



How to survive in agility

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When I picked up the book "Deep Survival" by Laurence Gonzales I didn't have any idea it would inspire me to spend hours and hours consolidating what he wrote as a way to help with the mental management side of agility – especially competition performance. With the premise that 90% of people freeze or panic when confronted with a life-threatening situation, Gonzales explores what, why and how the remaining 10% stay cool, focused and alive. He states "They are the ones who can perceive their situation clearly; they can plan and take correct action... and these survivors share certain traits: training, experience, stoicism and a capacity for their logical neocortex (the brain's thinking part) to override the primitive amygdala portion of their brains."

This is a book about who lives, who dies, and why in survival situations. I didn't think it would turn out to help me understand things I do in agility, but then I read on page 66 the following (paraphrased):

"Elite performers seek out the situations that make them perform well and feel more alive." Cool! I want to be an elite performer. I seek out competition. But wait... I don't generally perform well in competition. If I do, I think it's fair to say I feel more alive, but that "Blue Angels" feeling of being totally in-synch with my dog doesn't happen very often. And then I went on to read the next sentence (paraphrasing):

"Easy to demonstrate that up to 90% of people when put under stress are unable to think clearly or solve simple problems. They get rattled, they panic, they freeze. Muddled thinking is common."

Crap – now I know why. Even though I want to be an elite performer, the fact is that I fall into the latter category. Then I started re-reading the book with a new perspective. Even though survival really isn't at stake competing in agility – it might as well be - given how disproportionately stressed I get. I began to hope I could learn something that would help me compete better.

Here are my notes about why I might be doing what I am doing. I like to understand things, especially things I don't understand. Maybe this is helpful for you too.

On page 133 of "Deep Survival" it says " Even when we are told, even if we understand it at an intellectual level, most of us don't embrace the facts in that emotional way that controls behavior.". This is why I am so excited about this book. I've read a lot of mental management books and I've tried a lot of techniques, but I never really understood how they were supposed to work. I never embraced the opinions and guidance in these books as facts – and maybe that's why I haven't had much success changing my behavior.

OK well, big surprise; stress is muddling up my competition performance. I get it already. I understand it at an intellectual level – I'm more than ready to embrace whatever I need to embrace in order to be an elite performer. I'm still sorting that out, but here is what I think I understand so far.

Handling:

When you learn something complex, like handling, at first you must think through each move. That is called explicit learning and it is stored in explicit memory. As you gain more experience, you begin to do the task less consciously. You develop flow, touch, timing – a "feel" for it. It becomes second nature, which is known as implicit learning. Having your handling skills stored in implicit memory has a lot of advantages. It lets you act quickly and you don't have to consume your working memory with instructions about how to step, or which hand to use, in order to be consistent.

Working memory is the place where thoughtful work is done. Working memory is always full and can only keep track of a few things at once. The more things you can do through implicit memory, the less you displace out of working memory. If you have to remind yourself to stand up on course, something else you wanted to remember slips out of your attention. If your handling is second nature and stored implicitly, you won't forget to do the right things on course – maybe you'll just forget where you put your car keys instead.

Implicit learning is built through a different neural pathway from the one that carries explicit memory. Implicit memories are not stored in or even accessible to the analytical/reasoning part of the brain. This is why I'm so unsuccessful telling myself to "handle confidently!" – I can say the words, I can understand how beneficial it is, but I can't get to the implicitly learned handling moves by reasoning my way there.

Implicit memory is created via feelings that are built as you experience the emotion of doing something that works (you can also learn to have a "bad feeling" about something). Those

emotions are accessed through somatic markers – “bookmarks” created in the brain as shortcuts. When a decision to act must be made instantly, the emotional system flips to a bookmark that matches the current circumstances and the things you’ve learned to do implicitly happens. This makes for a very fast short cut, you almost don’t have to think what to do, you just act.

Because the system is designed to work without the assistance of logic or reason, the answer to the question “what was I thinking?” is clear: I wasn’t. The whole point of the system is that you don’t have to think.

AHA – I’ve practiced my handling to the point where a lot of it is second nature. Certain things like where I put my crosses, how I send ahead, or put pressure on the path only feel right if I do them, well, the way I do them. I have bookmarked short cuts that enable me to execute these implicitly learned behaviors without really thinking about them. And when I’m actually running a course, where decisions to act have to be made instantly, my brain follows the bookmarks to the appropriate handling behaviors. Front cross footwork, dropping my hand on a blind cross, adding pressure... all fall into this category.

But hey, that makes it sound like I should handle like a savant – but there is a flip side to this coin. This is also why certain handling moves that you decide you want to change are so persistent even though you rationally want to do something different.

This reinforces why it is so important to only rehearse things in practice that you want to be good at. Once you implicitly learn bad footwork or how to disconnect from the dog or to habitually reach into your pocket for a treat or to predictably say “yes” when your dog hits their weave entry etc.... – you are hard wired to fast forward to those behaviors under similar circumstances and they’ll quickly become habits for better or worse.

I’d do well to think more carefully about how I am learning (and teaching) handling behaviors. Given the pros (fast, automatic) and cons (thoughtless execution, habit-like) of implicitly learned things and also the pros (deliberate / purposeful) and cons (slower, limited bandwidth) of explicitly learned things – am I learning what I need to do on course in the right way so it gets stored properly?

I wonder if my “feeling” that things happen fast on course is exacerbating things. I wonder if having this feeling triggers my brain to think decisions have to be made instantly, which in turn taps into those emotional bookmarks (too often? Inappropriately?), when I could actually handle much more thoughtfully. When I watch my runs on video, they aren’t nearly as fast and chaotic as they seem at the time – something to ponder.

The thing is, though, I don't see an explanation yet for some of the things I do on course. For example, I might put a front cross somewhere stupid even though I didn't walk it, didn't plan on it, don't even think it makes sense. I'm somehow tapping into the wrong shortcuts. That's exactly what it feels like – I'm as surprised as everyone else when I do that kind of thing. What's up with that?

Competing:

The reason I compete is that there is something rich about the experience. I feel like its worth getting up for, being cold for, waiting for hours for. It matters. I care what happens on course. I have powerful secondary emotions (learned emotions) about competing.

I've also competed a lot. I've had time to develop some implicit learning about competing. These are things that I am not thinking explicitly about. Intellectually I know it's not helpful to feel nervous, to feel my "prey drive" kicking in, to feel fixated on the outcome of the run – but these feelings are bookmarked. As Laurence writes: **"Opting for a thoughtful, measured approach, does not cut it emotionally and it is the emotions that are the strong catalysts for action."** Dang, I think I know where this is leading already.

So here I am, ready to go into the ring. My intellect says trust your strategy, trust your training, trust your dog, watch your dog, keep your head in the game. But my emotional learning is faster, more automatic, and not under my analytical, reasoning brain's control. My amygdala hijacks the neo cortex and conscious/working memory. It recognizes the situation and fast-forwards to the "oh boy, oh geez, oh crap" emotional bookmark and I can actually feel my nerves kicking in.

Stress releases cortisol into the blood. It interferes with the ability to perceive and where perceptions are processed and decisions are made. You see less, hear less, miss more cues from the environment (and your dog), and make more mistakes.

Stress interferes, because it causes you to focus narrowly on the thing that you consider most important and it may be the wrong thing. I actually do recognize this "narrowing" – I actually thought it was something I was doing consciously as a productive thing – I didn't realize it was the stress that was forcing it to happen. I thought I was doing well to move from telling myself "just don't screw up" to "just smile" or "just remember how lucky you are to have healthy dogs to run" or "just work every obstacle" or "just blah blah blah".

The reality though is that I was just reacting to the stress and that bookmark was interfering with my perception of what was happening in the run. Couple that with a library of handling

options easily accessed by automatic bookmarks triggered by strong emotions – no wonder I would see unplanned stuff happen on course.

OK more things I can do:

There are at least two separate brain systems that can generate behavior. I already know that one search engine involves using emotional bookmarks. Because they are so powerful and automatic and because they will take over my reasoning, in order to perform well under stress I have to develop bookmarks that will work to my advantage. I need to build emotional bookmarks to implicit learning that fast forwards me to useful behaviors like “watch my dog”. Then I will be able to thrive on the stress. I will seek it out because it is my gateway to my best performance – my most automatic and timely behaviors.

Knowing that whatever stress I do feel is going to focus my attention – I need to pick something really helpful to focus on, for example, “watch your dog’s eyes”. Probably bouncing around, artificially trying on different thought processes which in turn displaces useful stuff in working memory isn’t doing anything for my performance.

Training

A second strategy the brain uses for handling complicated problems is to create mental models, which are stripped down schematics of the world. I need to build some new mental models.

Check out the separate article about what a mental model is.

OK more things to do. I have to be really, really careful that my mental models that represent real time reality are accurate. I have to be really, really careful that my mental models that represent my future reality are pointing me where I want to go.

Here’s an example from my personal experience. I lead out and turn back to release my dog from her stay. My mental model is that she has a stay. I see her sitting right where I left her – that matches my mental model. Only she isn’t where I left her and she isn’t sitting, she’s crouching like a tiger, which everyone else sees clearly because they have no expectations of her behavior. When someone tells me “you know you released her when her butt was up”, I’m all befuddled, I would swear that she was still sitting.

Here’s another mental model. My mental model of selecting a handling strategy is that I have a solid and proven approach. I am aware that I have to guard against my mental model becoming outdated (for example, if new course design options become legal) so I test it a lot

in practice by going through the steps. Because I do, I keep experiencing the emotion of doing something that works and that creates a feeling of confidence. I “feel” like my strategy is sound. I have built implicit learning of a solid, confident handling strategy – I walk the course and can find my crosses, visualize where I can get to, identify my handling options etc. almost automatically. By Jove, I think I’m getting it – that is a mental model that works for me.

On the flip side....my mental model of actually running my strategy is that I’m not very good at it. It would be typical of me to make a handling mistake. I just know that I’m going to get so excited that I do something dumb on course. Weirdly, it’s not part of my mental model that I would get lost on course (which I’ll come back to).

According to Laurence, people tend to take in information that confirms their mental models. I notice my stupid mistakes. I can hardly remember what went right on course but I am super attuned to what I did wrong. Days later I can still recall and kick myself over something stupid I did. Because I do, I keep experiencing the emotions of frustration etc. I “feel” resigned to the fact that I am lucky if I don’t screw something up. I have built implicit learning of feeling like I don’t perform well in competition. And lets see, there is that master default bookmark that unconsciously works to match reality to my mental model. Oops.

But my mental model doesn’t even match reality very well. When I watch my runs on videotape they aren’t as chaotic as I would have thought. Things aren’t moving as fast as they seemed real time. There is a lot more going right than is going wrong. Sometimes I do actually get lost or disoriented on course (but oddly I think of those times as anomalies and I don’t dwell on them – they don’t match my mental model).

I need to create mental models of current reality that are helpful to my agility and make sure they match reality well. I need to pay attention to the models I have and if they are outdated, I have to keep an open mind and be willing to update them. Where they don’t match reality very well, they might prevent me from doing the things I need to do to improve.

Mental models can be helpful and not helpful in steering me toward a future that I want. My brain will strive to match reality to my mental models and a future reality that includes me doing stupid things on course is not where I want to be. I need to build some new mental models. For example: A mental model of being able to watch my dog’s eyes when I want her to be on handler focus. I know I can do it. I do it all the time in practice. It’s easy to do when I focus on doing it but its not implicit yet. Maybe, a mental model of me executing my handling strategy instead of experimenting with things other than what I know will work - just to see how they would work. That is a tough one, I have been a tinkerer my whole life – but as folks have already pointed out to me, I can experiment all I want at home. A mental

model that any mistake on course is an anomaly, a bit of information to steer my training, and not worth dwelling on beyond that. It doesn't mean that I am doomed to always make mistakes for gosh sakes.

So now what. Well, again, according to Laurence, "plans are generated as one of the many outputs of the brain. The human brain is very well suited to making plans that have an emotional component to drive motivation and behavior. Plans are stored in memory – exactly as past events are – there is no difference to the brain. You bookmark the future in order to get there.".

Alright, I have my list of mental skills to work on and I really think I understand how this all works. Finally. (Although Scientific American Mind articles would indicate that we really don't know how the brain works all that well). But wait, its not about reasoning it out.

If elite-performers do these things and survive mountaineering accidents and being lost at sea – surely I can do It well enough to survive, or thrive, I should say, for 30 seconds on course!!!!