

PLAY MAGIC POKER

Dr Stephen Simpson drops into the WPT Poker Academy this month to share the seven proven mind secrets that every player needs to know to improve their game

Is professional poker a hobby, game, sport or business? It can be all of these things, but without question it is a huge industry.

For some players, poker is a part-time job played out online. For others it involves long hours and much travel, sometimes seven days a week. Irrespective of where you fit in this spectrum, you owe it to yourself to give yourself the best chance of winning more than your share of hands and all the fame and fortune that follows.

If I played poker for a living, I'd soon be sleeping on the streets. Fortunately I have skills in other areas. They include understanding how our brain works and how to supercharge its performance.

I use these skills as a mind coach and my clients include some of the world's elite poker players. They know the importance of maximising every possible edge, and this includes developing their mental game.

If you play poker, you should be doing the same. The following seven proven mind secrets can form the foundation that underpins all of your other strengths – and guess what? They work pretty well in all other areas of life too.

MAGIC TIP 1: CREATE MASSIVE CONFIDENCE

There are several ways to increase your confidence and self-esteem, but this one can be extremely effective. Make this commitment to yourself, write it down and then say it out loud with conviction: "From this moment forward I will remember every good thing that happens to me."

When something good happens to you, wallow in the pleasure for a moment or two before allowing the memory to slip into your unconscious mind. If you do this several times a day for a month, there will be a change in your brain chemistry and outlook on life. You will notice the difference, but those closest to you will notice it more.

When you have one of these pleasurable experiences, make sure that the memory is easy to retrieve by associating it with a physical anchor. This should be a small gesture that is easy to remember. It should be discreet, but most importantly, it should feel right to you. Adopt this practise for a month and the chances are you will continue to do so in the future without thinking, thus recalling how lucky you are.

MAGIC TIP 2: PLAY WITH THE BEST OBJECTIVES

Ideally you should have one overarching goal in life at any time. I suggest that you take some time to decide what this goal might be. Although monetary goals are great, they risk putting pressure on you, which will only inhibit your performance. Remind yourself that your goal is the result of doing other things that you can control.

Once you have decided on a goal, the more different ways you can remind yourself of it each day, the more successful you are likely to be. Examples include writing the goal on a post-it note and fixing it to the bathroom mirror or using the goal as a screensaver on your computer.

The more places you can think of to display your goal, the more likely you are to achieve it. I advise clients to write their goal on a piece of paper and put it in their pocket so they can always retrieve it. Keep in mind that writing is the doing part of thinking – and this creates a powerful connection to your unconscious mind.

MAGIC TIP 3: DEAL WITH DISTRACTIONS

Poker requires enormous stamina, especially during live events. Your brain is like a sponge. It can absorb a huge amount of information, but once it is saturated, it leaks. Restrict the flow of unwanted information – especially the distractions – so that you can sharpen your focus on the few things that really matter.

There are many distractions that compete for a player's attention including friends, music and social media and how they deal with them has a huge effect on their results. Another major distraction is swaps, where players agree to invest in each other for a share of their winnings. Understand the statistical argument for reducing your variance, but if you truly believe you are a top poker player, there is only one player you need to support at the table – and that is you.

Try to create a bubble at the table that nobody and nothing enters without your permission. By doing this, you'll conserve energy for what counts: winning one hand at a time.

MAGIC TIP 4: LIVING IN THE NOW

If you are thinking of a mistake you made five minutes ago, these thoughts will take you away from your peak performance zone. Similarly, thoughts about the future and what you will do with your prize money are likely to ensure that you seize defeat from the jaws of victory. So what are the secrets of staying in the present and how can you use them to increase your performance?

I worked with Chris Moorman just before he won the L.A. Poker Classic. Chris was probably surprised by some of the things we talked about, especially when I told him that he was going to stop playing poker with the objective of winning money! I told him it was more important to play for fun with no concern for the past or future.

This is otherwise known as living in the now. I gave Chris the mantra: "Focus on process, and the results will take care of

themselves," and he embraced it. He has never played just for money, but is far more interested in the life choices it provides.

There are many things in poker that you cannot control, so don't waste time worrying about them. Instead, list seven daily processes that would define a successful day. Evaluate these processes at the end of the each day and ask yourself if you've achieved them all perfectly. If you have, be sure to give yourself a reward.

MAGIC TIP 5: IGNITE YOUR MIND WITH MEDITATION

Peak performance in poker comes only from a focused mind. People talk about techniques such as meditation, hypnosis, prayer, yoga or visualisation, but these methods all aim to achieve the same thing: they help us to stay in the present by focusing on our immediate experience.

Culture and personal choice dictate which technique is likely to be the most appropriate for you, but one thing is for sure – it will be very difficult to develop a focused mind without adopting one of these techniques or a similar alternative.

Hearthmath, hypnosis and havening are my preferred meditation techniques. These methods are all extremely effective, but only when used with professional instruction. I practise these techniques every day and use them very successfully with my clients too. You would be foolish not to at least give them your utmost consideration.

MAGIC TIP 6: MAKE YOUR OWN LUCK

Several players have asked me for advice about spotting 'tells'. My answer often surprises them. I tell them if they don't think about them and just trust their intuition, they will soon see positive results.

You need to become more observant, notice more opportunities and have the courage to seize them – and you can only do this by developing a quiet mind. When your mind is quiet, your intuition can speak and be heard.

Intuition, like any other skill, can only be improved with practice. Poet and author, Robert Graves, knew its value when he said: "Intuition is the supra-logic that cuts out all the routine processes of thought and leaps straight from the problem to the answer."

The lesson here is clear. Open your mind to as many sensory signals as you can and search for any clue relevant to your situation. The only way you can do this is by putting all of your attention in the present. Trust your intuition and instincts, but always ask yourself, "what's the risk?" This is the safety net, because while our instincts are often proved correct, there are occasions when they can be disastrously misplaced.

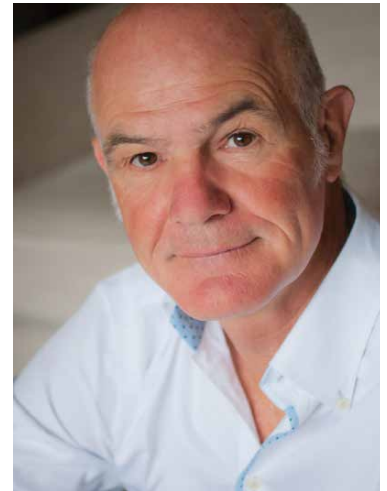
MAGIC TIP 7: INVEST IN THE BEST COACH YOU CAN FIND

Just about every successful poker player or athlete has a coach. Want to know why? Because you never listen to the voice in your head, even when you know it's right. For this reason, we all need a coach. Somebody we respect, somebody who does not pull punches and somebody who will shake us out of our comfort zone.

A brilliant coach does not say much, but the few words they do will be carefully chosen. They will almost certainly be hypnotic, even though both coach and client may be totally unaware of this. The coach and their words will be the catalyst that ignites your success.

They will impart mindfulness, staying in the present, letting go, getting out of the way and adopting neutral thinking.

The right coach is the one who will explain what you need to know, not what you want to hear. A coach who understands that peak performance demands a balance of physical, technical, mental and spiritual qualities. A coach that enjoys success in their life and the lives of their clients. Be sure to choose yours carefully. ◀



ABOUT DR. STEPHEN SIMPSON

Dr. Stephen Simpson is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and an Elite Performance and Confidence expert. He regularly appears on TV and radio and his clients include professional poker players such as Chris Moorman. Dr. Simpson is also a bestselling author, presenter and columnist whose articles feature regularly in a number of leading newspapers and magazines. Further details can be found on his website <http://www.drstephensimpson.com> and he also welcomes email questions from readers. Contact him at doc@drstephensimpson.com.