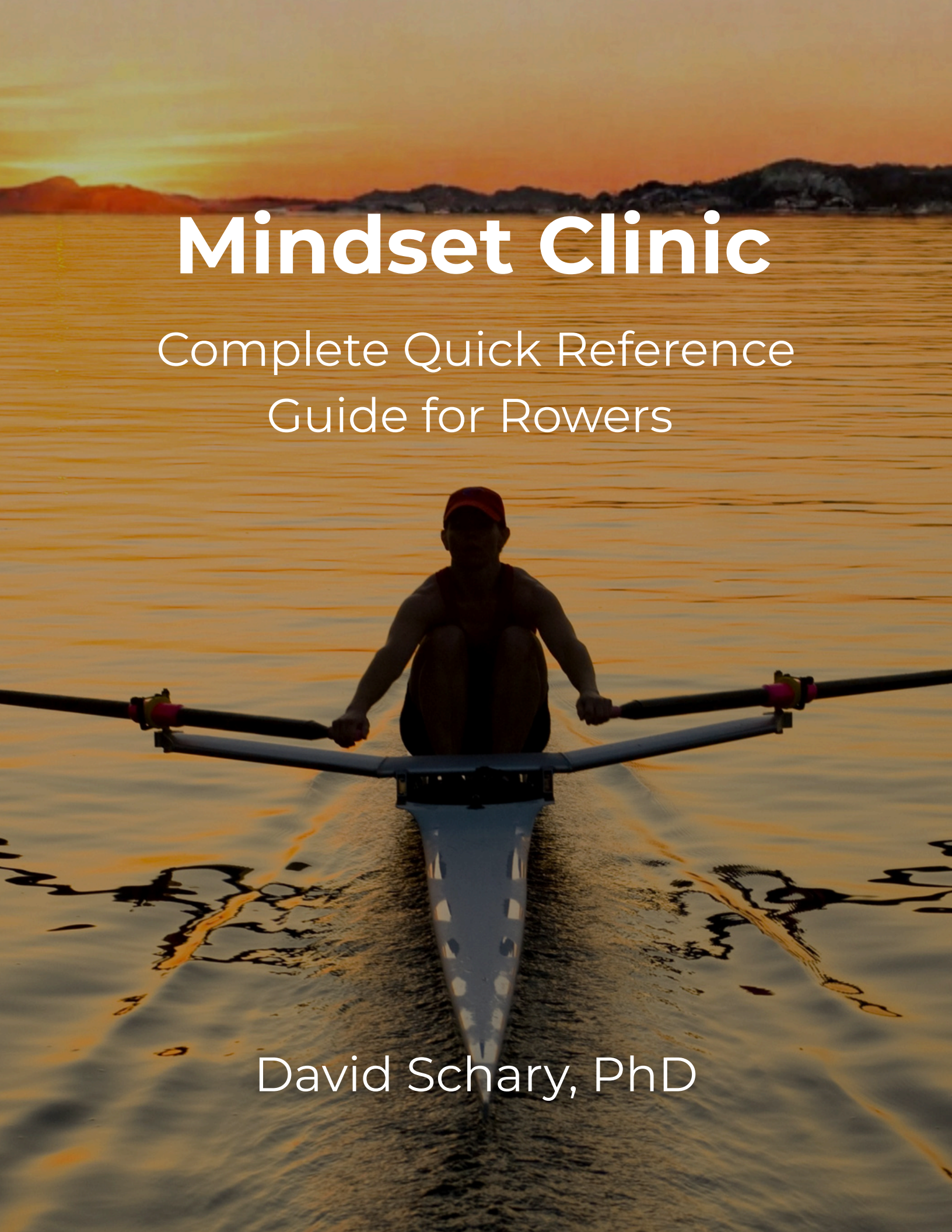

Mindset Clinic

Complete Quick Reference Guide for Rowers

David Schary, PhD

Mindset Clinic: Complete Quick Reference Guide for Rowers

by David Schary, PhD

About the Author:

David Schary is a sport psychology professor specializing in mental performance training for rowers. Using neuroscience and sport psychology, he helps rowers train their brains with the same precision and discipline required for every stroke. As a professor, counselor, former rower and coach, and contributor to Row360, David brings years of experience both on the water and in the classroom.

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This guide is a supplement to the Mindset Clinic video series. For more mental performance content, visit davidschary.com/blog.

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⚠️ CRITICAL: Read This First

This framework assumes:

- Your training plan is appropriate (not overtraining)
- You're recovering adequately (sleep, nutrition, rest)
- You're injury-free or managing injuries appropriately
- Your goals are yours, not someone else's

If any of those aren't true, address them first. Mental skills training cannot override physical breakdown, inadequate recovery, or misaligned values. The distinction between "loud signal at 85%" and "actual limit at 100%" only matters if your body has the capacity to safely push. When in doubt, talk to your coach.

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START HERE: Your First Two Weeks

If you do nothing else, do this:

Week 1: The 3-Question Reflection

After your next hard piece, answer these three questions:

1. **Where did my brain tell me to stop?**
2. **Where did I actually stop?**
3. **What does the gap teach my automatic brain?**

That's it. Write it down. Do this after every hard piece this week.

Example:

1. Brain said stop: 800m into the 2k
2. Actually stopped: Finished the full 2k
3. Gap teaches: The "stop" signal arrives way before my actual limit

---

Week 2: Add Daily Evidence

After each practice (not just hard pieces), write down **one specific thing you executed well.**

Not how you felt. What you **did.**

- "Maintained 1:52 split through final 500m" ✓
- "Felt okay" ✗

Keep doing the 3-question reflection after hard pieces.

Week 3: Connect to Your Values

Before training, complete the Values Identification Exercise.

When you don't feel motivated, say out loud: **"I don't feel motivated today AND I value [X], so I'm going to [action]."**

Keep doing weeks 1-2 practices.

Week 4: Full Integration

Continue all three practices. Review your evidence log weekly. Notice patterns.

Now you're ready to explore the rest of this guide.

Why This Sequence?

Your automatic brain (System 1) learns through **repeated experience + reflection**, not understanding. You can't think your way to change – you train it through deliberate reps.

The 3-question reflection is the highest-leverage tool in this entire guide. Everything else builds on that foundation.

Realistic Timeline:

- Pain tolerance shifts: 8-12 hard pieces with reflection
- Confidence building: 2-3 weeks of evidence logging
- Consistency becoming automatic: 4-6 weeks

Start small. Build the habit. Everything else follows.

QUICK REMINDERS ACROSS ALL THREE TOPICS

The Universal Pattern

Your automatic brain (System 1) learns through experience, not understanding.

- You can't think your way to change
- You train it through deliberate reps
- **Reflection after experiences is where integration happens**

The Skill Parallel

All three are trainable skills, just like your stroke:

- Pain tolerance was trained (usually by accident)
- Confidence was trained (through past experiences)
- Discipline was trained (through reinforced patterns)
- **They can all be systematically retrained**

Realistic Expectations

- ~15-20 reps to recalibrate pain tolerance
- Weeks of evidence collection to build confidence
- Consistent cycles of values-based action to build discipline
- **Old patterns don't disappear, you build stronger new ones that outcompete them**
- Under extreme stress, old patterns might resurface – that's normal, not failure

The Non-Negotiable

Reflection drives change. Without it, you're just suffering or going through motions. With it, you're systematically training your automatic brain.

COMMON MENTAL TRAPS & COUNTERS CHEAT SHEET

Quick Reference for In-the-Moment Struggles

When you think...	Reality check	Action
"I can't do this"	Signal, not command	Next stroke. This stroke.
"Everyone else is better"	Comparing your inside to their outside	What did I execute well?
"I don't feel motivated today"	I can have this feeling AND act on my values	State your value out loud, then act
"This should be easier by now"	Plateaus = invisible adaptation	Check process metrics, not just outcomes
"I'm going to fail"	My brain is running that story	Can I perform anyway?
"I want to stop NOW"	Is this 85% or actually 100%?	10 more strokes, then reassess
"I'm the worst on the team"	You don't see their struggle	Focus on your own trajectory
"This is too hard"	Hard ≠ impossible	What's worked before?
"I'll never be good enough"	System 1 running old program	Check the evidence log
"What's the point?"	Motivation dropped out	What value am I honoring today?

Keep this visible during training!

PRESENTATION 1: Pushing Through Pain

Your Brain Is Lying to You When Rowing Gets Hard | David Schary

Your Brain Is Lying to You When Rowing Gets Hard

The Core Problem

Your automatic brain sends "STOP" signals based on past patterns, not your actual limits. It hasn't learned that intense discomfort ≠ danger.

The Solution

Pain tolerance is a trainable skill. You recalibrate your automatic brain through deliberate practice, just like fixing your stroke.

Key Concepts

Two-Brain System

- **Automatic brain (Racing Brain or System 1):** Fast, runs under pressure, sends survival signals
- **Thinking brain (Training Brain or System 2):** Slow, rational, knows the plan
- Under intensity, System 1 takes over – this is biology, not weakness

The Calibration Problem

- Your brain screams "stop" at 85% capacity with the same urgency as 100%
- This isn't a toughness problem, it's inaccurate signaling
- Takes ~15-20 hard pieces to recalibrate

⚠️ CRITICAL DISTINCTION

85% + Loud Signal vs. Actual 100%

How to tell the difference:

- **85% + loud signal:** Uncomfortable but breathing controlled, form holding, can speak in short phrases
- **Actual 100%:** Form breaking down, gasping, vision tunneling, lightheaded

Over time, you'll get better at distinguishing between them. The goal isn't to always push past, it's to know the difference. If you're consistently hitting true 100% in training, your programming needs adjustment, not more mental toughness.

The Recalibration Loop

Feel the "stop" signal → Execute anyway → Notice actual outcome → System 1 gets new data

Three-Phase Protocol

BEFORE the piece:

- Notice the dread, don't fight it
- "My brain is doing the thing. That's what brains do."
- Commit anyway

DURING the piece:

- "I notice my brain is saying stop"
- That's a signal, not a command
- Next stroke. This stroke. Next stroke.

AFTER the piece (most important):

Ask yourself:

1. Where did my brain tell me to stop?
2. Where did I actually stop?
3. What does the gap teach my automatic brain?

This Week's Action

After your next hard piece, write down those three questions and your answers. This data collection drives recalibration.

PRESENTATION 2: Building Confidence

How Rowers Actually Build Confidence | David Schary

How Rowers Actually Build Confidence

The Core Problem

Your thinking brain knows you've trained hard. Your automatic brain fires "you're not good enough" anyway. That gap = the confidence problem.

The Solution

Confidence is Racing Brain/Training Brain alignment. Built through accumulated evidence your automatic brain can't dismiss, not through positive thinking.

What Confidence Is NOT

- Feeling certain you'll succeed
- Never having doubt
- Silencing the critical voice

What Confidence IS

- Acting despite uncertainty
- Trust built through evidence
- Your two brains agreeing

Key Concepts

The Evidence Problem

- **Racing Brain doesn't respond to:** pep talks, positive thinking, "just believe in yourself"
- **Racing Brain responds to:** undeniable evidence, successful reps, mastery experiences

The Comparison Trap

- You see their results. You feel your doubt.
- This comparison is rigged, you'll always lose
- You're comparing your internal experience to their external outcomes

The Recalibration Process

Every time you perform well despite doubt:

- Racing Brain gets new data: "doubt signal → good performance anyway"
- After enough reps, System 1 updates
- The doubt becomes less predictive, less loud, less controlling

Daily Evidence Protocol

After every practice: "What did I do well today?"

- Not how you felt, what you executed
- Did you hit splits? Maintain form? Execute the plan?
- Focus on actions, not feelings

Weekly check: "What can I do now that I couldn't do a month ago?"

When Self-Doubt Shows Up

Don't fight it. Notice it.

- "My brain is running that story again. That's what it does."
- Ask: "Can I have this thought AND still row well?"
- Create distance, you don't have to obey the thought

This Week's Action

Start an evidence log. After each practice, write one specific thing you executed well (actions, not feelings). Review it when the "not good enough" story starts.

PRESENTATION 3: Motivation and Consistency

Why Motivation Fails Rowers In Training | David Schary

Why Motivation Fails Rowers In Training

The Core Problem

You're relying on motivation, a feeling that changes with sleep, stress, weather, and mood. Waiting for motivation = waiting for your brain to randomly cooperate.

The Solution

Build systems that make consistency the default. Act from values, not feelings. Train your automatic brain to show up regardless of motivation.

The Real Equation

WRONG: Motivation → Action → Results

RIGHT: Values → Action → Results → (sometimes) Motivation

Action comes first. Motivation sometimes follows. But action doesn't depend on feeling.

Key Concepts

Discipline is a Skill

- **Current pattern:** "Don't feel like it → don't do it"
- **Retrained pattern:** "Don't feel like it → do it anyway → survive"
- After enough reps, showing up becomes automatic

The Plateau Problem

- Plateaus kill motivation because Automatic Brain needs feedback loops
- When effort → no visible reward, Automatic Brain withdraws investment
- **Reality:** Plateaus = invisible adaptation happening beneath the surface

The Commitment Formula

1. **Name the value:** "I value discipline/growth/teamwork"
2. **Name the action:** "I will complete this piece at target"
3. **Notice the feeling:** "I don't feel like it today"
4. **Choose:** "I can have this feeling AND honor my value"

Practical Strategies

Reduce friction (work WITH Automatic Brain):

- Pack bag the night before
- Non-negotiable schedule
- Remove decision points

The 10-minute rule:

- On days you really don't want to: commit to 10 minutes only
- Usually, resistance is to starting, not doing
- Once you start, you continue

Process metrics you control:

- Did I hit the target stroke rate?
- Did I execute the plan?
- Did I maintain form in the last 500?
- Creates feedback independent of outcomes

Accountability structures:

- Training partner, coach check-in, public commitment
- You're not relying on motivation, you're relying on not wanting to let someone down
- That's not weakness. That's strategy.

The Long Game

A season is 8-10 months. You will NOT be motivated for all of it. The athletes who improve most aren't the most talented, they're the most consistent.

This Week's Action

Write down one value rowing connects to. Next time you don't feel like training, say out loud: "I don't feel motivated AND I value [X], so I'm going to [action]." Notice what happens.

SIMPLIFIED EVIDENCE LOG + EXAMPLES

Your Daily Log (3 Required Fields Only)

DATE: _____

1. What I executed well today (one specific action):

---

2. Pain Tolerance Check (after hard pieces only):

- Brain said stop at: _____
- Actually stopped at: _____
- Gap/learning: _____

3. One Takeaway:

Optional fields (add if helpful, skip if not):

- Split/time data: Target _____ / Actual _____
- Motivation level (1-10): _____
- Value I honored: _____
- Next practice focus: _____

What Good Reflection Actually Looks Like

❌ MEDIOCRE REFLECTION:

- **What I executed well:** "Felt pretty good"
- **Brain said stop:** "During the hard part"
- **Takeaway:** "It was hard"
- **Why this doesn't work:** No specific data for System 1 to process. Feelings don't recalibrate your automatic brain.

✓ GOOD REFLECTION:

- **What I executed well:** "Maintained 1:52 split through final 500m of 2k even when legs burned"
- **Brain said stop:** "At 1200m mark, said 'you can't hold this'"
- **Actually stopped:** "Completed full 2k at target"
- **Takeaway:** "Stop signal arrived 800m before actual limit. My brain's alarm is miscalibrated, it fires early."
- **Why this works:** Specific, measurable, creates undeniable evidence that System 1 must process.

✓ ANOTHER GOOD EXAMPLE:

- **What I executed well:** "Showed up and completed warmup despite motivation 3/10"
- **Takeaway:** "I can act even when I don't feel motivated. Showing up is the skill I'm building."
- **Why this works:** Lowers the bar appropriately. Honoring values counts as evidence.

✓ EXAMPLE WHEN YOU ACTUALLY HIT YOUR LIMIT:

- **Brain said stop:** "At 1600m, form breaking, gasping, seeing spots"
- **Actually stopped:** "At 1650m, couldn't maintain form safely"
- **Takeaway:** "That was actually 100%, not just a loud signal. Now I know what my true limit feels like vs. 85% + alarm."
- **Why this works:** Learning to distinguish signals from limits IS the skill. This is valuable data.

Instructions

- Fill out within 30 minutes of finishing practice
- Be specific: "Maintained 1:52 split" not "rowed okay"
- Lower the bar for "what went well" – showing up counts
- If you can't find anything you did well, talk to your coach (might need programming adjustments)
- Review weekly to see patterns

PRE-RACE/PIECE MENTAL CHECKLIST

The 5-Minute Protocol

(Laminate this or save as phone wallpaper)

☐ NOTICE dread/doubt

Don't fight it. "My brain is doing the thing. That's what brains do."

☐ RECALL evidence

One specific time I've done this before:

☐ COMMIT to process

Not outcome. What's my execution focus?

Technical cue: _____

☐ IDENTIFY first stroke focus

What am I doing stroke 1-10?

☐ ANCHOR to rhythm

"This stroke. Next stroke. This stroke."

☐ CHECK values

Why does this matter to me today?

Key reminder: You don't need to feel ready. You need to be committed.

VALUES IDENTIFICATION EXERCISE

Connecting to Your "Why"

Step 1: Remember a Real Moment

Think of a specific day when you trained even though you really didn't want to. You showed up anyway.

That day was: _____

You showed up because: _____

That reveals you value: _____

Step 2: Name Your Primary Values

From your story above, what matters most? Pick 1-2:

My primary values in rowing:

1. _____
2. _____

Step 3: Common Values (if you need prompts)

Circle any that resonate:

- Discipline
- Being part of something bigger than myself
- Pushing my limits
- Growth/mastery
- Teamwork
- Proving something to myself
- Mental toughness
- Physical challenge
- Belonging
- Excellence
- Overcoming adversity
- Other: _____

Step 4: Create Your Commitment Statement

"I don't feel motivated today AND I value _____, so I'm going to _____."

Example: "I don't feel motivated today AND I value being a reliable teammate, so I'm going to show up and complete the warmup."

Step 5: Review Weekly

Your values might shift over a season, that's normal. Update as needed.

How this week's training connects to my values:

EMERGENCY RESET PROTOCOL

When Everything Falls Apart

Use this when: major setback, mid-season crisis, injury, poor race result, or you're spiraling

STEP 1: ZOOM OUT

Name what happened (facts only, no story)

What actually occurred?

Strip out: "I'm terrible," "I'll never," "Everyone thinks"
Keep in: Times, splits, observable events

Facts: _____

STEP 2: SEPARATE SIGNAL FROM TRUTH

My brain is saying: _____

The evidence shows: _____

Are these the same? Usually not.

STEP 3: SMALLEST NEXT ACTION

What's ONE thing I can control right now?

Not "fix everything." Not "have a great race tomorrow."
Right now, in the next hour, what's controllable?

My next action: _____

Do that. Then reassess.

STEP 4: CALL IN SUPPORT

Who can I talk to in the next 24 hours?

- Coach: ☐

- Teammate: ☐
- Sports psych: ☐
- Trusted friend: ☐
- Family: ☐

You don't have to fix this alone.

STEP 5: REVIEW YOUR WHY

Look at your values exercise. Do they still matter?

If YES: What's one action that honors them?

If NO: That's important data. Maybe rowing doesn't align with your values anymore, and that's worth exploring with someone you trust.

If UNSURE: Give it 48 hours. Reassess when less emotional.

REMEMBER:

One bad piece/day/week doesn't erase 15 good ones.

The Automatic Brain might panic and say "all the progress is gone."

The Thinking Brain can look at the actual pattern:

- Review your evidence log
- Check your monthly assessment
- Look at the trend line, not the single point

This moment feels huge. In two weeks, it'll be one data point.

Not minimizing your pain, acknowledging perspective.

You've survived 100% of your bad training days so far.

⚠️ CRITICAL:

If this crisis involves injury or burnout: Stop. Rest. Recover. No amount of mental skills training fixes physical breakdown. Talk to your coach about adjusting the plan.

TROUBLESHOOTING FAQ

Common Questions and Reality Checks

Q: What if I reflect and realize I actually WAS at my limit?

A: That's valuable data too. Now you know what true 100% feels like vs. what 85% + loud signal feels like. Over time, you'll get better at distinguishing between them. The goal isn't to always push past, it's to know the difference.

Q: What if the evidence log makes me feel worse because I can't find things I did well?

A: Lower the bar. "Showed up" counts. "Maintained form for first 500m" counts. "Completed the warmup" counts. You're looking for actions you controlled, not perfection. If you're truly struggling to find anything, talk to your coach – you might need programming adjustments or additional support.

Q: How do I know if I'm building discipline or just being stubborn about a bad training plan?

A: Check with your coach. This framework assumes your training plan is appropriate. Discipline = executing a sound plan despite not feeling like it. Stupidity = ignoring injury signals or overtraining. Key difference: Are you recovering? Are you getting stronger over weeks? If no, adjust the plan, not just your mindset.

Q: What if my doubt comes back after I thought I'd "fixed" it?

A: You didn't break anything. Old patterns resurface under extreme stress, that's normal brain behavior. You haven't lost progress; you're just in a high-stress moment. The new pattern you built is still there. Use your tools (evidence log, defusion, process focus) and it'll come back online.

Q: This feels like a lot of work on top of actual training. Do I have to do all of it?

A: No. Start with the "First Two Weeks" protocol. The 3-question reflection is the highest-leverage tool – if you do nothing else, do that. Add other tools as needed. This isn't homework; it's a toolkit. Use what helps.

Q: What if my teammates think this mental stuff is "soft" or make fun of it?

A: You don't need to announce it. Do your reflection privately. But if it comes up: the best athletes in every sport do this work. It's not soft, it's strategic. You wouldn't skip physical training; why skip mental training? Your results will speak for themselves.

Q: How long before I see results?

A: Depends on the skill:

- **Pain tolerance:** Noticeable shifts around 8-12 hard pieces with reflection
- **Confidence:** 2-3 weeks of evidence logging before System 1 starts updating
- **Consistency:** Immediate (you either show up or don't), but automaticity takes 4-6 weeks

Don't expect linear progress. You'll have breakthroughs and setbacks. Focus on the trend over weeks, not day-to-day.

Q: What if I try this and it doesn't work?

A: Define "doesn't work." Are you doing the reflection piece, or just the action? Most failures happen because people skip the reflection – that's where the automatic brain actually learns. If you're doing full protocol for 4+ weeks with zero change, talk to a sports psychologist. You might need individualized support, and that's fine.

Q: Can I use this for other sports or life areas?

A: Absolutely. The principles (Automatic/Thinking Brain, recalibration through experience, values-based action) apply anywhere. Adjust the specifics to your context.

COACH QUICK START GUIDE

5 Critical Things Coaches Need to Know

1. Change the Post-Practice Question

Instead of: "How'd it feel?"

Try:

- "Where did you notice the stop signal today?"
- "What's one thing you executed well?"
- "Did your brain's prediction match what actually happened?"

Why: This reinforces the reflection protocol and shifts focus from feelings to data.

---

2. Give Feedback That Builds System 1 Confidence

Less effective: "You're so talented!" or "Great job!"

More effective:

- "You maintained your splits through the last 500 – that's measurable progress."
- "Two weeks ago you backed off here. Today you didn't. Your automatic brain is learning."
- "Look at your splits from last month vs. today. That's evidence you can't dismiss."

Why: Specific, action-based feedback gives System 1 concrete data to process.

---

3. Use Skills-Based Language (Not Character-Based)

Avoid: "You're mentally weak," "You just need to be tougher," "Winners don't quit"

Instead: "Your automatic brain is still calibrating," "You're learning to distinguish signals from truth," "Let's build the skill of pushing through"

Why: Character-based language triggers shame and defensiveness. Skills-based language creates a growth mindset and removes moral judgment from struggle.

4. Watch for These Red Flags

Athletes who need professional support beyond coaching:

- Persistent negative self-talk that doesn't respond to evidence
- Complete avoidance of hard pieces or sudden performance drops
- Social withdrawal from team
- Comments about worthlessness extending beyond rowing
- Disordered eating behaviors or exercise compulsion
- Signs of anxiety/depression: sleep issues, appetite changes, loss of interest in activities

Action: Private conversation, express concern, refer to sports psychologist or counselor. Don't try to "coach through" mental health issues.

---

5. This Framework Assumes Appropriate Programming

If athletes are using these tools consistently with no improvement, check:

- Is the training load appropriate?
- Are they recovering adequately?
- Are they actually at capacity vs. hearing loud signals?

Mental skills training cannot fix overtraining or inadequate recovery.

Quick Integration Ideas

- Dedicate 5-10 minutes post-practice for team reflection
- Share this guide with the whole team
- Have athletes share evidence logs weekly (opt-in, not mandatory)
- Invite sports psych professionals for team workshops

For full coach integration strategies, see Team/Coach Integration Guide.

COMMON FAILURE MODES

If You're Doing This for 4+ Weeks With No Progress, Check:

❌ Failure Mode 1: Avoiding the Hard Pieces

The problem: You're doing the reflection, but only on medium-intensity work.

The fix: System 1 only recalibrates through actual discomfort. You need 15-20 genuinely hard pieces. If you're avoiding intensity, talk to your coach about why.

❌ Failure Mode 2: Being Too Vague in Reflection

The problem: "Felt hard" isn't data. "Rowed okay" isn't evidence.

The fix: Review the examples in the Evidence Log section. Get specific: times, splits, stroke counts, form cues executed.

❌ Failure Mode 3: Skipping the Reflection

The problem: You're doing hard pieces but not writing anything down or thinking about the three questions.

The fix: Reflection is where System 1 learns. Action alone isn't enough. Set a timer, spend 2 minutes within 30 minutes of finishing practice.

❌ Failure Mode 4: Overtraining

The problem: You're pushing through genuine injury signals or inadequate recovery.

The fix: This framework cannot override physical breakdown. If you're not recovering between sessions, not getting stronger over weeks, or ignoring pain that's different from discomfort, adjust your training load, don't just add more mental toughness.

❌ Failure Mode 5: Fighting the Thoughts

The problem: You're trying to eliminate doubt/dread rather than acting despite it.

The fix: The goal isn't to silence your automatic brain. It's to perform anyway. "I can have this thought AND row well" is the target, not "I will never doubt again."

❌ Failure Mode 6: Only Tracking Outcomes

The problem: You're only logging race results or PR attempts, not daily execution.

The fix: Process metrics you control (stroke rate, form cues, showing up) build confidence faster than outcome metrics you don't fully control (who else shows up, weather, equipment).

❌ Failure Mode 7: Doing This Alone When You Need Support

The problem: You're struggling with mental health issues beyond normal training anxiety.

The fix: This guide addresses performance psychology, not clinical issues. If you're experiencing persistent anxiety, depression, trauma responses, or disordered eating, work with a sports psychologist or therapist.

Still Not Working?

If you've ruled out all seven failure modes and you're still stuck after 4-6 weeks of consistent practice:

Consider working with a sports psychologist for individualized support. This framework is a starting point, not a replacement for personalized guidance when needed.

TEAM/COACH INTEGRATION GUIDE

Post-Practice Reflection Prompts

Instead of: "How'd it feel?"

Try:

- "Where did you notice the stop signal today?"
- "What's one thing you executed well?"
- "Did your brain's prediction match what actually happened?"

Why: This reinforces the reflection protocol and shifts focus from feelings to data.

Feedback That Builds System 1 Confidence

Less effective: "You're so talented!" or "Great job!"

More effective:

- "You maintained your splits through the last 500, that's measurable progress."
- "Two weeks ago you backed off here. Today you didn't. Your automatic brain is learning."
- "Look at your splits from last month vs. today. That's evidence you can't dismiss."

Why: Specific, action-based feedback gives System 1 concrete data to process.

Language: Skills-Based vs. Character-Based

Avoid: "You're mentally weak," "You just need to be tougher," "Winners don't quit"

Instead: "Your automatic brain is still calibrating," "You're learning to distinguish signals from truth," "Let's build the skill of pushing through"

Why: Character-based language triggers shame and defensiveness. Skills-based language creates a growth mindset and removes moral judgment from struggle.

Red Flags: When Athletes Need Additional Support

Watch for:

- Persistent negative self-talk that doesn't respond to evidence
- Complete avoidance of hard pieces or sudden performance drops
- Social withdrawal from team
- Comments about worthlessness extending beyond rowing
- Disordered eating behaviors or exercise compulsion
- Signs of anxiety/depression: sleep issues, appetite changes, anhedonia

Action: Private conversation, express concern, refer to sports psychologist or counselor. Don't try to "coach through" mental health issues.

Team Culture Suggestions

Normalize mental skills training:

- Dedicate 5-10 minutes post-practice for reflection
- Share this guide with the whole team
- Have athletes share their evidence logs weekly (opt-in, not mandatory)
- Invite sports psych professionals for team workshops

Address comparison culture:

- Post times anonymously or in ranges
- Celebrate individual progress, not just absolute performance
- Explicitly discuss comparison trap in team meetings

Build accountability structures:

- Training partners check in on each other's process goals (not just outcomes)
- Weekly value statements: "This week I'm rowing for [value]"

Integration with Training Plans

During plateau phases:

- Remind athletes about invisible adaptation

- Shift focus to process metrics they control
- Increase frequency of reflection check-ins

Before major competitions:

- Use the pre-race mental checklist as team protocol
- Normalize pre-race anxiety as brain doing its job
- Focus on preparation evidence, not outcome predictions

After poor performances:

- Facilitate emergency reset protocol
- Separate facts from story in team debrief
- Identify controllables for next opportunity

Coach Self-Check

Are you modeling these concepts?

- Do you admit when you're uncertain rather than projecting false confidence?
- Do you reflect on your coaching decisions and adjust based on data?
- Do you act from values (athlete development) even when you don't feel motivated?
- Do you show athletes that struggle is part of growth, not evidence of inadequacy?

Athletes learn more from what you do than what you say.

For Athletes: How to Talk to Your Coach About This

If you want to integrate these concepts but your coach isn't familiar:

Frame it as: "I've been working on my mental training using this framework. Could we spend a few minutes after practice doing reflection on where my brain signaled stop vs. where I actually stopped? I think it would help me recalibrate faster."

Not: "You need to read this and change how you coach."

Most coaches will support self-directed mental skills work if you present it as a supplement to, not replacement for, their coaching.

MONTHLY SELF-ASSESSMENT

4-Week Check-In

MONTH: _____

Pain Tolerance Progress

Pieces completed at target intensity: _____ / _____

Noticeable improvement in:

Still struggling with:

Biggest learning about my capacity:

Confidence Progress

Evidence log entries completed: _____

Most meaningful piece of evidence this month:

Comparison trap frequency: More / Same / Less

How my self-talk has changed:

Consistency Progress

Practices completed: _____ / _____

Times I acted despite low motivation: _____

Most effective strategy for showing up:

Process metrics I'm tracking:

- ___
- ___
- ___

Integration

Which presentation concepts am I using most?

☐ Pain tolerance protocols
☐ Confidence building
☐ Motivation/consistency tools

What's working best:

What I'm still figuring out:

One thing I'll focus on next month:

Coach check-in notes:

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books

For the science behind these concepts:

- *Peak Performance* by Brad Stulberg & Steve Magness
    - Why stress + rest = growth
    - How elite performers train their minds

For defusion and values-based action:

- *The Confidence Gap* by Russ Harris
    - Practical ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) techniques
    - How to act despite fear/doubt

For building consistency systems:

- *Atomic Habits* by James Clear
    - How habits form and how to build them
    - Identity-based behavior change

For understanding System 1/System 2:

- *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman
    - The research behind automatic vs. deliberate thinking
    - Dense but foundational

Podcasts

- Finding Mastery with Michael Gervais
- At the Thousand with Kevin Leslie

When to Seek Professional Support

Consider working with a sports psychologist if:

- You're using these tools consistently for 6+ weeks with no progress
- You're experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression that extend beyond training

- You have a history of disordered eating or exercise compulsion
- You're dealing with trauma that surfaces during training
- You need individualized support beyond this framework

This is not a weakness. This is taking your mental health and training seriously.

FINAL REMINDERS

These Are Skills, Not Personality Traits

- You're not "mentally weak" or "lacking discipline" or "not confident."
- You have automatic patterns that were trained, usually accidentally, through past experiences.
- Those patterns are trainable. Just like your stroke.

Start Small

Don't try to implement everything at once.

Use the "First Two Weeks" protocol:

- Week 1: 3-question reflection after hard pieces
- Week 2: Add daily evidence log
- Week 3: Integrate values check-in
- Week 4: Review and adjust

Build the habit of reflection first. Everything else follows.

This Takes Time

- ~15-20 hard pieces to recalibrate pain tolerance
- 2-3 weeks of evidence logging for confidence shifts
- 4-6 weeks for consistency to feel automatic

You're rewiring automatic responses. That's slower than learning a new technical skill, but it's permanent once established.

Regression Is Normal

Under extreme stress, old patterns will resurface.

That doesn't mean you've lost progress. It means you're human.

The new pattern is still there. Use your tools, and it'll come back online.

You Don't Have to Do This Alone

- Work with teammates
- Check in with your coach
- Seek professional support if needed
- Share your evidence log with someone you trust

Mental training, like physical training, benefits from community and accountability.

This Framework Assumes:

- Your training plan is appropriate (not overtraining)
- You're recovering adequately (sleep, nutrition, rest)
- You're injury-free or managing injuries appropriately
- Your goals are yours, not someone else's

If any of those aren't true, address them first. Mental skills can't override physical breakdown or misaligned values.

The Point Isn't Perfection

The point is:

- Slightly better pain tolerance over time
- Gradually more confidence built on evidence
- More consistent action aligned with your values

Small improvements, compounded over a season, create massive change.

CONTINUE YOUR MENTAL TRAINING

You now have the tools, frameworks, and protocols to systematically build pain tolerance, confidence, and consistency. The next step is implementation.

Work With David

Individual Coaching
Personalized mental performance coaching tailored to your specific goals and challenges. One-on-one guidance to accelerate your progress.

Team Programs
Build collective focus, resilience, and mental toughness across your entire roster. Long-term programs designed for competitive rowing teams.

Workshops
Interactive sessions teaching practical mental skills. Perfect for teams, clubs, or coaching conferences.

Speaking & Media
Engaging presentations on sport psychology and mental performance for teams, clubs, podcasts, and events.

Explore all services →

Free Resources

Take the Rowing Intensity Quiz
Are you Fire, Ice, or Flow? Discover your natural intensity style and get personalized strategies.
Take the quiz →

Read the Blog
Articles on sport psychology, neuroscience, and practical mental training strategies for rowers.
Visit the blog →

Row360 Contributions
Expert insights on mental performance published in Row360 magazine.
Read articles →

Connect

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- @DavidSchary
- linkedin.com/in/davidschary

Want to schedule a consultation? Let's connect: davidschary.com/lets-chat

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SHARE THIS GUIDE

If this guide helped you, **the best way to support this work is to share it with one teammate, coach, or athlete who could benefit.** No email required, no barriers – just pass it along.

Mental skills training works better when it's normalized and discussed openly.

Questions? Feedback? Success stories?

I'd love to hear how you're using these tools. Reach out anytime:

david@davidschary.com

Remember: Elite performance isn't about never struggling. It's about having systems for when you do.

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