its purpose, which is to stimulate and maintain motivation and guide an individual's behavior toward achieving the desired outcomes. Psychologists say that having a good goal is already 20% of its realization, which makes sense because a good goal works on the level of motivation.

Motivation is the driving force that leads us to an activity, in other words, it stimulates a certain behavior, determining its intensity and duration. We can behave in a certain way because we are motivated by internal needs, states, or drives, or our behavior can be triggered externally, by incentives, attractive features of certain goals that are important or interesting to us. The motivational cycle usually begins with the disruption of internal homeostasis, and the organism strives to restore it by satisfying the need that emerged in the form of a motive, which materializes through the realization of a specific goal. Many motives have a biological basis and are vitally important to us, but there are also so-called psychological motives – goals and values that are equally important for our daily lives. These are the so-called growth motives, which reflect the need for love and belonging, for respect, self-respect, and finally for self-actualization (Maslow, 1954), i.e., the maximum realization of all our potential in areas that are important to the individual. It is precisely this need that WorldSkills competitors satisfy in their field of expertise.

On this journey, they satisfy some of their needs and try to act purposefully to prepare as well as possible for the competition, which is their ultimate goal. However, for the preparation to be as high quality as possible, it needs to be systematically prepared and goal-oriented, specifically guided by specific goals that are monitored, evaluated, and refined or changed, depending on the phase of preparation. The competitor shapes, evaluates, and refines their goals in collaboration with the mentor. This is extremely important for two reasons. A competitor is often not experienced enough to set goals within realistic frameworks. On the other hand, it would not be ideal for the mentor to set goals for the competitor, as such goals would be perceived as imposed (not necessarily consciously), which is motivationally undesirable. For proper goal-setting, it is important to follow the principles of goal-setting, which indicate how goals should be set and what type of goals should be set.

#### Principles of goal setting

1. **Long-term and Short-term Goals** – It is important to have long-term goals that serve as the framework of the entire process, the desired outcome to be achieved, but it is equally important to have short-term, smaller goals that serve as stepping stones towards the long-term goal, and help in evaluating progress through stages. It is beneficial for both long-term and short-term goals to be clearly time-defined with deadlines.
2. **Realistic** – A good goal is one that is realistically achievable, neither overly demanding nor too easy. A goal that is too high reduces motivation over time because it becomes impossible to reach, which accumulates dissatisfaction in the competitor and a sense of incompetence. A goal that is too easy lacks meaning because the competitor doesn't put in the extra effort and doesn't progress in the long run.
3. **Specific and Measurable** – A good goal is one whose degree of achievement can be verified, preferably observed. It doesn't necessarily have to be measured on a specific scale (e.g., time,

repetitions), but can also be subjectively scaled (e.g., level of effort/energy/perseverance on a scale from 1-10).

4. **Positively Formulated** – Goals should be framed in terms of something the competitor wants to achieve, rather than something they want to avoid (e.g., "do a quick check of each section of the task" instead of "don't forget to check what has been done after each section"). Although it may initially sound similar, a positive goal has a completely different psychological impact, as it directs the competitor towards a desired outcome, not a mistake or failure, which impacts motivation.

5. **Process-Oriented** – A well-defined goal is formulated in terms of performance, not just the result of that performance. In other words, it clearly specifies what the competitor needs to do to achieve that outcome, instead of focusing only on the final result (e.g., instead of "sew the exact front side," a better approach would be "ensure precise measuring and careful cutting of the front segments, and patiently and calmly join large edges while checking for flatness").

6. **Written and Reviewed** – It is beneficial to have all goals written down in a specific protocol, periodically reviewed, and analyzed to determine what additional steps the competitor needs to take to achieve the goals more effectively and quickly. Goal evaluation and progress tracking positively influence the competitor's motivation. For example, if a competitor has a list with the long-term goal and several short-term goals to work on during the preparation period, marking off completed tasks (e.g., with a red checkmark or strike-through) positively impacts their motivation, their sense of security in their preparation, and their long-term self-confidence.

It is important that the competitor periodically checks and evaluates their goals, and makes changes or refinements with the mentor when necessary. The mentor should pay attention to the quantity and manner of providing feedback.

7. **Personal, not imposed** – Every competitor has the right to choose their goals in accordance with their own needs and priorities, within the framework of the overall goal, which is the best possible preparation for the competition. In order for the set goals to be fully embraced and for them to fulfill their motivational purpose, no one should impose goals on the competitor. On the contrary, the goals should be the competitor's own choice. It is best for the competitor to shape their goals together with the mentor when creating the work plan and program. The psychological preparation goals, which are incorporated into the preparation process and supplemented with technical goals, are formulated in collaboration with a psychologist.

In the process of learning and achieving goals, support and positive feedback are crucial, with the mentor-expert playing a key role. The better a goal is formulated, the greater the possibility of clearly tracking and documenting specific indicators of success, for which the competitor should be praised and sometimes rewarded. For motivation and self-confidence, it is important that the competitor is able to recognize evidences of their own progress and value it as something worthy (and not just normal or expected)—in other words, that they can praise and reward themselves.



Think about your goals, create them, or check the ones you already have. Try to define them according to the previous text and the protocol below. Choose only what you can actually act on, not something that is beyond your control.

- - - - MY GOALS - - - -

Long term goal

---

Short term goal 1

---

Short term goal 2

---

SKILLS I WANT TO IMPROVE	MY GOALS	WHAT EXACTLY WILL I TAKE ACTION ON AND WITHIN WHAT TIMEFRAME?

#### 6.4 Self-Confidence

There is no competitor or coach in any field who would disagree with the statement that self-confidence is one of the most important components of competitive success, as well as daily success in various life tasks. Self-confidence is a part of the overall concept of oneself, a component of self-esteem – a global sense of one's own worth. Self-confidence is the belief in one's abilities, the individual's awareness of how successfully they can perform a task or overcome a challenge.

A self-confident person acts as though they are capable of doing things their own way, feeling in control of events and their life, creating their own destiny, and creating conditions that allow them to experience success and

achieve the results they strive for. A self-confident person uses their strengths and potentials in challenging situations, believes that these are sufficient to respond to nearly any task appropriately, and believes they can handle even unfamiliar circumstances.

Self-confidence is felt and reflected in attitude, speech, appearance, gaze, words, walk, and behavior. Self-confidence can be developed, and it is an area worth investing in every day. Learning to maintain self-confidence regardless of how things develop is a characteristic of a winning mindset. A self-confident attitude is characterized by positive thinking, belief in one's own abilities, skills, and training, focus on constructively solving problems, and good coping skills when dealing with mistakes.

Self-confidence is accompanied by positive emotions, a sense of one's own strength and readiness, and an active approach. Self-confidence determines the competitor's attitude and approach to a competitive situation. Whether the competitor calmly and confidently approaches the task or becomes discouraged, focusing on potential failures, focusing on what might go wrong, and increasing their stress response depends on their assessment of the situation at that specific moment. In a competitive situation, as in life in general, our emotions are conditioned by the way we assess the situation we are in. What we think influences how we feel, and this is evident in our behavior, in this case, in the competitive performance (Figure 1).

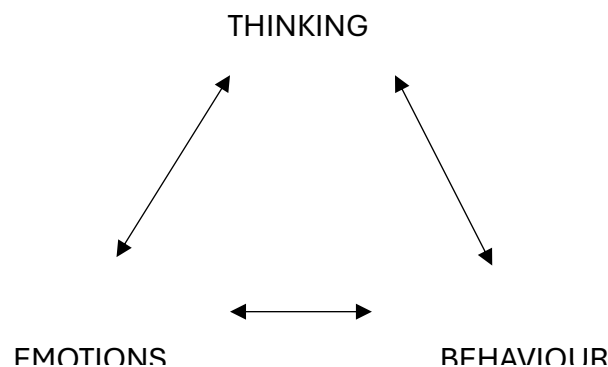


Figure 1:  
model (Beck, 2007)

*Cognitive-behavioural*

When there is an imbalance between our assessment of the demands of a situation and our resources, strengths, and abilities, stress occurs. There are two possible solutions – either reconsider and change the assessment of the situation (which might not be realistic), or become aware of and strengthen your strengths and abilities. In any case, what is desirable is focusing on your strengths and capacities, finding evidence that supports the idea that you are capable and have reason to believe in yourself, and focusing on those aspects of the situation that are within your control.

For all of the above, it is important to note that it does not matter what the actual situation is, but rather what the person (the competitor) believes at that moment. Facts may suggest otherwise and actually be in favor of the competitor, but if he/she does not feel that way and perceives the situation differently, what will determine the functional level of self-confidence is the perception – what the person believes at that moment.

Self-confidence is partly a stable part of personality, but also a state, a way in which a person reacts at a given moment, for example, when facing a task. Variations in the level of self-confidence are determined by the circumstances, more precisely by the person's assessment and reaction to those circumstances, and these variations can be learned to control, leading to a certain level of resilience, i.e., decreased reactivity to surrounding signs.

The first step on that path is the awareness that no one has maximum self-confidence all the time – variations are normal. People generally have more self-confidence in familiar situations where they feel comfortable, where everything is predictable. Also, a self-confident attitude is characterized by the awareness that making mistakes is normal, and a self-confident competitor accepts their mistakes, poorer results, and deviations from expectations without getting caught in a web of self-blame and self-criticism. Moreover, true self-confidence is revealed precisely in difficult crisis moments, when the competitor makes a mistake or when things do not go according to plan. A self-confident competitor retains their belief in these moments or, in the case of failure, learns from the situation and moves forward. An important part of such learning is learning about oneself.

Do the following exercise to better assess your self-confidence, depending on the situation.



**Fill in the following table. Reflect on the circumstances or situations related to your vocational competitions in which you feel confident and self-assured, and those in which you doubt yourself. Becoming aware of the situations and triggers that make you feel insecure is the first step toward strengthening your self-confidence.**

Situations where I feel confident	Situations where I feel insecure

### How to Strengthen Your Self-Confidence - Sources of Self-Confidence

Numerous psychological studies have been conducted to determine what most contributes to self-confidence. Summarized, several different sources of self-confidence stand out. These include:

- Good preparation
- Achievements
- Vicarious experience
- Verbal persuasion
- Physiological state
- Emotional state
- Stepping out of the comfort zone
- Self-confidence as a personal choice.

**Good preparation** is certainly a fundamental prerequisite for a desirable level of self-confidence for any competitor. If a competitor is not well-prepared but is confident, their confidence is unfounded and will not help their performance. No matter how confident a person is, they cannot overcome a lack of preparation.

On the other hand, good preparation gives the competitor momentum and the confidence that they can meet the demands of the task, even in unpredictable, new, and unexpected circumstances. Good preparation results from planned training and helps the competitor understand what is required of them. They will have multiple options and solutions "in their mind," making it easier to handle difficult situations.

An important aspect of good preparation is **situational training**. After the mentor-expert has guided the competitor through all areas of preparation, it is advisable to use situational training as much as possible. This is based on segments of test tasks, including solving tasks within a time-limited period. A particularly useful form of situational training is preparatory competitions.

**Achievements** provide a powerful boost to self-confidence. Athletes often testify to this. Nothing boosts confidence like a good result. A medal earned gives a sense of accomplishment, where the effort is paid off, and the hard work is validated. Each time a competitor witnesses their own success, whether through a result or by proving their skill, they build upon their self-confidence and are ready to take the next step, try to conquer a higher challenge. It is very important for the learning and practice process to be progressively planned, and the competitor should not move to the next level until they have mastered the previous one. Otherwise, they may experience failure, and when this failure is repeated (for example, when basic skills are missing or when some components haven't been mastered), the effect on self-confidence can be the opposite. The key is planned and targeted development of professional skills and performance based on previous smaller successes. When mistakes occur during this process, the competitor will not be discouraged but will accept them as part of learning (which is the goal) because they are aware of everything they have achieved so far and the fact that what they've done once, they can do again.

**Vicarious experience** involves learning about self-confidence from others, more precisely, observing other competitors who act confidently and perform successfully. This helps increase self-confidence in the observer. This effect is enhanced, especially when the person believes their "model" is similar in characteristics and abilities, and the change occurs on the principle of "if they can do it, I can too." Therefore, it is beneficial to recognize individuals in the competitive team who could serve as good models and inspiration for others.

**Verbal persuasion** is a powerful tool for any change, including increasing self-confidence. Mentors can use it in communication with their competitors in the form of positive verbal messages, expressing belief in success, progress, and a positive outcome. Verbal persuasion can also be used by the competitor themselves, in the form of positive self-talk. It is important to train oneself to replace negative thoughts and negative self-talk with positive ones and to do this persistently so that it becomes a habit. Words are not insignificant as they reflect our thoughts and attitudes, which in turn affect our emotions and behavior (performance). This is a crucial psychological skill for every successful competitor, as it supports their self-confidence. For competitors with low self-confidence, it is important to note that this should not be the only technique used; it should be combined with other techniques for strengthening self-confidence. Otherwise, repeating positive phrases without evidence over time could have the opposite effect, leading to further decreases in self-confidence.

**Physiological state** – This segment concerns the competitor's ability to control their physiological reactions during training and competition, as well as their belief that their efforts to influence these reactions can truly bear fruit. The body reacts to stress with increased tension, and if the competitor perceives this as undesirable and problematic, it increases their experience of stress, negatively affecting their self-confidence in that situation. In Chapter 5.7, we will present some techniques for regulating physiological arousal, which can help competitors in stressful situations or when dealing with performance anxiety.

**Emotional state** – Self-confidence is fundamentally an emotional response to different situations that the competitor encounters. If in a certain situation we feel insecure and scared, our self-confidence will

decrease. During such challenging moments, maintaining a desirable level of self-confidence is largely a result of the ability to control thought processes, and indirectly, through them, emotional states. Also, applying various psychological techniques when a competitor feels tension, anxiety, fear of external evaluation, or after making a mistake, which are mentioned in these chapters, specifically targets changes in emotional states, thus impacting self-confidence levels.

**Stepping out of the comfort zone** – People generally do not like change. It is difficult to change, even when the current situation is not ideal. Most people prefer to "swim" in the so-called comfort zone, where everything is familiar, close, and predictable, because this gives them a sense of control and security. A self-confident person pushes their boundaries, willingly stepping outside that comfort zone and trying new things. At first, these situations may feel uncomfortable, but they force us to adapt, change our existing patterns, and find new ways, even though we cannot be certain whether they will work. Areas outside the comfort zone are where our growth, progress, and skills improvement occur. Even though we may feel like we're taking risks, it is worth taking responsibility and daring to act, recognizing the challenge in the problem, and moving forward. There is always a 50:50 chance of success, and when we experience it after such an adventure, our self-confidence significantly increases.

In competitive preparation, this means searching for and contemplating new ways to solve tasks, testing your limits, letting your imagination and creativity flow, and choosing situations that initially bring discomfort. Persisting in tasks that are not going well at first will gradually reduce the discomfort, increase feelings of competence and control, and you will recognize the effects of your new actions, thus nourishing your self-confidence.

**Self-confidence as a personal choice** – It is extremely important for anyone who feels they lack self-confidence to consciously choose to work on it every day. This means actively applying techniques and finding evidence that supports their self-confidence on a daily basis. Self-confidence will not grow on its own, and no external source can nurture our self-confidence as much as we can ourselves. The first step is the conscious choice of certain behavior patterns, with the mechanism of social learning being crucial. If we want to become more self-confident, one of the simplest interventions is that we must appear like a self-confident person and do what a self-confident person would do in that moment, even if it feels difficult at first. It is also important to patiently gather evidence in our favor, acknowledging our efforts, the amount of work done in preparation, and congratulating ourselves for both bigger and smaller successes. This will help gradually shift our self-perception in a positive direction.



**Honestly assess and mark the typical reactions and thinking patterns you recognize in yourself**

High self-confidence	Low self-confidence
I do what I believe is right even when others question it <input type="checkbox"/>	I adapt my actions to what others ask for and to their expectations <input type="checkbox"/>
I take risks easily and dare to try a new approach <input type="checkbox"/>	I stick to what's tried and true, fear failure, and find it hard to take risks <input type="checkbox"/>
I accept my mistakes and am ready to learn from them <input type="checkbox"/>	I try to hide my mistakes and hope no one notices them <input type="checkbox"/>
After a failure, I keep going even stronger and don't make a tragedy out of the situation <input type="checkbox"/>	I react emotionally to failure and feel like a failure myself when it happens <input type="checkbox"/>
I expect others to recognize and appreciate my achievements <input type="checkbox"/>	I often highlight my achievements and results in front of others <input type="checkbox"/>
I accept praise with pride, and I know how to say 'Thank you, I worked hard for this,' or 'Thank you, I'm glad you noticed my success' <input type="checkbox"/>	I feel uncomfortable when praised, and I tend to say things like 'Thanks, but anyone could do that,' or 'It's nothing special,' etc. <input type="checkbox"/>



**Make a list of 10 reasons why YOU are a good WorldSkills competitor. What are your qualities and strengths? Read this list out loud several times, once a week, and keep adding to it! 😊**



**Think of some situations related to your profession or vocational competitions in which you felt successful. Reflect on how you prepared for them. How did you feel?**

A situation in which I felt successful	What led me to success?
What I can learn from this experience?	
What do I need for successful performance in future?	

\*Promise yourself that you will work on your self-confidence every day. Promise yourself that you will work persistently and thoroughly, using every opportunity to achieve your goals. If any doubts arise, write them down. Take a step back and calmly assess how realistic they are and how to respond to them. If it's a real obstacle that you can act upon—make a plan. It is extremely important to promise yourself full commitment!

## 6.5 Anxiety

When discussing issues related to competitions, most competitors mention performance anxiety—more specifically, nervousness and discomfort associated with performance. They speak of the fear of making mistakes or failing, the need to calm themselves, and becoming more resilient to external expectations and various sources of pressure.

The most general definition of anxiety is that it is an anxious emotional state, a condition connected to the basic emotion of fear. Another term for anxiety is stage fright. It is an overwhelming feeling of unease and distress that manifests on a cognitive level (our thoughts) and a physiological level (bodily reactions). What competitors call anxiety usually arises from worry and negative predictions about future events—most commonly the competition outcome—and fear of being evaluated by others, whether important or not, familiar or unfamiliar, in relation to their performance.

In a competition setting, it's clear that every participant must demonstrate their level of knowledge and skills, and that they are being compared to others. In other words, knowing that others will observe and evaluate our performance can be quite stressful. Even if we believe that the judges and observers will be well-intentioned, we still worry about not meeting expectations, disappointing ourselves, our mentors, teams, or supervisors—consequences no competitor wants.

How does performance anxiety arise?

Basically, anxiety is a certain level of energy in the body—a kind of excitement. How an individual interprets their physical symptoms (increased heart rate, rapid breathing, butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms, etc.) greatly affects how they experience this bodily energy. In other words, we assign meaning to anxiety signs through cognitive appraisal, which is the first step in the creation of any emotion or emotional state, including this one.

Accordingly, anxiety can be negative, interfering with our performance, or positive, helping us focus and channel our energy at the right moment to successfully complete a task.

Negative performance anxiety, as previously described, stems from how we assess the situation in relation to our own capabilities to handle it. Specifically, it begins with what we think about ourselves when something is expected of us. If we feel inadequate for the task, we experience discomfort and perceive it as a threat (to our self-esteem, image, status, etc.). The primary need in such moments becomes avoiding the situation. Sometimes this means physically avoiding it; other times, it means procrastination, not putting in enough effort (with thoughts like "If I don't try hard and fail, it's not really my fault"), or cognitive avoidance (e.g., "I wish it were already 5 PM and this competition was over" or "I wish I were somewhere else instead of here").

Anxiety symptoms may appear even during preparation, as competitors think about or anticipate the event. If a competitor feels these symptoms and does nothing, they risk serious issues during the actual competition—because they’re essentially practicing how to feel anxious and give in to it.

Every competitor must know that avoiding situations that trigger anxiety or fear actually strengthens them, making them more persistent and spreading them to other areas over time. On the other hand, facing such situations strengthens our coping abilities and reduces symptoms.

Negative anxiety is recognized by the physical symptoms typical of arousal, as well as by the many negative thoughts that multiply, focus on the future, and consider possible negative outcomes (such as “what if...” statements). Competitors with lower self-confidence are generally more prone to stage fright—both during preparation and in the competition itself.

The truth is that anxiety is a normal state experienced by the vast majority of competitors. What distinguishes a psychologically prepared competitor from those who haven’t undergone psychological training is the awareness of this fact. They know how to use anxiety as an ally and apply useful, practiced techniques in those critical moments. They also know how to convince themselves that they are capable of doing well—despite the nerves.

**Positive anxiety** might be beneficial to every competitor. It is a mild excitement before the event that boosts focus, energy, and concentration. We feel it through bodily symptoms, but without the self-doubt or negative thoughts—instead, we feel anticipation and readiness. In fact, two competitors may experience identical physical symptoms, but depending on how they interpret them (as excitement and a normal reaction—neutral perception, or as signs of losing control—negative perception), they will experience either positive or negative anxiety. This affects their performance.

Competitors with higher self-confidence, as well as those who have undergone psychological preparation, are more likely to experience positive rather than negative stage fright. Psychologically stronger competitors are less reactive, understand the connection between thoughts, emotions, and performance, and know how negative thought patterns can cause unpleasant emotions. These emotions then affect the body—tightening muscles, narrowing attention, which in turn leads to mistakes and weaker performance.

### The Time Dynamics of Anxiety

The unpleasant emotional state we call *anxiety* (or *performance anxiety*) follows a fairly consistent time pattern for most competitors. It tends to increase as the competition approaches (mild symptoms appear 1–2 days before), peaks just before the start of the competition, and typically begins to decrease once the competitor starts working on the task, soon disappearing altogether. In competitors with lower self-confidence, symptoms may start several months in advance, triggered by intense thinking about the competition and possible negative outcomes (*cognitive anxiety*).

There is also the possibility that stage fright persists or reappears during the competition itself, most often triggered by the competitor making a mistake or noticing an irregularity or oversight in the competition task. If panic sets in and the competitor begins predicting what else could go wrong, the feeling intensifies—*stage fright* can then grow and remain at a stable intensity throughout the event. In such situations, it is helpful to stick to an *action plan* (Appendix 1), which the competitor has prepared in advance and which outlines how to respond to a mistake or mishap. This response depends on how the competitor classifies the mistake, how much time is available, and their level of discipline, self-confidence, and psychological readiness

## How to reduce anxiety?

Everyone experiences anxiety differently, and it's hard to truly understand what someone is going through because it is a personal experience. Anxiety can be an ally, as long as the competitor knows how to manage it and keep it under control.

There are two main types of interventions that help with performance anxiety:

- *Cognitive interventions*, which target the thoughts that cause and reinforce anxiety and related negative emotions.
- *Behavioral interventions*, which address the physical symptoms of anxiety, reduce arousal and bodily excitement, and thereby help calm the mind indirectly.

Whichever technique is chosen, every competitor must understand that it will only help and be effective in the moment if it has been practiced in advance during the competition preparation process.

### Cognitive techniques

The first cognitive intervention with a competitor experiencing performance anxiety is *normalizing the symptoms*, helping to reduce the person's tendency to catastrophize by helping them understand that stage fright is normal, that all competitors experience it, and that they are not alone in feeling it. It's also helpful for the competitor to recognize and accept the fact that there's a significant discrepancy between what they feel internally and what is visible externally—what others see is often only a fraction of what the competitor is feeling inside.

With experience, anxiety decreases. Furthermore, *good preparation reduces about 70% of performance anxiety, 20% can be managed using psychological arousal regulation techniques*, and the remaining 10% *through a positive mental attitude*.

Cognitive interventions are largely based on identifying thoughts that trigger fear and anxiety—these are the *triggers*. For a competitor to feel fear, they must believe they are in danger, which is the result of their cognitive evaluation of the situation. It doesn't matter whether this perception is objectively true—what matters is that it feels real and true to them. The thoughts that trigger anxiety often appear *automatically*, and competitors may not even be aware of their influence. Because of the speed with which these thoughts trigger anxious responses, we call them *automatic negative thoughts* (Beck, 2007).

After the competitor identifies their negative thought triggers, the next step is to assess their *reality and validity*. The competitor should ask themselves how likely it really is that the feared outcome will occur, what evidence supports this belief, and what alternative explanations might exist.

People often *exaggerate the perception of danger*, and when they take a closer look at their fears and worries, they quickly realize—after this kind of analysis—that these fears *rarely come true* in the way they had imagined, and that their consequences are *not as catastrophic* as they initially thought.

The final step would be to *reframe negative, dysfunctional thoughts* into more positive and functional ones.

Competitors often report the following negative thoughts as anxiety triggers. Take a look at how you can help yourself in such cases.

DISFUNCTIONAL, NEGATIVE THOUGHTS	FUNCTIONAL, POSITIVE THOUGHTS
I won't have enough time.	I've prepared well, I know what I'm doing, I'll focus on the task.
I won't be able to solve the task.	I'll go step by step, I've done this before, and even if I haven't, I'll figure it out.
I mustn't make such a stupid mistake.	Anyone who works makes mistakes, they're normal. I'll do my best to avoid them, but making one doesn't mean I'm bad.
What if I make the wrong decision?	I trust my preparation and know that sometimes any decision is better than wasting time trying to make the perfect one.
I've never seen this before.	A great challenge and a chance to apply what I know—and to learn something new.
My hands are shaking, anxiety will eat me alive.	It's just excitement, my body's way of saying it's looking forward to what's coming.
I have to do everything perfectly.	It's more important to finish than to be perfect—even if everything isn't done perfectly, what matters is the overall impression and functionality.

Everyone has some typical thoughts and phrases that come to mind regarding competitions and that upset them. By identifying your own, you can prepare in advance to neutralize their effect. Recognizing such thoughts and changing them, as well as acting on physical symptoms and reactions, falls under self-regulation techniques.

For these techniques to be effective—especially in key moments, such as during a competition—it is important to start early with this type of preparation and to work on yourself systematically and with discipline throughout the preparation period.

A psychologist can help the competitor in learning and applying this technique, but so can a mentor—primarily by helping them view the situation from a different perspective. Anxious competitors, especially those with low self-confidence, often has difficulties to see beyond their 'negative pattern' and may not have ideas on how to look at the situation differently.

The following protocol can help in practicing and applying the mentioned technique in practice:



In the following table, list your most common negative, dysfunctional thoughts that increase your anxiety and unpleasant emotions. Check how likely it really is that your negative predictions will come true and provide the evidence you have for that. Then come up with alternative explanations that could also

apply in that situation, re-evaluate your level of belief in the original negative thought, reframe it into a more functional, positive one, and check how you feel afterward.

<b>Negative thoughts</b>	<b>1.</b>	<b>2.</b>	<b>3.</b>
<b>Emotions</b>			
<b>The level of belief in their truthfulness (1-10) and the evidence for it</b>			
<b>Alternative explanation</b>			
<b>The level of belief in the initial thought (1-10)</b>			
<b>Reformulated negative thought</b>			
<b>Emotion</b>			

### **Behavioral Techniques**

Behavioral techniques are methods that focus on the body and the physical symptoms of anxiety (tremor). Primarily, these techniques are related to relaxation exercises that are important to practice and know how to use, as the body cannot be both tense and relaxed at the same time. In other words, by relaxing the body, the mind will also relax, which opens the door to better concentration. Applying relaxation techniques before a competition calms the body and reduces the symptoms of anxiety. Additionally, relaxation techniques can be very helpful between individual tasks in the competition, at the end of each competition day, and these aspects will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### Breathing exercise

Although people generally think they know how to breathe, many actually breathe improperly and with reduced capacity. Furthermore, many believe that breathing is helpful when we're stressed or anxious, without realizing that it matters *how* we breathe. Using the wrong technique can intensify the physical symptoms of anxiety, which will be discussed in the chapter on arousal regulation techniques.

Breathing is a natural process that ensures life for every living being. Quality breathing is one of the most important factors for good mental and physical functioning. Breathing oxygenates tissues, organs, and the brain, helps flush out toxic byproducts from the bloodstream, balances emotional reactions, and assists in dealing with difficult situations. Since breathing is vital to our lives and can help us during stressful

moments, it makes sense to raise awareness and practice controlled breathing. Breathing is actually a helpful tool for developing control over our internal states, such as regulating anxiety or improving concentration. Learning breathing techniques is often one of the first steps in psychological preparation.

For calming anxiety, **abdominal breathing** (also known as diaphragmatic breathing) is used. The technique itself is simple and is performed as follows. The individual should focus on making their abdomen move during both inhalation and exhalation, while keeping the chest minimally active, ideally still. It's also important not to force the breath to its maximum capacity, as this will induce tension. The breathing should follow a steady, even rhythm.

For calming the body, which is the goal for someone experiencing anxiety, it's crucial that the exhale lasts a bit longer than the inhale. Additionally, there should be a brief pause between the inhale and the exhale (and vice versa). Specifically, this means breathing in a 3:1:4:1 ratio. Here's how it works:

1. **Inhale** – Gently push the abdomen outwards, taking about 3 seconds (the participant can help themselves by counting rhythmically 1-2-3).
2. **Pause** – After inhaling, take a short pause for 1 second.
3. **Exhale** – Slowly pull the abdomen inwards while exhaling for about 4 seconds (counting rhythmically 1-2-3-4).
4. **Pause** – After exhaling, take another short pause for 1 second.
5. **Repeat the cycle.**

In the beginning, it doesn't matter whether the person breathes through their nose, mouth, or a combination of both. The recommendation is to do whatever feels most comfortable. However, to help focus on the breathing, it's useful to close the eyes. To further enhance awareness, they can place one hand on the abdomen and the other on the chest to ensure the abdomen is moving and the chest remains still.

When starting, it's helpful to practice this exercise for about 2 minutes while lying down. One technique is to place a small book on the lower abdomen to help the individual control their abdominal muscles. They should focus on lifting the book upwards during inhalation and lowering it during exhalation. All movements should be smooth and fluid, and the participant should focus on the sensation of relaxation with each exhalation. Over time, this exercise can be done while sitting or standing, and it's important to practice it in the position that will be most useful during the competition (e.g., a programmer might need to practice this while seated since they will be sitting while working on the task).

By training this relaxation technique, participants can help regulate their anxiety and maintain focus during stressful situations, like competitions.

inhale



It is important to practice breathing exercises regularly, every day, and to monitor their effects and the level of relaxation response they induce (e.g., by measuring heart rate before and after the breathing exercise)



Apply one of the following breathing exercises regularly. On a weekly basis, track your level of relaxation and the progress you make through consistent practice. For easier observation of the effects of your training and to help with self-discipline, record your results in the following protocol.

Day / hour	The relaxation level before 1-10	The relaxation level after 1-10
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		

At the beginning, the competitor should practice the breathing exercises once a day for 2 minutes. Later, they can increase this to 2-3 times a day, combining it with relaxation exercises. Initially, the competitor should record their level of relaxation before and after performing the breathing exercise. Later, they should track their pulse before and after the exercise. A quick pulse measure can be taken using a smartphone app (e.g., Heart Rate app).

Below are some basic breathing exercises, from the simplest to the more complex. The competitor can record the following text and play it to guide themselves through the exercise.

### Breathing exercises in practice

#### *Basic breathing exercise*

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Follow the rhythm of your natural breath, feeling your inhale and exhale the way you usually do when you're not thinking about your breathing. Just observe your breath. Now, gently inhale and push your belly out, then slowly relax it on the exhale, drawing it back in toward your spine. Repeat 4-6 times and do 3 sets of these.

#### *2-minute breathing exercise*

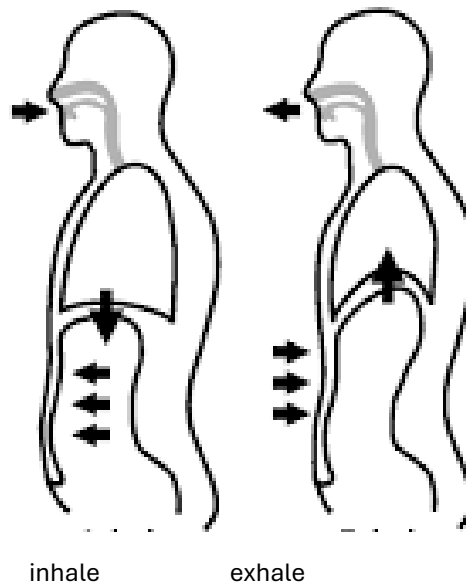
Get comfortable and close your eyes. Relax the muscles in your face. Focus on your breathing, a calm inhale and slow exhale. Just observe your breathing until you catch a calm, regular pattern. Notice how your belly rises with the inhale and gently falls with the exhale. Hold your breath briefly between the exhale and the next inhale.

Inhale, exhale. One-two-three, ..., exhale-two-three-four ... inhale-two-three ... exhale-two-three-four.

Feel the effect this breathing has on your body. Notice how you calm down as your breath relaxes, and how you gently activate on the inhale. Slow your breath down, take a few long, slow exhales, and feel the relaxation spreading through your body, calming you.

Just focus on your breath, release your thoughts, and let your mind follow your body. Follow the calm

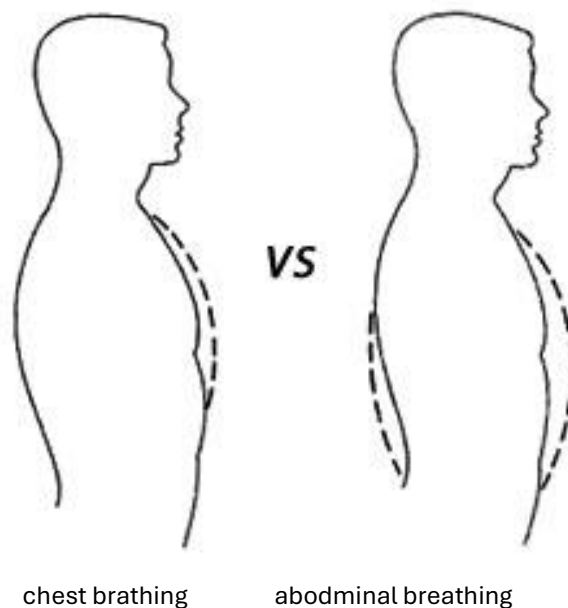
inhale and slow exhale, repeating the word "calm" to yourself with each exhale. Do this 10 times. Feel the relaxation in your body. Count to four, then open your eyes and blink. You feel good and energized!



Initially, the competitor can perform this exercise daily, at home, during breaks, before sleeping, and it can also be done in conditions where attention is distracted, for example, on public transport or while watching TV, as an additional exercise in more 'challenging' conditions.

#### *7&7 breathing exercise*

Before you focus on your breathing, find your pulse, preferably on your neck. To begin, follow the beats of your pulse with calm breathing. Then, try to match your breathing rhythm with your pulse rhythm and observe what happens. Let your inhale last for 4 pulse beats and your exhale also last for 4 pulse beats, and follow this for 4 inhale-exhale cycles. Increase to 5 beats and 5 cycles. Pay attention to what happens. If you are breathing correctly, the pulse rate during exhale should slow down, which indicates that your body is calming down. The final form of this exercise is to perform an inhale lasting 7 pulse beats and an exhale also evenly spread over 7 pulse beats, and repeat this in 7 cycles (7 pulse beats inhale, 7 pulse beats exhale x 7). Do this exercise every day during rest periods or before sleeping. Be careful to evenly distribute each inhale and exhale over the pulse beats, and avoid inhaling or finishing your exhale on, for example, the 5th beat and waiting for the remaining two beats to pass. This creates tension and has the opposite effect.



## 6.6 Concentration

Concentration is often related to successful performance in various tasks, such as studying, taking exams, participating in sports competitions, or performing work-related duties. Good concentration involves directing awareness to what is important in the moment based on the task at hand, which includes the ability to select stimuli and distinguish what is relevant from what is irrelevant (Moran, 1997). A common statement heard when an error occurs is when a mentor tells the competitor to "concentrate" or "you are not focused." However, under the pressure of failure and in the shadow of criticism, it is often very difficult to concentrate, especially if the competitor has not practiced working under such conditions or has not developed concentration skills.

Concentration is closely tied to attention, and sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. Attention is the foundation of good concentration; it is the spotlight of our awareness that illuminates what is important amidst the overwhelming stimuli around us. A critical skill related to good concentration is the ability to manage attention, which includes selecting stimuli, isolating distractions (known as distractors), and the ability to refocus, i.e., return attention to what is essential after losing focus.

To understand how these processes work, it is important to first understand the **laws of attention**:

1. **Attention capacity is limited.** If a competitor spends their attention on irrelevant things, less attention remains for what is essential, making them less efficient.
2. **Different tasks impose different attention demands.** It is important to differentiate what is more and less significant or demanding and allocate attention accordingly.
3. **Attention is multimodal.** We can "split" attention across various sensory modalities (for instance, we can listen and watch simultaneously).
4. **Automatism saves attention capacity.** It is important for competitors to practice some repetitive actions or simpler, fixed parts of the task to the point of automatism so that they do not have to think about them during the competition.
5. **Managing attention/concentration is a learned and perfected skill.**

6. **It is normal to lose focus, especially if the activity lasts a long time.** However, a better competitor is the one who realizes they are distracted (their attention is diverted) sooner and knows how to refocus (bring their attention back to what is important for the task) in the shortest time possible.
7. **Attention is related to the level of arousal (activation in the body).**

For effective preparation, and particularly for competitive performance, good concentration is essential—being focused on the task and the action the competitor is performing at that moment. Maintaining attention is not always easy, as it is constantly challenged by various distractors. The impact of distractors varies depending on the importance of the competition, the stage of the competition, the competitor's psychological resilience, and readiness, and some physiological factors, such as fatigue, dehydration, lack of sleep, energy levels, emotions, and motivation. Distraction often occurs when the competitor is under stress. In those moments, they start directing their attention to themselves, their symptoms, or their emotions, i.e., they focus inward rather than maintaining attention on the task and what they are doing. Awareness of distraction often pushes the competitor to focus on concentration itself, which becomes another distraction, as they are no longer focused on the performance and the task at hand but on themselves.

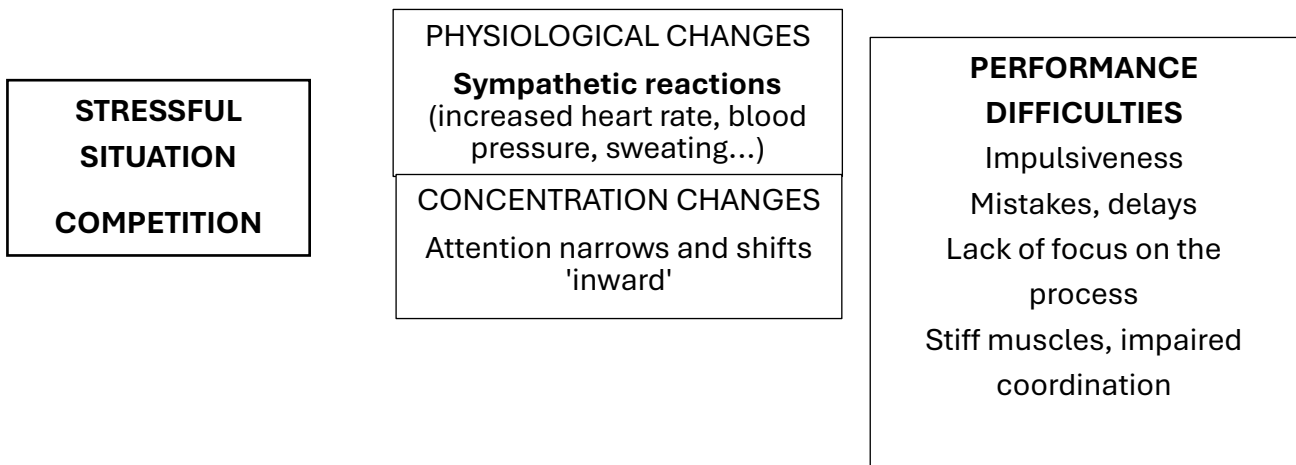


Figure 2. The effect of stress on concentration

#### How to maintain concentration and manage attention?

Attention management is a skill that can be trained. Being aware of the principles of attention processes and understanding how they work contributes to the development of this skill. Furthermore, it's important to accept distracting factors in the environment (e.g., audience, lighting, cameras, clock, other competitors), as there will always be some distractions. A focused performance is a reward in itself because it results in a good feeling and better outcomes, which the competitor is aware of. Although distractions can appear in various forms and intensities, they are generally divided into two categories based on their source: external and internal.

#### External distractors:

Audience  
Noise

#### Internal distractors:

Emotions  
Thinking ahead

Lighting, media, heat, humidity  
Judges  
Other competitors  
Scoreboard/clock

Mistakes  
Result/outcome  
Fatigue, pain  
Other needs (hunger, thirst)

It is important for the competitor to identify their most common distractors and recognize their influence in the current moment.

If nothing is done, the distractor will grab their attention, leaving less mental capacity to focus on the task at hand. The most common concentration mistake is incomplete awareness of the present moment. In other words, the competitor becomes preoccupied with a mistake or difficulty they encountered (dwelling on the past) or worrying about a possible mistake or poor outcome/result (escaping into the future), which causes them to miss consciously engaging with the task in the present moment, thus increasing the likelihood of error or omission.

The competitor may also be highly focused, but on the wrong thing—for example, focusing on themselves, their emotions, fatigue, or distracting noise—thereby neglecting to focus on the process, which negatively impacts their performance.

To prevent these difficulties, it is beneficial for the competitor to have an action plan that includes a step-by-step approach to the task, as well as a behavioral template for handling mistakes, lack of time, etc., which involves both professional and psychological skills.

The key to good concentration is a high level of discipline that allows the competitor to stay consciously involved in each present moment, as opposed to being distracted by the past or future. Being in the past doesn't necessarily mean reflecting on something that happened a long time ago, a previous competition, or an event during preparation that reminds them of the current one; it can mean focusing on something that happened 60 seconds ago, but is now irretrievably over. Once it's done, there is no way to turn back time, and the competitor no longer has control over it—so they shouldn't waste their attention on it.

Sometimes competitors fear that if they just let go of a mistake, it will happen again. However, it's important to focus the mind on what we want to happen, not what we want to avoid (otherwise, we focus on the very opposite). Worrying about not worrying enough, leading to a mistake, only creates excessive vigilance, tension, and disrupts the competitive focus.

Magic formula for concentration:

PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
mistake	performance, task	outcome, result

X     ✓     X

In order for a competitor to be well-focused during a competition, it is important to improve this skill through disciplined practice during the preparation period. This means becoming aware of their typical distractors, learning to recognize the signs of losing focus, practicing refocusing techniques (bringing attention back), and combining this with breathing and relaxation exercises. A relaxed mind is more capable of maintaining concentration.



**Think about what your most common distractors are and when you allow them to take effect. Be aware of the consequences they have on your mental state and performance**

My distractors	Situation that arises them	Consequences of distraction

#### Recommendations for improving and maintaining concentration

The first step in improving concentration is **mindful attention**, awareness of the process and the moment in which it occurs. This requires the competitor to decide to put mental effort into their performance and concentration. In other words, the competitor must be willing to focus, rather than waiting for focus to happen on its own. In sports, there are many examples of good practices that show a positive connection between the decision to concentrate and the ability to perform at the top of the athlete's capacities.

A good strategy to help trigger the "concentration switch" is to create a specific sign or gesture that the competitor will use to activate their focus at the beginning of the competition (e.g., touching the table with both palms before starting work). Similarly, they can design a signal for "turning off" the concentration system at the end, to release the mind and relax the body quickly. These signs, to be effective, should be practiced during preparation.

Here are some basic recommendations for enhancing concentration:

- 1. Focus on one thing at a time**  
Applying the "one thought principle" greatly facilitates the competitor's ability to focus on the process. When competition pressure arises, the competitor feels a sense of numerous "must-dos" that need to be anticipated and followed through. However, good concentration requires a calm mind and focusing on one thing at a time, step by step, throughout the process. This is the essence of the "keep it simple" principle, which usually yields the best results.
- 2. Your mind is focused when you do what you think about**  
When there is no difference between what we think and what we do, we are maximally focused. To achieve this mental state, the competitor must reduce analytical thinking and focus attention on what is specific to the action at hand, especially on what is under their control.
- 3. Recognize attention loss and refocus**  
It's normal to lose focus, especially when an activity lasts for a longer period or is cognitively demanding. Temporary "shut-off" is one way the brain rests from mental effort. It's important for the competitor to recognize the signs of attention loss and to have practiced quickly applying a refocusing technique (e.g., the Stop technique). A good way is to consciously redirect attention to the current goal since the process and task are what the focus should always return to.
- 4. Focus "outwards" when you're nervous**  
Competitors are often distracted by negative emotions and mistakes. In moments of

nervousness, it's crucial to direct attention outwards (to external things that are part of the performance, such as the screen, tools, or desk) rather than inward, to doubts, emotions, and internal processes, as this can further heighten nervousness.

#### 5. **Encourage yourself**

No matter what's happening, it's good to occasionally give yourself a positive message of encouragement. If the competitor has lost focus and complicated the situation, it's helpful to remind themselves to stay calm, that losing concentration happens to everyone, and that there is enough time to recover and get back on track.

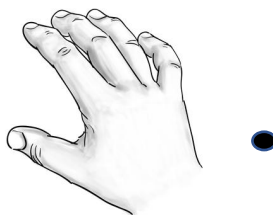
### Concentration exercises in practice

#### *Focusing on the process, not the outcome*

Focusing on the process, rather than the outcome, is the first practical principle of good concentration. To achieve this, it is important to have process-oriented goals that must be adhered to regardless of how the competition is going or how you or your competitors are performing. It's crucial to stay focused at all times only on the action you are performing and on what is within your control. By doing this, you are less likely to fall into the trap of focusing on the result, which, of course, doesn't mean you will be any less motivated to achieve it.

To help stay on this path, the competitor can use a visual cue as a reminder of their process goals. For example, they can place a marker on their desk (e.g., turning an object they frequently use upside down and returning it to that position each time). This way, each time they turn the object, they are reminded of the process goal and can mentally repeat it. Another option is to draw a small symbol on their wrist (e.g., a black dot with a marker) (Figure 3), as this part of the body is always in their visual field when they're using their hands.

*Figure 3: Example of a concentration cue on the hand*



#### *Key words and focus points*

This technique involves defining specific words or creating short phrases that are meaningful, strong, vivid, and positively formulated to help the competitor focus on a specific segment during performance. The competitor can periodically read them during their work or mentally repeat them as specific instructions to guide their attention to something essential for effective performance.

For example, a key word like "*patiently*" can remind the competitor to act calmly and proceed step by step, checking each part of the task before moving on. Similarly, the word "*next*" can remind the competitor to let go of any mistakes and continue with their work rather than wasting time analyzing what went wrong.

Additionally, the competitor can define key visual cues or focus points, such as:

- "Line", which instructs the competitor to focus on following the line during a task like cutting material.
- "Eyes", which reminds the competitor to maintain steady eye contact during communication with clients or patients.

### *Stop technique*

This technique is used for refocusing, i.e., bringing attention back after a distraction. It involves four simple steps:

1. Recognize the loss of focus: Notice when you've lost attention and become aware of the distraction.
2. Visualize the "stop" sign: Imagine a "stop" sign (or mentally say "stop" to yourself).
3. Breathe: Take a deep breath, focusing on abdominal breathing.
4. Apply the key word: Use a specific key word to direct your attention to what needs focus (e.g., "desk").

### *Centering*

Centering is a technique used to calm the body's physiological reactions. It can be combined with breathing techniques (e.g., the 7&7 technique), which helps isolate the influence of distractors and other irrelevant signals that aren't important for performance. The technique involves directing your attention to the center (core) of your body, which is approximately the area around your body's center of gravity, about 10 centimeters below the navel. The body is "centered" when weight is distributed evenly around this point, so that the competitor feels comfortable and the body becomes receptive to important signals, while the mind is focused and ready for action (Nideffer & Sagal, 2001).

This is an effective technique that can help with both directing attention and reducing arousal. It's important to practice centering in the body posture that the competitor predominantly uses during competition, and the technique will be effective in competition if it has been practiced in a stressful situation beforehand.

Centering can be done for 3-5 minutes with the following instructions:

1. Stand still: Feet shoulder-width apart, body weight evenly distributed on both legs, arms relaxed.
2. Close your eyes and breathe calmly and rhythmically using abdominal breathing. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Notice how tension in your body increases as you inhale and how a relaxing, calming sensation spreads through your body as you exhale. Listen to the sound of your breath.
3. Gradually shift your attention to larger muscle groups in your body, and with each exhale, relax them one by one. Start with your forehead, cheeks, shoulders, scapulae, hands, abdomen, lower back, thighs, buttocks, and feet.
4. Focus on the lower abdomen, and with several breaths, release the remaining tension. Focus on the area about 10 centimeters below the navel, where the waistband of your pants ends.
5. Visualize this point as the center of your body, imagining a shape that feels appealing and energizing. Direct the energy of your breath through this point, becoming aware of the pleasant sensation of weight, calmness, and control.

6. With each exhale, accompany it with a word that illustrates the physical sensation and mental focus you want to achieve (e.g., calm, focus, sharp, relaxed, control, etc.).

### *Situational training*

Situational training is extremely beneficial for competition preparation, regardless of the competitive discipline. It involves practicing professional skills under conditions as similar as possible to the actual competition, while simultaneously allowing the training of psychological skills and the application of specific psychological techniques.

One of the simplest forms of situational training is practicing a task or part of a task under time pressure and in the equipment (clothing) the competitor will wear during the competition. This encourages the sense of competition and reinforces the role of being a "competitor on the task." Over time, this will become normal and will not create additional pressure or raise the importance of the moment, as would happen if the competitor were to wear the "competition uniform" for the first time on the actual day of the event. Such training can begin once the competitor has developed their professional skill to a high level (not in the initial learning phase) and should be practiced at regular intervals (e.g., every 15 days).

Situational training can also be used to practice psychological skills, such as concentration and resistance to distractions. In this regard, the competitor should try to define the conditions in which they train in a way that closely mirrors the competition environment. For example:

- Work under strong lighting/work under insufficient lighting
- Noise from spectators and interested passers-by (For this, recordings of conversations, unstructured speech from a large group of spectators, etc., can be used to simulate distractions and affect concentration)
- Fatigue (It is advisable to occasionally add additional training sessions in between regular ones that the competitor must perform while fatigued. This can be planned by adding a session after the usual training or assigning tasks after some intense physical exertion.)
- Heat/humidity (It is important to conduct some training in less favorable temperature conditions. Under stress, the body heats up even in air-conditioned spaces, making it more fatigued and harder to concentrate. This can be achieved by creating stuffy conditions in the training room by not ventilating or having the competitor wear extra clothing.)
- Pressure (There are various options for simulating competitive pressure; for example, reducing the time allotted for a specific part of the task to less than what would realistically be needed, or creating other scenarios, such as imposing some form of penalty for mistakes, placing the competitor in a disadvantaged position, or simulating the failure of a tool that requires continuing the task without it.)

Through regular situational training, competitors are better equipped to handle the various stressors and challenges they may encounter during an actual competition.

### *Pre-competition and competition routine*

Developing a systematic pattern of actions and behavior immediately before performing each task with the aim of practicing professional skills—creating a routine—is an important concentration technique.

The pre-competition routine involves defining the steps that precede the actual start of the task, such as preparing equipment, repeating goals, practicing breathing exercises, organizing the workspace, adjusting seating at the desk, taking the work protocol or defined task, creating a sequence of procedures, and so on. By performing these pre-task activities always in the same way, the competitor narrows their attention to what is important and enters into a "competition concentration mode," from which they can mentally distribute their focus on crucial cues. This defined sequence of actions and mental operations in a competitive situation, which is largely unknown and unpredictable, also gives the competitor a sense of control. The routine represents a secure space in which they know exactly what they are doing, what comes next, which reduces the chance of anxiety and nerves.

The pre-competition routine can include the time from arriving at the competition space, and it is especially important to define the routine for the period immediately before the competition (e.g., the last 5 minutes before the start), as this time is typically recognized as critical. During this period, the mind tends to become analytical. The mental attitude and posture, which largely depend on the competitor's current mindset, with which the competitor begins the competition, can greatly influence how smoothly things will go and how they will feel from the start. This can even determine the course of the work for a large part, or perhaps the entire task for the day.

It is advisable to define routines for the competition in the form of a specific action plan (Appendix 3). In this way, by following the steps of the competition routine, the competitor increases their awareness of the present moment and focuses their attention on the specific task they are performing at that time.

Routines can be successfully combined with other techniques for improving and maintaining concentration, such as the use of key words, which can become an integral part of the pre-competition and/or competition routine.

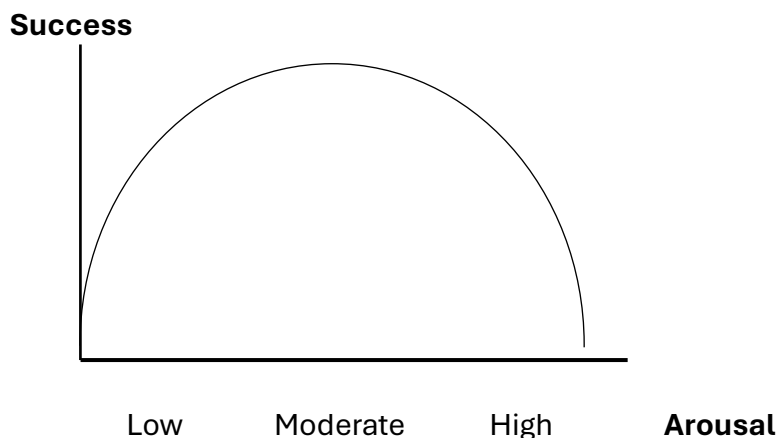


Try applying several different concentration exercises and choose 1-2 from the listed ones to practice regularly. You can also select and apply these exercises in collaboration with your mentor. Assess how each exercise works for you, what it helped you with, what you learned, and what seems useful for application

Exercise for concentration	My notes

### 6.7 Arousal regulation

For good performance in any activity, a certain level of energy is required that allows the body to be alert and the mind to be optimally focused. This energy can be defined as arousal—the level of activity in the body that varies along a continuum ranging from sleep to hyperactivity (Petz, 2005). Different activities require different levels of arousal for performance to be optimal, but the general rule applies—the best performance is achieved at a moderate level of arousal (a slight excitement before or during competition, known as positive nervousness). Too low or too high arousal levels are undesirable because they lead to concentration problems and impaired performance. This relationship between arousal and performance is described by the inverted U curve (Figure 4). The principle always holds true, though the intensity of energy corresponding to moderate arousal may vary depending on the skill.



The level of arousal is manifested through physical reactions. A competitor should aim for a moderate level of arousal in order to perform optimally, and it is important that they can recognize the symptoms of both low and high arousal and intervene when necessary to return their arousal to an optimal level.

Arousal levels are most often influenced by emotions, but also by physical activity. Every competitor can train themselves to regularly scan their own arousal level and, if necessary, take action to regulate it. Arousal can also fluctuate depending on the physical state of the body, as well as the competitor's perception of the situation they are in, which affects their emotional response.

It is important to note that excessively high arousal—often the most common issue among competitors—can be triggered not only by negative, unpleasant emotions (such as fear or anger) but also by positive ones (such as happiness, excitement, or strong desire for result).

For a competitor it is very important to recognise his/her arousal level and to intervene if it is not optimal one. Here are some signs:

Low arousal signs	Moderate arousal signs	High arousal signs
Yawning Lack of energy Feeling of fatigue Sleepiness Slowness Absence of attention Lack of concentration Low posture	Showing interest Optimal focus Timeliness Good reactivity Concentration Positive attitude Motivation	High heart rate Feeling of nervousness in the stomach Restlessness Excessive activity Euphoria Over-talkativeness Repeatedly checking of equipment Self-doubt Feeling of heat Scattered attention

The level of arousal immediately before and during competition is almost always accompanied by emotional changes. These typically occur for two main reasons: performance anxiety (stage fright) and negative thoughts, as well as reactions to mistakes.

To reduce the impact of these factors, it is important for competitors to be aware that their energy resources are limited and that cognitive activity can be just as exhausting as physical activity. This makes it crucial to know how to distribute energy and distinguish between what is essential and what is not, in order to avoid wasting it unnecessarily. A key rule that can help in this area is: a competitor should always focus only on the things they can influence. Anything outside of their control should not consume their time or energy, as it is ultimately a futile effort.

Even though we may believe that worrying about certain things (e.g., conditions, the type of task we will receive, judges, or the opinions of important others about our performance) ‘sharpens our mind’ and prepares us to reduce the chance of making a mistake, the actual effect is the opposite. Worrying about such things increases anxiety, feeds performance anxiety, and raises arousal levels beyond what is optimal, because we cannot control these factors.

The solution to this is quite simple: every WorldSkills competitor should direct their energy solely toward themselves and their task, as this is the only thing they can truly influence and control. The reality is that no one can completely control the situation they are in. Likewise, we cannot directly control our emotions, as they are governed by the autonomic nervous system, which—as its name implies—operates autonomously.

However, despite that, every competitor can manage their behavior in any situation, make choices, and adopt response patterns that reflect a high level of psychological preparedness. This is shown by maintaining emotional calmness and correctly directing energy and attention toward what *can* be controlled—instead of dwelling on what has already happened or hasn't yet occurred, criticizing oneself, or engaging in long internal monologues.

Certainly, one of the most critical moments in any WorldSkills competition is how a competitor reacts to making a mistake. Mistakes can disrupt concentration and confidence, trigger unpleasant emotions, and drain the competitor’s energy. A psychologically prepared competitor is aware of several key points:

1. Mistakes are normal and bound to happen at some point—perfect performance is impossible.

2. Mistakes need to be let go in order to stay focused.
3. A mistake says nothing about the competitor as a person.
4. Mistakes can be corrected or compensated for.

Mistakes affect two levels: the obvious, external one (e.g., something doesn't work, or something is misaligned), and the internal one, where they impact the competitor's thoughts, feelings, behavior, and subsequent performance. Most often, they raise arousal levels, or in the opposite case, completely drain the competitor's energy, potentially leading to withdrawal from the task.

Therefore, in addition to arousal regulation techniques, techniques for responding to mistakes will also be described, as they likewise affect arousal levels.

### **Techniques for arousal regulation**

**Mistakes** are most commonly perceived by competitors as obstacles preventing them from reaching their desired goal. The typical emotional reaction that arises in such cases is **anger**. Some competitors also perceive mistakes as a **threat to their success, results, or status**, which causes **fear**. In both cases, the body reacts with increased arousal, and it's important to apply techniques to regulate (reduce) arousal along with techniques for managing mistake reactions.

#### *Techniques for managing mistake reactions (coping with mistakes)*

The basic logic behind this technique is letting go of the mistake — the competitor must allow themselves to move on without exhaustively analyzing the mistake or harshly criticizing themselves. To put this into practice, the competitor can apply one of the following strategies:

- Name the mistake and document its impact (e.g., "Okay, I made [x], and [y] happened"), classify the severity of the mistake (1 = small, 3 = big), evaluate its further impact and point value, and decide whether it is worth correcting or not. This approach can become part of a regular mistake-response routine.

If the competitor decides to correct the mistake, it is important to predefine the amount of time they will spend on it and stick to it strictly. (It's common for competitors to "get stuck" trying to fix a mistake, spending too much time on it, only to later realize that the task was worth very few points and wasn't worth the effort. Often, the competitor also feels they're close to the solution and gets absorbed in the correction process, forgetting about time.)

If the competitor decides not to correct the mistake, they must move on. In practical terms, this means mentally detaching from the mistake and letting it go (i.e., not thinking about it anymore). This can be achieved using a keyword technique (e.g., saying "move on") or a physical action that breaks the "mistake loop," such as standing up or stepping away from the workspace for about 30 seconds (which serves as a mental reset), then returning to the task.

- To prevent or reduce negative emotions, the competitor can use instant techniques for lowering arousal (e.g., completely calming the body for 45 seconds) or using a smile (smiling — even forced — activates facial muscles that in turn stimulate neural circuits and brain regions that reduce frustration and promote partial relaxation).
- Counting mistakes — the competitor can make a prior agreement with themselves on how many mistakes they will tolerate without getting angry (e.g., 3). When these occur, they are simply

acknowledged and counted. If the limit is exceeded, another technique can be applied. This simple strategy gives the competitor courage to make mistakes and is very effective at normalizing the situation, especially for competitors prone to panic and catastrophizing when errors occur.

### *Techniques for elevating arousal*

Sometimes, due to fatigue or lack of fresh air, a competitor's arousal level may drop below the optimal threshold, making them more susceptible to distractions. In such cases, it is advisable to raise the arousal level. There are several simple methods that can be used even during a competition:

- Chest breathing technique – take a few powerful breaths into full lungs (simultaneously through the nose and mouth) followed by strong, fast exhalations through the mouth until the lungs are empty. This should be done together with alternating contraction and relaxation of the hands and larger muscle groups (glutes, back). Muscles are strongly contracted during the inhale and relaxed during the exhale. Do 3–4 breaths in one set and repeat for two, at most three sets.
- Dynamic muscle stretching – alternately stretch larger muscle groups, holding each stretch position for a maximum of 5 seconds.
- Drinking water and splashing the face with water.
- Physical activity or light exercise for 60–90 seconds.

### *Techniques for reducing arousal*

Excessively high arousal leads to increased bodily tension, which competitors often describe as nervousness or stage fright during competitions. In such a state, the competitor experiences additional difficulties with concentration, as attention becomes overly narrow, resulting in missed or lost key information relevant to the task at hand.

Relaxation skills help both physically and mentally, allowing attention to be focused on relevant cues and conserving energy — both during competitions and in everyday life. The ability to relax is generally a valuable life skill.

There are many relaxation methods, most commonly used in combination with breathing exercises described in previous chapter. Here are some additional:

#### *White clouds*

Gently close your eyes. Imagine a deep blue sky with a small, white, round cloud in it. Let your thoughts rise up and try to merge with that cloud — imagine that you are becoming that small white cloud. Now you are soft, relaxed, and gentle. You are becoming light and airy. A warm and gentle breeze passes through you. Your mind is completely calm, and you feel good and happy. You feel relaxed and carefree.

After I count to two, you will open your eyes and feel calm and relaxed.

**One... two...** open your eyes, blink a few times, and stretch a little.

#### *Beautiful place*

Follow the rhythm of your breathing and slowly close your eyes. A calm inhale and a slow exhale. Allow your mind to take you far away from this place, away from this room... allow it to take you to a place where you feel good — your own beautiful place where you feel comfortable and relaxed.

Imagine yourself in that place on an early summer morning. There are no people around you, no one... just you and the familiar scene. Let your gaze move from left to right, notice the colors, observe what is on your left and what is on your right. Pause and calm your breathing. Listen. Hear the sounds and follow the rhythm of your breath. Enjoy the scene where you fit perfectly.

This is your beautiful place. You feel good here. You are recharging with positive energy, and this place is waiting for you whenever you need it. Calm your breath and try to absorb all the sensations. Take one last look around and memorize the scene — freeze it like a postcard that you can return to and bring to life whenever you wish. Inhale, exhale calmly, and open your eyes. Blink a few times, clench and relax your fists, and stretch a bit.

Arousal level also depends on certain biological variables, such as metabolic changes triggered by hormones or illness. However, personality traits—specifically temperament—also influence arousal. In other words, each individual has their own typical and recognizable level of arousal, which can be observed through the energy they express in their speech, gestures, tone, and behavior.

On the other hand, arousal level can be affected by fatigue, which is largely influenced by lifestyle pace and workload—most significantly, by lack of sleep or poor-quality rest during the night. This can become especially noticeable during stressful life periods. For WSC competitors, such a period is precisely the time leading up to the competition (final preparations), as well as during the competition itself.

Due to changes in environment and sleeping arrangements, many competitors fear difficulties caused by lack of sleep—whether from last-minute preparations before departure or while staying at the competition venue. For such cases, and in life in general, certain recommendations can be helpful. These are summarized in what is known as **sleep hygiene**, which will be presented in the following section.

### *Sleep hygiene*

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe healthy habits before sleep. Numerous studies have resulted in significant guidelines and advice on how to sleep well, which form the basis for suggesting long-term ways to break bad sleep habits.

There are various medications used for insomnia, but they are only a short-term solution. During the use of sleeping pills, there may be a risk of dependency and difficulties in developing healthy sleep habits without them, thus prolonging the problem. It is recommended to consult a doctor about what is best for you, but good sleep hygiene is advised as an important part of treating insomnia, alongside other alternatives such as medication, cognitive therapy, or on its own.

For a competitor, it is crucial to establish a good sleep routine, especially as the competition approaches, so that the same can be maintained during the competition itself.

If a competitor has some difficulties with sleeping, some tips might be helpful.

### *Sleep hygiene tips*

**BE CONSISTENT.** One of the best practices for your body is going to sleep and waking up at roughly the same time every day, including weekends and days off. This proper rhythm will help you feel better.

**SLEEP WHEN YOU'RE TIRED.** Try to go to sleep only when you're truly tired, instead of lying in bed awake for a long time.

**GET UP AND TRY AGAIN.** If you can't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something calming or boring until you feel sleepy. Then, return to bed and try again. Sit up and dim the lights, as bright light signals to the body that it's time to get up. You can sit and read something boring, like a phone book. Avoid doing anything stimulating or interesting, as that will make you more awake.

**AVOID CAFFEINE AND NICOTINE.** It's recommended to avoid caffeine and nicotine at least 4 hours before bedtime. These substances have a stimulating effect, making it harder to fall asleep.

**AVOID ALCOHOL.** It's also recommended to avoid alcohol 4 hours before going to bed. Many believe that alcohol helps with sleep, but it actually disrupts the quality of sleep.

**THE BED IS FOR SLEEPING.** Try not to use your bed for anything other than sleeping and sex so that your body associates the bed exclusively with sleep. If you use your bed for watching TV, eating, reading, working on your laptop, paying bills, and so on, your body will not make this association.

**NO PHONES.** Avoid browsing the internet or checking your phone before bed. This activates our brain cells and increases arousal and attention levels, which interferes with falling asleep.

**WATCH ABOUT NAPPING DURING THE DAY.** It's best to avoid napping during the day to ensure you are tired when it's time for bed. If you can't skip the afternoon nap, make sure it's no longer than one hour and before 3 PM.

**BEDTIME RITUALS.** Develop your own bedtime rituals that signal your body that it's time to sleep. Some people use relaxation and breathing exercises 15 minutes before bed each night, or sit down with a cup of caffeine-free tea.

**BATHING.** Taking a warm bath 1-2 hours before bed can be helpful. It increases your body temperature, which has a soothing effect as the temperature naturally drops.

**DON'T LOOK AT THE CLOCK.** Many people struggling with sleep tend to check the clock frequently. Constantly looking at the time during the night can wake you up (especially if you turn on the lights to check). This can increase negative thoughts like "Oh no, it's already late, I'll never fall asleep" or "It's so late already, I've only had 5 hours of sleep, this is terrible."

**CHANGE YOUR POSITION.** If you wake up and can't fall back asleep, change your position. If you can't move your bed, try changing sides or sleep in the opposite direction.

**USE A SLEEP DIARY.** Keeping a sleep diary can be useful in tracking the actual facts about your sleep, without guessing. A sleep diary requires commitment, so it's good to write it for two weeks to identify problems, and again after two months to see how much you've improved.

**EXERCISE.** Regular exercise is beneficial, but avoid heavy exercise 2 hours before bed. A morning walk can help you feel refreshed in the morning and fall asleep more easily at night.

**EAT PROPERLY.** A light meal before bed is recommended because some people can't fall asleep when they're hungry, but heavy meals can interfere with sleep. Some recommend a warm glass of milk, which contains tryptophan, a substance that naturally promotes better sleep, or chamomile tea.

**PROPER POSITION.** The position of your bed and room is very important. Your bed should be in a quiet and comfortable spot. Sleeping in a cooler room, with enough blankets, is much better than sleeping in a warm room. Use curtains or a sleep mask to block out morning sunlight, and earplugs if the room is noisy.

**MAINTAIN A DAILY ROUTINE.** Even if you didn't sleep well and feel tired, it's important to continue with your planned activities. Don't avoid tasks just because you're tired! This can actually increase insomnia.

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