

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND-MUSCLE CONNECTION AND MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

By [YouAreUNLTD](#) -October 5, 2018

As we age, our bodies and our minds change. They may get weaker, but they may get stronger in certain ways, too. Take the mind, for example: Constantly working it out by learning and challenging it through things such as puzzles, for example, keeps those synapses in tune.

And then there are your muscles, of course. They need constant tuning and challenge as you age so that you can maintain and even build strength and fitness, which helps to ward off lingering effects from things such as falls or other injuries.

However, as you age, what's the connection between the mind and the body? Well, as it turns out, there's a big one. The more you pay attention to the physical strength you're trying to build, the more in tune your mind will be to what's happening to all parts of your body, and the greater your ability to keep challenging both of them. How can you do that? This graphic explains it.

MIND-MUSCLE CONNECTION TIPS

TURN OFF DISTRACTIONS



Focus on your workout and turn off TV, podcasts, and other distractions.

VISUALIZE THE MUSCLES YOU'RE TRAINING

During each lift, visualize the muscle you're working. Think about the specific muscle you want to focus on and direct your attention to that area of the body.



INCLUDE WARM-UP SETS



Before you perform your lift, complete a warm-up set with a very low weight and high reps. Concentrate on squeezing the weight and focus on engaging the muscle you're working.

ADD CUES

Cues can be internal, such as telling your body to row the elbows behind the body during a bench press, or external, such as like pushing your heels into the ground during a squat.



INCREASE TIME UNDER TENSION



Time under tension is the amount of time you spend during each repetition. The slower your repetitions, the better your brain will communicate with your muscle fibers. Do tempo reps, where you count for 2 to 3 seconds with each contraction of the muscle.

Brought to you by:

HEALTH PERCH

In partnership with:



Unfolding the mind-muscle connection

Simply put, the mind-muscle connection is a conscious and deliberate muscle contraction. It's the ability to focus the tension you create during exercise on a specific muscle or region of muscles in the body, which is the difference between passively and actively moving the weight.

When you focus on using specific muscles to create contractions, the [brain calls upon a greater percentage of high muscle fibers](#) to complete the task. This also prevents innervating of muscle fibers not in use. By creating tension in the right muscles, your body is better able to gain strength and size in all the right places.

Internal and external focused attention

[Focused attention](#) is how well the brain can concentrate on a specific activity for a given amount of time. This is a large part of cognitive development and works well during resistance training.

Two types of attention are important during exercise: internal focus and external focus. Internal focus is when you concentrate on the specifics of what your body is doing. For example, during a crunch, your mind focuses on contracting the anterior abdominal muscles while flexing the spine.

An external focus is how your body relates to the environment during exercise. On a leg press machine, for instance, the external focus is to push the platform away from your torso with your feet. Though external and internal focus improves performance, evidence shows that [internal focus plays a more integral role](#) in muscle growth and development.

To improve your mind-muscle connection, focus your attention on the muscles required to move the weight. During biceps curls, for instance, think about how the muscles in the front of

the arm contract to move the weight toward your shoulder. (This goes for all strength exercises.)

Choosing one cue at a time

Cueing is a tool used by coaches and trainers to help clients improve movement and performance. You can use cueing on your own to help improve how your brain connects to the right muscle fibers. Pay attention to your form and note what you want to work on.

Once you come up with a few cues, work on one at a time. Take the bench press, for example. You have set up, lowering the bar, and pressing the bar.

The first cue to work on is proper setup. This is positioning your body on the bench, getting tight and braced in the upper body, and removing the bar from the rack safely. Focus your attention on these skills before your brain automatically sets up with proper form.

When this skill is acquired, move on to lower the bar with solid mind-muscle connection. Building on your skills over time helps improve attention because you focus on movement in segments rather than trying to master everything at one time.

More time under tension

[Time under tension during resistance training](#) is a key component for muscle building. The more time under tension you spend during a lift, the stronger and bigger your muscles grow. Time under tension can be increased in various ways.

One way is to pause during peak contraction. For example, you can hold a glute squeeze at the top of a bridge, pause during the flexed position during a bicep curl, or hold at the bottom of a push-up.

Another way is to slow down the [eccentric](#), or elongated portion of the exercise. Adding a 3-second eccentric movement improves your mind-muscle connection because your mind automatically focuses on controlling the slowed down the movement.

Additionally, [isometric contractions](#) are another great way to increase time under tension and improve how your brain relates to the muscle. Planks are a great example of isometric contractions. Loaded carries, isometric chin-ups, and iso-hold squats are a few more ideas.

Turn off distractions

[It's a misconception that humans can multitask](#) and this doesn't just relate to patting your head while rubbing your belly. It may seem easier to get through your workout if you divert your attention from the pain in your gains.

However, the opposite is true. Turning off distractions, including your phone and television, allows your brain to focus on the task at hand. Music is a great way to energize your body and get into your workout, but you may be better off leaving the audiobooks and podcasts for the treadmill.

Putting it all together

Your mind has plenty of ways to connect with your muscles during exercise. Choose one thing to focus on at a time and build this skill as you become more in tune with your body.

If you are newer to exercise, it's best to start by turning off all distractions. Eccentric contractions are the easiest to learn and a good way to build muscle fast. If you're a gym veteran, focus on concentric and isometric contracts, and build cues into your training in order to tap into your muscle-building potential.