Most of us have strategies we use to manage stressful situations, like performing in competitions or taking exams. Techniques you might recognise include planning how you will cope if certain situations arise or preparing yourself for a tricky situation by talking yourself through it. You probably use some without even realising it. Now psychologists have set up the largest experiment to find out more about the strategies we use and how effective they are.

Working with BBC LAB UK, Professors Andy Lane and Peter Totterdell, designed a game to see whether strategies used by top sportsmen and women, like sprinter Michael Johnson, also work for ordinary people, like you and me. The game tests how effective you find one of three different ways of improving performance: visualisation, self talk and if-then planning.

Top athletes have long recognised the importance of mental as well as physical training and many will have routines that help them get into a winning emotional state, where self-doubt is replaced by positive thoughts about what they need to do to succeed.

‘Can you compete under pressure’ lets you try out one of these techniques and find out whether it helped you complete the challenge of the game. Once you’ve finished the test you can access information on how to use the other strategies too.

And it seems that taking part in this study has benefits. Professor Totterdell, from the University of Sheffield is excited by the feedback they have received from participants. “People playing the game say it makes them think about things differently and that it helps them manage anxiety.”

Not just for athletes

Professor Lane, from the University of Wolverhampton, explains that while we often think of these athletes preparing themselves mentally for competition, the techniques can be applied in other situations. “There is absolutely no reason they can’t be applied in exams, too”, he says. “Just like an athlete preparing to compete, you’d go through some sort of warm up – re-reading some of your notes, then some positive self talk, maybe thinking through how you’re going to answer the question and seeing yourself relaxed in the examination.”

In fact, all three strategies being studied are ones people commonly use to manage stressful situations. But we might use them in different ways. As Professor Lane explains, there are different levels or ways of using self talk. In an exam, for example, you might focus on the process, by using self-talk to think about the exam question. Or you might focus on the outcome, using self-talk to put you in a positive frame of mind by “talking” about how well you are going to do in the exam. This type of self-talk is about motivating yourself. Or you might focus on your emotions, saying to yourself ‘I’m going to keep calm’.

Performing under Pressure
Managing emotional states

The study developed out of research exploring how sportsmen and women prepare themselves for competition and from research into how we manage our emotional states. Professor Totterdell, from the University of Sheffield, explains that to some extent we need to accept our emotions and then try to figure out what our emotions are telling us. There may be a reason you feel particularly anxious in some situations. But once you’ve identified the situation and why you feel anxious, then you can try to figure out how to change your emotional state.

For example, you might be feeling very nervous as you go for a job or university interview, but to succeed you need to convey enthusiasm. How can you turn that nervousness into a positive attitude and enthusiasm for the job?

“You can do it by surface acting, or faking it”, says Professor Totterdell, “but that doesn’t always come across as being authentic. Or you can deep act. That is to conjure up the emotions you need to show, using techniques like visualisation.”

Professor Totterdell is keen to stress that these situations can be managed. You can change your emotional response, to avoid emotions that get in the way of your performance and to actively create certain feelings.

Professor Lane’s top tip is “to play the game, not the occasion.” He points out that football players, for example, play the game all the time in practice. It’s only under the pressure of competition that the goalie suddenly misses the ball. Why? “Because you are thinking of outcomes rather than concentrating on the here and now”, he explains.

So rather than worrying about whether you’ll pass the driving test or not, develop a strategy that will help you stay calm by going through a simple routine when you enter the car. Try visualising: seat belt on, mirrors checked, gear shift in neutral, etc.

Performing under pressure

Which technique is best for you?

Some techniques work better for some people than others. Finding out which works best for you is likely to be a process of trial and error. Professor Totterdell points out that it may also depend on the situation – what works for you might be different in a job interview than in a social situation. His advice? “See what works for you then practice it.”

“These are skills and abilities. Some people learn them more quickly than others”, says Professor Lane. Over time and with practice, you should improve. Try a few different strategies, see which seems to work for you and most importantly, keep practicing. “You also need to accept that it might take some time,” he adds.

So if you are heading toward a stressful A-level exam period or worried about your upcoming driving test, then start practicing these techniques early. “It shouldn’t be intrusive though”, Professor Lane says. “You don’t want to sit there looking odd as you mumble to yourself while you revise.”

More information

Why not have a go yourself? If you are over 16, you can take the test at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/labuk/articles/compete/

Emotion Regulation of Others and Self (EROS) Research programme:
http://www.erosresearch.org