

Climber's Mental Health Toolbox: Meet Your Amygdala

Mental Health Vitamin with Dr. Kristi Pkiewicz

Rock climbing doesn't just create strong bodies, it can create strong minds too. Every new problem is a chance to use growth mindset. Each fall is an opportunity to develop resilience. Frustrating moments are great times to practice self-regulation -- the list of ways to develop mental skills in climbing goes on and on.

Competition rock climbing is full of situations that can trigger fear and uncertainty. Tying into the sharp end or stepping up to a comp problem may provoke a huge adrenalin spike. That's the work of the amygdala, a thin strip of tissue deep in the brain, as it flips on like a light switch.

This neural light switch doesn't know the difference between "REAL DANGER, HOLY ----!!" and "perceived danger, meh." The amygdala's job is to flip your systems to full throttle, in case a saber-toothed tiger might be coming right at you. In rock climbing, fear is sometimes a totally appropriate and even life-preserving emotion. But all climbers know there are just as many benign scenarios, like a tricky slab route, where the worst outcome is a quick hop back onto the mat, which can still activate the amygdala and its fear-based warning system.

It's worth practicing how you can dial back that surge of emotion so you can focus on what will actually help, such as footwork.

1. Name the emotion: "This feels terrifying."

2. Use a breathing exercise or a visualization exercise. Take a deep breath in, hold the top of your breath, feel the stretch of your lungs, then feel yourself releasing that air. Then, check your focus again. Are you more tuned into the wall? -OR- Visualize each movement you will make, and, as Alex Honnold does -- take time to visualize what happens if you step wrong and fall or need to work your way out of a mistake.

3. Use self-talk: "I'm a person who works at hard things."

4. Now, get back to it!

The skills we could need for that scary slab problem or sport route dyno aren't just footwork and movement skills, but also the mental skills of self-regulation and resilience. A great way to develop these skills is to face our fears in low-risk situations, like the climbing gym, and practice taking control of situations that might otherwise be ruled by emotion. Climbing is perfect for this type of mental work.

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