

# CLEAR YOUR MIND TO CLEAR THE WAY: MANAGING THE MOMENT

Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Mark Burrell

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**R**oute clearance missions can range from a few hours to many days. It is unlikely you can stay completely focused for an entire mission, but you can learn to focus for a short duration many times during the task. This article provides some tools to help increase your ability to manage the moment. The presented method, created by Dr. Ken Ravizza, adapts a systematic approach to taking one thing at a time. Ravizza's method follows six steps to help you "be where you need to be when you need to be there." This adaptation is about helping you to perform well consistently by refocusing for short periods of time. Ravizza's process is known as the *Rs*.

## **Your Attitude: Your Decision**

**B**efore we get to the *Rs*, let's examine attitude. You control your attitude. You can either decide to commit to the mission and be the best improvised explosive device (IED) spotter possible, or you can roll with the punches and hope that you find something or that you don't get blown up. It's your decision. To help with that choice, look at your mission. Why are you doing what you're doing? It may be stated in the patrol brief's mission statement. If not, determine the purpose of going out. It may be to clear a road in order to move supplies or help another unit move safely to an objective. If you ask your leader, ask in a way that doesn't question his or her decisionmaking, but rather clarifies your purpose. Ultimately, you use your specialized knowledge and equipment to protect others so that they can perform their missions.

## **Responsibility**

**T**he fundamental component of the *Rs* process is *responsibility*. Learn what you can control—then take the responsibility to act appropriately. As a

member of a route clearance team, you have a responsibility to yourself, your unit, and those following behind to both find IEDs and clear a path. You must maintain your personal weapon and protective equipment, night vision devices, and first aid kit. You have a responsibility to be on time and ready—which includes being mentally prepared—for each mission. Taking responsibility for your mental readiness means choosing a proactive method to control yourself so that you can consistently search effectively for IEDs. You may not find every IED, but wouldn't it be great if you found just one more?

Imagine yourself as a spotter searching for IEDs during a standard route clearance mission. Use the photo on page 49 to help you visualize a typical street. What distractions could be present? What thoughts can get in the way? What could keep you from focusing on the one task of finding an IED? Take a minute to write out a list of distractions. On this list, there are things you can control and things you can't. Cross off those things you cannot control, and focus on what you can control. Don't waste time and energy on things beyond your control. You probably notice that the only thing you can consistently control is yourself. You can control your behaviors, your thoughts, your emotions, and your attitude—and you must learn to be in control of yourself for high-level performance. In sports, self-control leads to body control, which leads to skill control (Figure 1, page 47). Think of the basketball player who turns the ball over and immediately reaches in and fouls the opponent. This is an example of someone who lost self-control and then couldn't maintain body or skill control. For those clearing a route, your skill is your ability to focus. Start by taking a slow, deep breath. The breath is a good indicator of whether or not you are in control. If you can breathe, you give yourself a chance to perform with a clear, calm, and focused mind.



Figure 2. Progression of control

## Simplifying the Rs Process

The Rs process is built around three components of *self-control*, *plan*, and *trust* (Figure 2):

- Gain or maintain *self-control* by recognizing where you are mentally and emotionally and where you need to be. Release any negative thoughts or tension and regroup.
- Transition to the *plan* step as you refocus on the task at hand and what is important right now.
- *Trust* in your ability to find IEDs by ensuring that you are ready and by responding as you search for IED indicators.

These three components are a simplified version of the Rs process, and you can substitute words of your own to help you remember it. West Point's football team, for example, uses the terms "clear-load-target" to help them remember to take one play at a time. For them, *clear* represents releasing the last play. They *load* the upcoming play and focus on it. *Target* is their word for executing the play by



Figure 3. The Rs Process

trusting their ability and responding with what they have.

## The Six-Step Rs Process

### Recognize

Learn to *recognize* where you are mentally and where you need to be. How do you recognize when you are not focused on searching for IEDs? Figure 3, page 48 lists some examples of physical, cognitive (thoughts), behavioral, and emotional indicators. Think back to playing a sport.

Did you ever tense up? What happened to your heart rate, focus, muscular tension, or thoughts? Did you play better or worse? If you can learn to be more aware of where you are and make adjustments to get you to where you need to be, you can learn to perform more consistently. Think about searching for IEDs. Do you simply look for a big box or artillery shell in the middle of the road? It isn't that obvious. You do, however, look for the indicators that an IED is present: a thin copper wire shimmering in the distance, disturbed dirt on the side of the road, an empty marketplace, or rubble piled up to create a choke point. In a similar way, you must become aware of the indicators that let you know when you are not in control of yourself. Once you've recognized where you are and where you need to be, you have two choices: *refocus* or *release*.

You can think about your ability to recognize your level of readiness as a traffic light (Figure 4, page 48). When the light is green, you go right on through with no reason to slow down. You do the same when you are performing well—you keep going with little thought or conscious effort. However, when the light turns yellow, you can speed up or slow down to stop. Many athletes speed up when they arrive at yellow light situations rather than gaining control by slowing down. Finally, when the light is red, you stop—or you could crash. Think of your performance in these terms. When do you have green, yellow, or red lights? What indicates that you have yellow or red lights? If you have a green light, keep on going! If you have yellow or red lights, you need to release the stress or negative thoughts and get control of yourself.

This process is ongoing. You must learn to check in regularly throughout the mission. For instance, you might consciously check in with yourself when you reach a checkpoint. You might do so every time your vehicle stops to interrogate a possible IED. You should always do so after an IED detonation or enemy attack. Where will you check in, and what is the first step in checking in? Can you breathe?

Physical indicators	Cognitive indicators	Behavioral and Emotional indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increased heart rate</li> <li>■ Increased respiration</li> <li>■ Increased body temperature</li> <li>■ Sweaty hands and feet</li> <li>■ Frequent urination</li> <li>■ Decreased saliva cottonmouth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Internal</li> <li>■ Negative</li> <li>■ Critical of others</li> <li>■ Forgetful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Anxious</li> <li>■ Angry</li> <li>■ Walking faster</li> <li>■ Depressed</li> <li>■ Yawning tired</li> <li>■ Accident prone</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Examples of Physical, Cognitive, Behavioral, and Emotional Indicators**

### Release

To manage the moment, you have to let go of past events that may distract you from the present. Many athletes have found physical cues or actions helpful in *releasing* their last play. After baseball players miss a swing, they might step out of the batter's box, undo and redo their gloves, and then step back in. For them, it's about playing pitch to pitch. For you, it's about searching for IEDs, checkpoint to checkpoint. Here are some ideas to help release distractions:

- Squeeze the event into the ball of your fist as tightly as possible. When you are ready, let it go.
- Take a deep breath, and blow it out. Take a few more breaths, and feel tension disappear as you exhale.
- Take off your gloves. Don't put them on until you are ready to focus again.
- Talk to those around you. Silence can indicate that a person has become internally focused; speaking to people near you can help.

to see a ball going 90+ miles per hour, but rather to spot anything that indicates an IED.

### Regroup

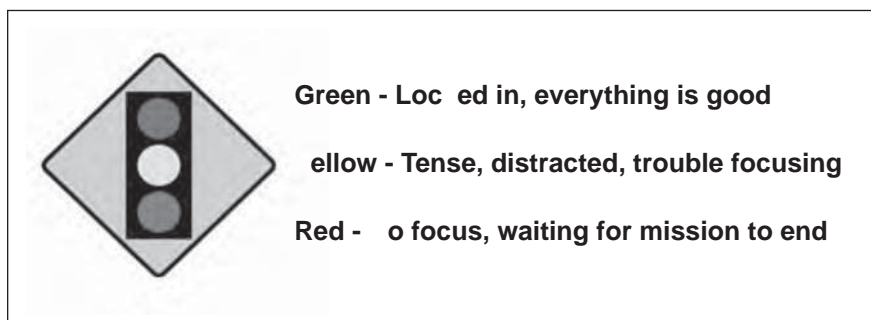
Once you release, you need to *regroup*. To do this, simultaneously take a slow, deep breath and pull your head and chest up. Lengthen your spine, and let your shoulders lower. (We tend to pull our shoulders to our ears when we are stressed.) Let your feet feel loose. Try it now to see how it feels; regrouping is a way of changing your body to a more confident posture and preparing for whatever comes next. When you act confident, you feel confident, and confidence is important when searching for IEDs as well as playing sports. Watch the quarterbacks who have a bad set of downs. Inspect their body language: The less-confident ones may hang their heads down. If they maintain that posture, they probably won't do well on their next outing.

Along with changing your posture, using positive self-talk can help you regroup. We all talk to ourselves throughout the day, and positive self-talk helps us concentrate in a purposeful way. Here are some examples of positive language to help you regroup:

- Let's go!
- I've got this!
- I will find you!
- Bring it on!

Another tool to help you regroup is to use a focal point—a visual trigger that reminds you to be confident. Some baseball players use the tip of the foul pole to remind them to breathe, to get their head up and chest out, and to

play with confidence. Several pitchers have written in their hats certain words that they read after a bad pitch, when they need to regroup. You might use a small dot on your watch or words you've written on the inside of the vehicle.



**Figure 2. Levels of Readiness**

This list is not all-inclusive, but it may give you some ideas. Do not keep stress inside as you search for and clear IEDs. Part of what the hitter does in baseball is try to see the ball clearly at the release point. You aren't attempting





**A street scene suggesting potential distractions**

### Refocus

Now it is time to focus on the next part of the mission. What do you have to do right now, and what is the plan? The football team focuses on the next play call—but in looking for IEDs, you must *refocus* on the road ahead. What do you know about the next portion of the road? Is it dirt, gravel, asphalt, urban, or other—and how does that change where you need to look? Do you need to scan the horizon for possible enemy forces? Once again, this is a proactive approach to managing the moment and becoming more effective at searching for IEDs.

### Ready


How do you know that you are *ready*? Quickly scan your body, and ask yourself if you can breathe. If the answer is yes, you are ready. If not, start the process over, and make yourself ready. You don't have the choice to step off the mound or take yourself out of the game, but you have some tools to help make yourself more ready. A slow, steady breath is a good indicator that you're in control. If you're in control of yourself, there is a good chance that you can control your performance and are ready to search for IEDs.

### Respond

As stated before, the *Rs* process helps to get you in the right mindset for taking one thing at a time. Part of the process is learning to trust your ability to execute a task. You trust that you're properly prepared and will *respond* accordingly. You are in control of you, and now you just search—with the one responsibility to speak up when you spot a possible IED or when you have the sense that one

is present. It may be your first combat mission, and you're unsure; but you must speak up—even if you cannot explain why you think there is an IED. Do not second-guess your ability; lives depend on your speaking up.

### Summary

**N**ow that you have learned a method to help you better manage the moment, you must practice this process during training and throughout missions, since it requires repetition to become effective. Be patient, and remember that reacting to a weapons malfunction or becoming proficient at a battle drill was not immediately easy but took practice and determination. Practice! 

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