



Habits Coach

Leadership Conversation with Dr. Jim Afremow

Q: How did you get involved in sport psychology?

Afremow: I've always loved physical activity and the outdoors. I grew up in Portland Oregon. My father was a big sports fan. I've also been into psychology, how people tick, and how they can tick better. In graduate school, I studied counseling and sport psychology at Michigan State. Then I went into private practice in Phoenix and worked at Arizona State intercollegiate athletics for 10 years. Now I'm the peak performance coordinator for the San Francisco Giants.

Q: What are some of the coolest other things you have going on?

Afremow: I still have a private practice where I work with some Olympic hopefuls., Olympians, and other aspiring athletes of all levels. I do have a new book coming out, "The Champion's Comeback."

Q: What were some early leadership influences in your life?

Afremow: My parents taught me to be vitally involved in life. That's one of my core values. Too often we hit the snooze button, just trying to get through the day instead of getting better during the day. It's important to get out of your comfort zone and take risks. My parents were like that. We just liked to travel and do new things. Whatever you value most, go for it.

BE VITALLY INVOLVED IN LIFE

Q: How do you apply the principle of being vitally involved to your business?

Afremow: By staying hungry and humble. There's always more to learn and always more to do. Whenever opportunities arise, I go out and seize them. When we fall down or make mistakes, that's where resilience comes in. Look at everything as a learning opportunity. Life and sports are not about winning and losing, they're about winning and learning. I try to apply that in my own life as a person and as a professional.

I get excited when working with athletes who are truly going after greatness, willing to take that risk and go for it.

Q: How do you define mental toughness?

Afremow: When things are tough, stay positive and proactive. It's human nature to want to evade or run from difficult situations (e.g., tough workout, new challenges, etc.). Some of us choose to simply endure it, not really getting better in the process. The goal is to embrace. Tough workout? Bring it on.

Encourage yourself. Encourage your teammates. Appreciate the challenge at hand.

**LIFE IS ABOUT WINNING AND LEARNING,
NOT WINNING AND LOSING**

Q: What qualities separate elite athletes from the rest of the pack?

Afremow: We all may not have the same genes, but there's no such thing as a champion's mind gene. We can all learn to think like a champion. There's nothing preventing us being more confident, focused, committed, and getting clarity on our dream goals.

The Olympians I've worked with are skilled at the C-Words:

- **Confidence**
- **Composure**
- **Commitment**

Commitment is the big one. Top athletes do everything in their power to explore their true and full potential, whereas most of us hold back a bit. Elite athletes don't leave any stone unturned. "If sports nutrition is gonna help, I'll do that. If sport psychology is gonna help, I'll do that."

Elite athletes are fully invested in themselves, getting back to being vitally involved with life.

Q: What's holding that athlete or top performer back from making that 100% commitment?

Afremow: Number one is fear of failure. "I don't want to put everything have into this because I may not succeed." Number two is fear of success. "The better I do, the better I have to do." Thus, we hold back so we don't have to deal with the pressure of being super-successful and I have an "out" or excuse if things don't work out because I didn't put everything I have into it.

That's not the best way to enjoy the journey or arrive at a great destination.

It's really about putting yourself out there. Remember, your sport or your business is what you do, not who you are. So you don't have to overly invest your self-esteem in the outcome. The goal is to go out and be free and fearless. If you can be a good separator between who you are and what you do, then you're going to take more risks on the road to greatness.

GO OUT AND BE FREE, BE FEARLESS

Q: In your work, have you been able to see athletes make positive change instantaneously or is it always a laborious process?

We can all do it on any given day. We're always one thought away from thinking and performing our best. At the same time, mental toughness is a process, built on those down days when we choose to stay as optimistic as possible.

Sometimes you have to command yourself to really go for it. Other times you just have to keep pushing when things aren't going your way.

Q: What are your best confidence-building strategies?

Afremow: There are four main sources of confidence:

1. **Past Success.** When I ask athletes to share what they've done well at practice or competition, too many of them say, "I didn't do anything *perfectly* well." We're too hard on ourselves. **Give yourself credit where credit is due.** Think about your accomplishments, how good you felt, and how you made it happen. Are you doing everything in your power to see how good you can be?
2. **Verbal Persuasion.** What are some compliments you've received? What have the coaches or teammates told you that was good? Think about the positive feedback you've received.
3. **Role Modeling.** Who do you model and mirror as a performer? Gain confidence from that: "if they can do it, I can do it."
4. **Interpret Physiology.** One athlete may get butterflies before competition and think something bad is going to happen. The better way to interpret is to say, "I'm excited, prepared, and can't wait to get out there today." You'll feel more confident and perform better.

For me personally, I've had a lot of experience working with top athletes. That gives me a lot of confidence, having learned from those interactions.

CHOOSE OPTIMISM

Q: Who's the most mentally tough person you know?

Afremow: I've always worked with major league baseball players but now that I have a closer look at their daily demands, it's a tough sport. For example in the NFL, players have a week to recover after a game. In baseball, it's only 12 hours. You play 162 games in approximately 180 days. Plus spring training, which is every day. And if you make it to post-season, you have even more games.

To me, it takes a lot of mental toughness to day-in and day-out be at your best.

Q: How important to success is maintaining a long-term perspective?

Afremow: Having a long-term perspective is vital for all of us. Performance outcomes fluctuate. The world, unfortunately, wants you to focus on your last result. That kind of approach doesn't work well.

I've found that when you do the right thing, in the right way every day, your best "numbers" will be there at the end of the season.

BE MENTALLY TOUGH DAY-IN & DAY-OUT

Q: Why do we tend to excessively focus on short-term results?

Afremow: That's how we're built as human beings. We want immediate, instant gratification. Excellence requires ongoing growth and development.

Q: Who have been some of your greatest mentors?

Afremow: In sport psychology, the legends: Jim Loehr, Bob Rotella, and Canada's Terry Orlick. In general psychology, by far the works of Abraham Maslow.

Q: What's your LEAST FAVORITE word in the english language?

Afremow: The word CAN'T. When we use the word "can't," what we're really saying is "I won't" or "I don't want to." There is a lack of ownership and taking personal responsibility for your results. If anything, say, "I can't YET."

Q: What's your MOST FAVORITE word?

Afremow: The word TRUST. Too often, we don't trust our talent, our training, or our team. It's just as important to trust and respect yourself as it is to give fair due to your opponents. Trust positions you the best chance of success. And we all know that doubt is 100% effective!

Remember: "Birds don't think about flying. They just fly."

TRUST YOUR TALENT, TRUST YOUR TRAINING

Q: What's your definition of success?

Afremow: The journey is greater than the destination. Knowing in your core that you've given your best shot. Always learning and growing. Loving the challenge. Appreciating the competition. Becoming the best version of yourself.

Q: What do you want your legacy to be?

Afremow: I love this question because we tend to get caught up the daily distractions of life. Thinking about legacy pulls us out of that.

As a person, I want my legacy to be that of a great husband and father.

Professionally, to make an impact, connecting with others, and helping them achieve their goals.