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# Introduction

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Since Chris Moneymaker won the World Series Main Event in 2003, and set off the poker boom, Texas Hold 'Em and other forms of poker have grown progressively harder and players increasingly more sophisticated. Even the most casual player has access to books, videos, and coaching these days. More serious players leave no stone unturned when it comes to increasing their edge because it is more difficult than ever to win large field tournaments. Virtually all poker players recognize the importance of psychology to being a winning player, but many consider their mental state to be a random factor over which they have little control. They may want to increase their motivation and mental toughness, but they don't know how. One of the main challenges for poker players is to maintain a positive mental state over long periods of time. How much would your results improve if you could concentrate better or if you had more confidence in your skills? What if you could reduce the amount of time you spend on tilt? How about being able to finally beat someone who has consistently gotten the best of you? Do you ever procrastinate when it comes to studying or doing hand reviews? What if I told you that you could remedy all of these issues (and more) by taking advantage of state of the art performance psychology methods – all of which are based on actual science? Would that pique your interest? If so, read on!

A few years ago, I developed and taught a university course on the psychology of poker. It was an unusual course, but a fun one for both me and my students. I took everything I know about sport psychology, neuropsychology, and positive psychology (courses I also teach and areas I practice

in) and showed students how it applied to poker. By putting the best ideas of all three fields together I came up with “positive poker.” I’ll give you a quick overview of the three fields next so you can have a better idea of the types of things you will be learning.

Positive psychology is a fairly new area of psychology, so you may not have heard of it. Positive psychology is the scientific and applied approach to uncovering people’s strengths and promoting their positive functioning. Positive psychologists help people live their lives in a way that makes them happier, less stressed, less anxious, and less depressed. The best thing about positive psychology is that it is based on clinical research and not just on theory. In other words, its primary goal is to help people to reach their highest potential by using scientifically sound principles.

Neuropsychology is the study of the structure and function of the brain as it relates to specific behaviors and psychological processes. Today, fascinating research is being conducted that is finally allowing us to understand more fully how the mind and the brain operate both on a cellular level and a social one. We now have good evidence that you can use your brain in specific ways to help you change. This may not sound too exciting to you, but I think once we get into the information, you will find the ideas very helpful. We no longer have to rely on old wives’ tales about what “might” work. Instead we now have at our disposal a solid menu of tips, tricks, and strategies that we can try out with confidence. We have gotten to the point where we can literally peer into the brain and watch it as it works!

Finally, sport and peak performance psychology has as its concern the psychological factors that influence participation and performance in competitive endeavors. All top competitors in sporting fields use sport psychology consultants, and poker players are starting to see the benefits, too. If you want to use a sport psychology consultant to improve your mental game, make sure they understand poker and be aware that many people call themselves sport psychology consultants or mental game coaches, but they have very little training in the field. Once you finish this book, you will have a very good idea about the kinds of topics that a good sport psychology consultant can help you with if you want to hire one.

Most poker experts agree that there are numerous psychological skills necessary to mastering your mental game and becoming a better player. Everything from using a proper learning strategy, to increasing mental toughness, to dealing with tilt is important to mastering poker. The purpose of this book is to show you a variety of ways in which you can increase your skills in all of those areas. The methods I'll be teaching in this book blend neuropsychological and positive psychology principles with sport and performance psychology applications. Every method I discuss in this book has been studied extensively by psychologists in competitive settings and has been shown to be effective for the majority of people. Because poker is an art and a science, it may take some trial and error on your part to find the right blend of applications to address your particular concerns and issues. Not every technique in this book will work for everybody. For this reason, I'll give you a variety of techniques and you can pick and choose the ones you would like to try. My goal is to empower you to improve your performances on the felt while also enriching your everyday life. It should not surprise you to learn that successful business people use many of the same techniques!

## **The Evolution of Positive Poker**

This book has been several years in the making. While I was working on my doctorate in psychology, I was introduced to poker by way of a friendly home game. I'm not going to lie to you, we were terrible, but I became really interested in the game. I bought all the books I could find and started playing as much as possible – which wasn't all that much, thanks to work and school. The more I studied and played, the more convinced I became that psychology was a key component to the game. I got involved in a Skype study group and I remember someone saying that the pros just know a few certain specialized things that the rest of us don't and that if we just knew those things, we could become elite players, too. I had my doubts about this, but being the scientist that I am, I designed a study to check it out. I had to do a dissertation anyway, so I decided to make it fun and interesting by recruiting elite poker players to interview. As a bonus, I figured that I might pick up a few secrets that would help my game! My dissertation was called *Peak Poker Performance: A Qualitative Case Study*,

and I asked the players about their opinions on and experiences with the most important psychological aspects of poker. I asked them about a myriad of psychological skills to see which they thought were important. I also questioned them about how they got to the top and stayed there. For a summary of the major findings, please see Appendix A, and if you would like to see a complete list of the questions I asked, see Appendix B.

Most people have only a vague awareness of the psychological principles that might help their game, but these expert players had a deep awareness of the role psychology has played in their success. I'm sure you will find what they had to say fascinating, so I'm including excerpts from the interviews in later chapters. In exchange for their participation, I promised them anonymity, so they will be referred to by pseudonyms. Let me give you a brief description of the players, all of whom I interviewed in 2011, prior to Black Friday.

## The Participants

### **Participant #1 – Don**

Don, a 43-year-old professional poker player, has amassed \$5.2 million dollars in career tournament earnings. He has been playing since 1994, and he emphasized the importance of bankroll management as well as learning the math behind the games. He considers himself to be a very analytical, mathematical player. He recently took second place in a \$50,000 buy-in mixed poker tournament against some of the world's best poker competition, and he has a WSOP bracelet.

### **Participant #2 – Sam**

Sam is a 27-year-old professional poker player who has \$1.5 million in career tournament earnings. He was introduced to poker as a child by his family members, and he fondly remembers playing against them in friendly home games. He transitioned into bigger games in college, and after graduating college he decided to play poker full time. He won an online world championship, and he considers a 12th place WSOP Main Event finish his best live accomplishment.

### **Participant #3 – Kent**

Kent, a 26-year-old professional player, has accumulated \$3.2 million in tournament earnings. He was introduced to the game while a freshman in high school by another young man who went on to become a poker champion as well. During high school, they played for very low stakes where the most won or lost was in the \$20 range. He strives to be a role model for his siblings, and says his greatest accomplishment is the ability to take care of his family. He is one of the few people I interviewed who did not complete college. He was simply making too much money playing poker to attend beyond one semester. After Black Friday, he gave up full-time poker, but still plays as his work schedule allows.

### **Participant #4 – Gary**

Gary has earned \$3.4 million playing poker tournaments, which is an accomplishment considering he is only 27 years old. He started playing the game at 4 years old when a sibling taught him to play five card draw. After graduating college, he decided to play professionally. He named his greatest accomplishment so far as a third place finish in a World Poker Tour (WPT) event. Notably, he minored in psychology while in college.

### **Participant #5 – Paul**

Paul, age 26, started playing in high school and transitioned to being a full-time poker player after finishing college. He has accumulated \$5.7 million in tournament wins thus far. He earned another seven figures in the year after I interviewed him. He graduated college with a finance degree and a psychology minor. Recently, he has had several notable finishes in \$10,000 buy-in events at the WSOP including one in 6-max and another in HORSE.

### **Participant #6 – Bob**

Bob, age 28, came to poker by playing with his father as a teenager using loose change as the spoils. Now he has earned \$1.6 million at poker tournaments and has the distinction of making the final tables at the first two WPT \$10,000 events he ever played. After college, Bob decided to play full time and has profited over six figures from 2005 to 2011. After Black Friday, he ceased playing poker full time.

### **Participant #7 – Chip**

Chip, 26, has amassed \$6.4 million dollars since he started playing professionally at 18. He has added another seven figures to his bank account since I interviewed him. He started playing a wide variety of card games when he was 8 years old. In his family playing cards is a family affair and even his 90-year-old grandmother plays! He reported his biggest accomplishment as being the number of tournaments he plays, which is probably the highest in the world.

### **Participant #8 – Pat**

Pat is 59 years old and has been playing poker for 31 years. Pat has earned a WSOP bracelet and was recently inducted into the Poker Hall of Fame. Additionally, Pat is a published poker author and has taught hundreds of people how to play.

## **Enter Jonathan Little**

One thing I learned from my interviews was that if I wanted to take my game to the next level, I was going to need some outside help. I decided that I would get serious about it after I finished my dissertation. By the end of 2011, I had graduated and I took some private coaching from Jonathan Little. I chose him because I liked his teaching style and he seemed to be very psychologically balanced. With his help I was able to make my first six figure score, and I confirmed my suspicion that he has a profound understanding of the psychological aspects of poker. There is no doubt that he knows what it takes to become, and stay, an elite player. On one of our coaching calls, I mentioned to him that I wanted to do a book on the psychology behind becoming an elite player. He told me he was very interested, and he even offered to help! My good fortune is your good fortune, and at the end of each chapter you will get to read how Jonathan uses the psychological principles outlined in this book to enhance and improve his own game. He will even reveal mistakes he has made in the past and how he has used psychological principles to correct them. There is no doubt in my mind that you will find his commentary interesting and useful.

## The Success Trifecta

The purpose of this book is to teach you how to increase your psychological awareness so that you can achieve and maintain your highest level of poker success.

Before we get to the specific principles of positive poker, I would like to share three prerequisites for success with you. You must possess these three traits, and if you don't it is unlikely that you will be able to make full use of the positive poker principles outlined in this book. The prerequisites are passion; a willingness to learn, change, and grow; and an open mind. If you do not have these, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to achieve elite poker status. Consider the following research on how to become a millionaire, and I think you will see why passion is so important to achieving success.

In the 1960s a psychologist named Srully Blotnick decided to follow 1,500 people in order to find out how people became financially successful. He contacted his participants over the years and surveyed them on a variety of topics. After 20 years, 1,067 people remained in the study and 83 of them had achieved millionaire status. He found that, without exception, the millionaires cited passion as their secret sauce. Passion allows you to be persistent and that will get you very far in poker and in life. As Blotnick described in his book *Getting Rich Your Own Way* (1982): "they had to find their work absorbing. Involving. Enthralling."

If you love poker, you are ahead of the game! When I interviewed Bob for my dissertation, he described a process that sounds very much like passion to me. He said,

*You have to immerse yourself completely. You can't get away with just playing. If you are not immersing yourself, not playing hundreds of thousands of hands and not watching training videos and reading articles, not discussing hands with your friends, not reviewing hands, you'll fall behind. You must live and breathe the game, because that's what other people are doing.*

It takes a pure love of the game to engage in all the training that it takes to become top tier, but if you are willing, the pay-off can be substantial in more ways than one.



## *Positive Poker*

Secondly, you must have a willingness to learn, change, and grow. As you go through this book, ask yourself:

- ♠ Am I willing to do whatever it takes to reach my highest poker potential?
- ♠ Am I willing to do things that may go against conventional wisdom?
- ♠ Am I willing to change my lifestyle?
- ♠ Am I willing to do my homework in order to raise my game to a higher level?
- ♠ Am I willing to persist, no matter how many obstacles get in my way, until I reach my goals?
- ♠ Am I willing to make personal sacrifices to become the best?
- ♠ Am I committed to giving this my all even though there is no guarantee of success?

The more you are willing to learn, change, and grow the more likely you will be to achieve the level of success you desire. It can be hard to change long-standing habits and most mental game problems are just that: bad habits. If you are willing, though, you have a shot.

Finally, I am going to ask you to keep an open mind. Many people are skeptical about psychology and how it can help them. This is in part because there are so many self-help “gurus” who espouse what amounts to unscientific garbage, which dilutes the confidence people have in psychology as a science. I will present findings from clinical research that support the strategies I am advising you to try and I will let you know of any limitations in the research. As you read each chapter, I hope that your confidence that scientific psychology can help you achieve your goals increases. At the end of the day, if you are willing to keep an open mind and try new things, the positive poker strategies discussed in this book have the potential to change your trajectory. Now let’s get to the strategies that I’m going to be outlining in great detail throughout the rest of this book.

## **Positive Strategies When Playing Poker**

### **Develop Talent and Expertise**

By now, nearly everyone has heard of the 10,000-hour rule: in order to become an expert you must put in 10,000 hours of practice. All the psychological tricks in the book will not work unless you have mastered the strategic aspects of poker. I cannot stress this principle enough to you – although it is a bit more complicated than simply putting in the time. We now have solid information about the ways in which the brains of experts differ from non-experts. In order to achieve elite status, you must use a training process that will literally restructure your brain for poker. The next two chapters are devoted to teaching you the neuroscience behind how expertise develops along with specific strategies that you can use to attain your highest possible level of talent. It is not enough to put in the hours. You must structure your learning in a specific way in order to achieve expert status.

### **Set Goals**

Setting goals is vitally important and all successful players set goals to help with focus and achievement. Sadly, there is a great deal of misinformation about how to set and achieve goals. Once you understand and implement the proper strategy for setting your goals, you should notice a dramatic increase in what you can accomplish both in poker and in life.

### **Maintain Self-Control**

Self-control is a critical factor in how much you win or lose in poker. Studies show that the two most important factors to success are intelligence and self-control. While it can be difficult to increase native intelligence appreciably, you can easily increase self-control if you know how (and follow through). Self-control determines if you will set and achieve goals, if you will be able to control your emotions, and how good a decision maker you are. People high in self-control are able to manage their impulses in order to get the results they are after. If you have trouble with things like tilt or procrastinating, then increasing your self-control is a good place to start, and there is an entire chapter devoted to teaching you how.

## **Be Motivated**

It should come as no surprise that the best poker players are high in motivation. If you increase your motivation, you will be able to stay in the game longer, deal with variance better, and keep improving even in the face of setbacks and disappointments. There are several ways that you can increase your motivation if it is low. You can also harness your motivation to help you get more of what you want.

## **Have Focus and Concentration**

Concentration is another key for poker success. What you focus on before and during your competitions can determine whether or not you give yourself the best chance at success. To do your best, you must learn to concentrate intently during games and it is important to focus on the process of making good decisions. You cannot worry too much about outcomes. Focusing on the action as it unfolds and responding correctly is one of the major keys to poker success.

## **Be Self-Confident**

Your level of self-confidence is an important determinant to how much you can accomplish. It takes self-confidence to initiate and stick with a self-improvement program, and how you perform at the table is determined to a great degree by your level of self-confidence. Being self-confident is so much more than just telling yourself “I am the best” and requires active steps to increase and maintain. Every successful player I interviewed was brimming with self-confidence.

## **Master Tilt**

No matter how much motivation, confidence, and talent you have, if you cannot master your emotions at the table, you are costing yourself money. The best players are able to control their emotions. Remember though, not all tilt is the result of anger. Some people lose emotional control when they become happy or excited. No matter your pattern of emotional control, chances are it can be improved.

## **Be Mentally Tough**

Mental toughness is akin to the holy grail of psychological traits that you can possess. If you are mentally tough, you will be able to deal with any situation no matter how difficult. You will be able to bounce back time af-

ter time. Learning how to be mentally tough is one of the most +EV things you can do for yourself.

### **Learn to Have Resilience and Joy**

Learning how to bounce back in troubling times is very important, but the best players are also able to take the time to enjoy their accomplishments. Dealing with the ups and downs of poker can be stressful, but if you learn to live in the moment and enjoy the ride, you will be a success no matter what.

## **Using Positive Poker**

You have no control over how the cards come down or how your opponents choose to play, but you do have control over your mind and how you choose to use it. One of the major appeals to poker is that anyone can win. There is a certain level of unpredictability, which can be exhilarating or frustrating depending on your mental state at the time. One of the main challenges for players is to be able to produce strong performances consistently. If you want to give yourself the best chance to win, work on your mental game. It will pay dividends for years to come.

In the following chapters, I will teach you how to develop these nine psychological principles. Once you have them down and are able to exhibit them consistently, you will be a force to be reckoned with. Each chapter is designed to flow into the next. If you work through the chapters in order, you will logically progress through all of the skills and get maximum benefit. Each chapter is interrelated and they build on each other. If there are any skills where you know you need improvement, then focus on those areas first. This will give you the biggest bang for your buck. Otherwise, you can work sequentially through the book. Even if you decide to read the chapters out of order, you will increase your mental skills. The most important aspect of the book is that you take action. Each chapter has tips and strategies that you can experiment with. Try them out and incorporate the ones that work for you into your daily life. If something does not work for you, skip it and move on to something else.

Finally, do not be afraid to seek out additional help. Get a poker coach if you can. Getting feedback is essential to improving your game, no matter who you are or how good you think your game is. A licensed counselor or psychologist who specializes in sport and peak performance psychology can be immensely useful – especially if you have trouble with depression, anxiety, anger or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or attention deficit disorder (ADD). Most of the techniques in this book have been shown to help people who suffer from those types of disorders, but a proper assessment by a licensed mental health professional is a must to make sure you are getting the most useful treatment. You will find a list of useful resources and references at the end of each chapter, which will help you learn more about psychology if you so choose. Finally, you can visit Jonathan’s training site ([www.floattheturn.com](http://www.floattheturn.com)) where I have posted additional mental training videos, and he, of course, has excellent training videos.

## **Jonathan’s Comments**

As a young adult, psychology always intrigued me. Before I quit college to become a professional poker player, I was majoring in psychology. I initially viewed poker as a game of wits, where if you knew what your opponent was likely to do before he did, you had the opportunity to get rich. I now broadly view psychology’s role in poker in two realms, at the table and away from the table.

As I progressed through my poker career and eventually beat the largest buy-in sit ‘n’ go tournaments, I almost forgot about psychology’s involvement in poker because of the short stacked nature of the game. I learned how to play like a robot, mindlessly grinding out a small profit. When I turned 21, I decided to test my luck in the high stake live tournaments. I quickly found out that if the stacks are relatively deep, playing like a robot becomes unprofitable. The math is still relevant, but if you know your opponents’ tendencies, you can drastically alter your strategy and crush him.

Away from the table, psychology determines who makes it as a poker player and who doesn’t. There are countless pitfalls you must avoid if you

want to make it in this turbulent world. If you have a major leak, like degenerate gambling or drugs, you will likely fail. If you lack the discipline to adhere to sound bankroll management, you will likely fail. If you refuse to prepare ahead of time before you show up to major tournaments, you will likely fail. Basically, if you do not treat poker with the respect it demands, you will fail.

This book will teach you how I, and countless other world class poker players, make a living at this complicated game. Poker is not about simply playing your cards in a fundamentally sound manner. If it was that easy, everyone would do it.