



create thoughts helps you realize they are just that—thoughts.

Perhaps the most critical shift you can make in developing mental fitness is learning to operate from the perspective of the Witness. Your mental fitness will improve to the same degree that you can make this shift. Once you begin to operate from the Witness's perspective, you separate your true self from the limiting effects of thinking.

**PRACTICE BEING THE WITNESS**

There are times while climbing where you need to think, assess risks and make decisions. You usually do these at rest stances, where you have protection. Between such stances you should engage and simply focus on climbing without interference from the mind.

To practice, choose a lead that is just below your limit and has safe fall consequences, meaning the falls are clean and you have experience taking such falls. (After you do this exercise on routes below your limit, you can progress to more difficult ones.) If you don't have leading and falling experience, the exercise can still be useful if done on toprope. Your intention is to keep climbing regardless of doubts in your mind. Do a thorough risk assessment at protected stances.

As you begin climbing off the stance, focus your attention on the physical sensations of climbing: breathing, staying as relaxed as you can, and continually moving. If you stop within a section due to doubts, then follow these steps:

**First:** Delay reacting and don't listen to the doubts your mind creates. Look down to acknowledge where your last pro is to confirm that you are still in a safe fall zone.

**Second:** Focus your attention by looking for hand- and footholds and what you need to do to climb.

**Third:** Keep your attention on the physical sensations of breathing and relaxing.

Then do a couple of deliberate exhalations and commit to making the next move regardless of whether or not you will fall. Do not let your mind decide to fall, and do not slap hopelessly at the next hold. Engage your body by going for the next move with precision and focus, regardless of background doubts. One move is valuable; this is where you learn.

*Arno Ilgner is the author of The Rock Warrior's Way, considered the Bible of mental training for climbers. The above essay was excerpted from his new book, Espresso Lessons.*

# Witness the Mental Fitness

*Set thought aside to improve performance*

**P**ing! In a split second I was in the air and falling. The rope went limp as I accelerated into the mist and drizzle. What I most feared had happened: the hook had sheared off the flake. The rope came taut after 20 feet, throwing me upside down and jerking me to a stop. I was shaken but unhurt. This was our third visit to climb a new route on the 700-foot headwall of Whitesides Mountain in North Carolina and we were getting shut down again.

A first ascent is a deep, multi-layered challenge, nerve-racking and stressful. Whether or not the route will go is the outer unknown. Whether or not we have the ability is the inner unknown.

On that drizzly day at Whitesides, Doyle Parsons and I were faced with both unknowns, but it was the inner one that decided our fate. We were tired, wet and discouraged.

"Can't climb in the rain," I said, to help justify the decision. We tucked tail and left.

Your mind will do anything it can to keep from being fully present for the stress that is inherent in a climbing challenge. It will create thoughts to escape the stress, such as what happened to me on Whitesides. Another common escape thought

is: "I'm too pumped to continue."

This tendency to escape is your mind's natural inclination. What you can do about it is simply identify—or notice—these thoughts when they happen.

You can't "fix" the mind from the perspective of the mind. Mental fitness training has to be done from a perspective that is removed from the mind itself. You need a different access point.

Many people are so identified with thinking that they believe they think all the time. Yet you don't think all the time. You think much of the time, but there are gaps between thoughts. It's in those gaps that awareness resides. You can witness—that is, observe and notice—when your mind generates thoughts. Witnessing your mind