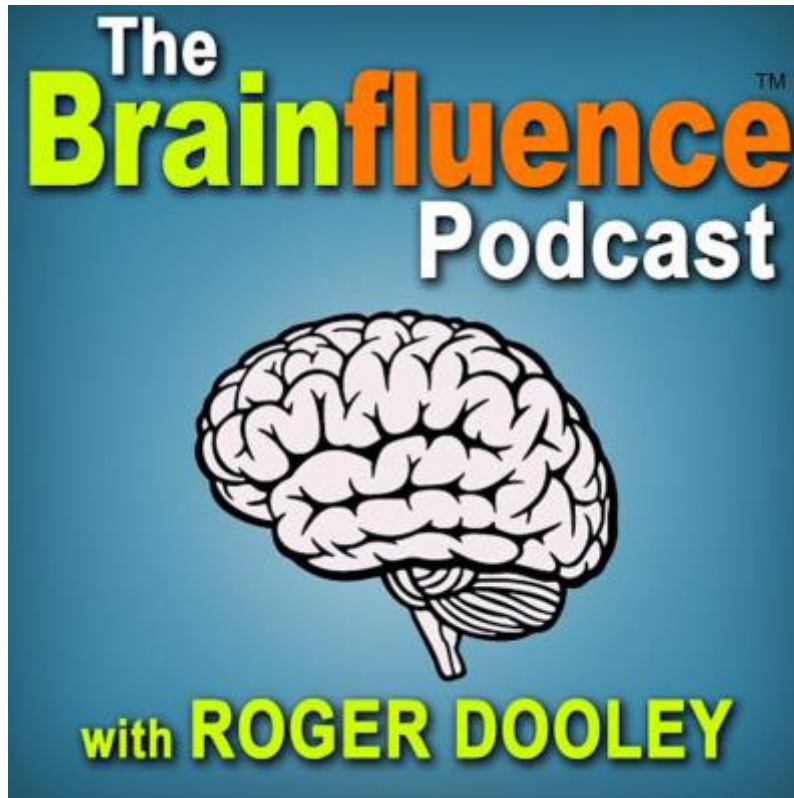


Psyched Up - The Science of Mental Preparation



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Roger Dooley

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Welcome to the Brainfluence Podcast with Roger Dooley, author, speaker and educator on neuromarketing and the psychology of persuasion. Every week, we talk with thought leaders that will help you improve your influence with factual evidence and concrete research. Introducing your host, Roger Dooley.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to the Brainfluence podcast. I'm Roger Dooley. If you stay in touch with the latest business thinking, you've probably encountered the work of today's guest. Daniel McGinn is senior editor at the Harvard Business Review. You may not find his byline on every single article, but his influence is everywhere. He's developed and edited some of their iconic articles like Chris Anderson's, How to Give a Presentation, and many others. He edits the HBR's annual ranking of the best performing CEOs in the How I Did It, CEO section. Some of what he's learned over the years is in his new book, Psyched Up: How the Science of Mental Preparation Can Help You Succeed. Dan welcome to the show.

Dan McGinn: Thanks so much.

Roger Dooley: Dan, before we get into your ideas about mental preparation, I'm curious about the HBR's CEO ranking. For years, I was involved in the college search and admission space because of my college confidential business. In that space the hopes and aspirations of millions of parents and students were focused on the U.S. News college rankings. These seemed to be objective because they were very nice numeric values for each of the criteria and specific weighting and so on. But of course, those criteria and the weighting could be considered arbitrary. Static rankings would be really boring if they were the same every year, so they'd always tweak things a little bit to shuffle the top players.

It seems like evaluating CEOs would be even harder than evaluating colleges. How do you pick the best performers, and does it create controversy?

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Dan McGinn: It does create some controversy. We try to be as objective as possible. We do our rankings based on mainly two factors. We look primarily at the total financial return, the total shareholder return on the stock of the company during the CEO's entire tenure. There are other lists out there that look at who was the hot stock for the last year, who was the hot stock for the last five years. The way we do it is we calculate if you bought the stock on the first day that that CEO was in the job, and you held it until today, what would the return have been.

The other thing we do, and it's a smaller portion of the weighting, but we also look at the ESG scores, the environmental, social, and governing scores for each of the companies. That gives us a little bit more holistic viewpoint. We like to think that we're objective. We try to keep the methodology pretty similar from year to year. While not completely static, our ranking doesn't jump around as wildly as some of the other ones do because we think about it as a career record, sort of like hall of fame kind of stuff, as opposed to just who's been hot for the last six months or the last quarter.

Roger Dooley: Right. Well that makes a lot of sense. I think when your metrics are really long-term, you will get that consistency. In fact, I think that's one reason why U.S. News always tweaks their formulas because they wouldn't sell as many magazines if, "Oh well, Harvard's on top again, and Princeton's second." Or whatever. It's always great. "Ha. Look at this. Harvard's up to three on the decline." When it's simply the fact that they tweaked some ranking factor up a little bit or down a little bit.

Let's talk about HBR a little bit online. How much has their online content grown? Some sites like Forbes and INC and Entrepreneur have brought in a lot of outside contributors to create tons of fresh content, but from what I can tell seems like HBR is pretty selective and maybe getting even more so.

Dan McGinn: Yeah, that's absolutely true. Present we're posting on our website just about five pieces a day, and that's much less than some of the competitors you named. We say no to the vast majority of pitches or

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contributions we get. We try to look for the same level of rigor online that we look for in the magazine. Many of our pieces have a research base. Many of our contributors are academics at leading business schools or people at top consulting firms. I think if you look at hbr.org on a daily or even a weekly basis, you will notice a difference in the kind of people who are writing for us and about the quantitative methods that are behind a lot of the ideas.

Roger Dooley: Very good. Some of my friends have complained that stuff is getting rejected where probably a few years ago, it might've been accepted, but the bar keeps going up. That's a good problem to have though, I guess. Again, let's go on to your book *Psyched*. Your focus is on mental preparation before say a difficult or stressful activity. It could be a rare occurrence, like giving a TED talk. Or maybe something that you do every day, like a surgeon operating on patients, or maybe a Broadway performer.

One of the interesting points you make relates to the state of arousal before you get started. I think that probably just about all of us who say, had to get up on a stage, feel that sort of faster heart rate and the faster breathing rate, those biometrics start to show a little bit of stress, but what you describe and there's research that shows, the way we interpret that or label that can really make a difference in how we do.

Dan McGinn: It can. You're right that anytime you're doing something that your body perceives as a threat, you go into a biological response. It's the fight or flight instinct that's kept our species alive for so long. There's a difference between being chased by a tiger or giving a TED talk, but to a certain extent your body does respond in similar ways. The research that you mentioned, it really does help people. There's been studies in math exam situations, people taking a stressful math test. There's been studies done of people in singing competitions.

And the idea here, it's called reappraisal. The idea is that most people will tell you before you do something that makes you nervous, "Oh you should try to calm down, relax." Well the reality is that it's difficult if not

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impossible to totally relax before you do these because your body's responding to the threat. So instead of trying to make that impossible leap between very nervous and very calm, reappraisal suggests that you should try to shift into an excitement mode. You're still going to be highly aroused, but it's a more positive. You're focusing on the opportunity as opposed to what could go wrong. It's a very subtle kind of shift, but there's been a variety of studies that have suggested it can have a powerful influence on performance.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I was really surprised by how significant the differences were, so I think that's probably a lesson that all of our listeners can take home. Yeah, okay if you're going to be doing something that's making you nervous, try and translate that into excitement. And these weren't big interventions. These were simply people saying, "I'm excited," or, "I'm anxious," rather simple things like that. I think when every little bit helps, that's very powerful.

Dan McGinn: Yeah, I agree. I agree. One of the striking things about, if you look at the variety of techniques that are discussed in the book, many of them are very quiet and not super dramatic kinds of interventions. Some of them involve a little bit of personal writing before you go do an event. You know, write about a time that made you feel powerful before you go into say a job interview situation. There's been studies that show that that will help you perform better in the interview. Nobody's going to know what you're doing. You're just sitting there writing. These things don't have to be kind of crazy, over-the-top spectacles. Many of these things that you can do are sort of very quiet, ritualistic practices that our research proves they give you an edge.

Roger Dooley: While we're on that topic, why don't you explain a little bit about centering and the process that can maybe help you, if not eliminate all your fight or flight, at least sort of get you a little bit centered and calmer.

Dan McGinn: Sure, I learned about centering at Juilliard, the music school in New York. There's a professor there who himself was a really, really good violinist. He studied at Juilliard himself. But when he became an

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adult, he decided instead of playing the violin, he went and got a PhD in psychology. He went back to Julliard, and he teaches a whole course for the musicians there on how to deal with the stress of auditions. Centering is really the centerpiece technique in this course. It's kind of like yoga or meditation. It's kind of hard to teach it by talking or by reading. You can go to YouTube. If you put "centering" into YouTube, there's some decent videos on how to do it. It involves a simple set of breathing and thought exercises that with practice, people can do in 10 seconds or less, that's shown to calm them a bit.

The other thing beyond YouTube, if you're in a situation where you really struggle with these kind of presentation settings, and you're having a hard time learning to do this. There are performance psychologists out there. Performance psychology is sort of a branch that's shot off from sports psychology. These are not people who want you to talk about your deepest, darkest childhood secrets. These are very sort of tactical interventions. You go for an appointment or two, maybe spend a couple hundred bucks, and they can teach you techniques that really will help you deal with the sort of turbulence of emotions that you feel before you take the stage. That's another thing that people who are interested in centering and don't feel like they can learn it on their own, for not a lot of money or time, they can get a little help with that.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, I really enjoyed the part in the book about Professor Kageyama and his really almost sadistic ways of testing and training his students. It was both funny and at the same time, it was like wow that guy's really mean. But he was doing it for a good reason. Why don't you explain that, about his adversity audition.

Dan McGinn: Sure. So the final exam in the course he teaches, the students are told ahead of time that they're going to be in a normal audition setting. There's going to be a panel of three professional musicians that are going to judge them. There'll be a screen there, which is often used in auditions to prevent bias of any kind. There will be a quiet rehearsal room, where they can relax and practice before they go in for the audition.

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Then when they actually show up, everything is orchestrated to go wrong. They're called up to the room in a random order apart from what they had expected. He turns the elevator off, so they need to carry their heavy instruments up flights of stairs and get all flustered. They get to the rehearsal room, and he's got a staticky AM radio so they can't really hear themselves practice. They get into the room, there's no screen there. One of the judges looks like he's drunk. The piano has ping pong balls in it, so it's one thing after another.

It's really a test of how well the students have learned to cope with things going wrong because nothing ever goes perfect when you do these things. It's a great test to that, and the students who've learned to center themselves and sort of block out the anxiousness and the distractions, do quite well.

Roger Dooley: How about the students who maybe don't do that well? Does it help them improve?

Dan McGinn: It's a good lesson for them, yeah. I mean the thing that surprised me about it, to be honest because schools are typically small and highly communicative places, he's managed to keep the secret for a while.

Roger Dooley: Really? That is surprising. Of course, maybe you've messed that up now, Dan.

Dan McGinn: There's a possibility there, yeah.

Roger Dooley: I was thinking the same thing. I can see that working the first time, but the second or third class you'd think that it would be part of the lore of the university.

Performers have weird little rituals, and you talked about Seinfeld putting on his jacket, and Colbert chewing one particular kind of pen, which is really kind of strange. I mean there's no logic in that. Why do these work, and how would you or I discover our own routine?

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Dan McGinn: There's a whole body of research in sports psychology about what they call "pre-performance routines", which is basically a series of task-related thoughts or actions that people do before, especially in sports like diving or putting a golf ball or shooting a free throw. Those are what they call uncontested activities because there's not a defender there. It's not a dynamic situation. You're basically kind of doing the same thing every time. The studies generally show that people who are more consistent, who have a routine and stick to it do better. Some of the studies also do interventions or control group interventions, where they take people who don't have a routine, teach them a routine, let them practice it a few times, and then they do better. There is sort of a powerful research base around this.

Why it works, nobody understands exactly why it works, but the thoughts are number one, the human body really sort of craves habit and routine. There's something comforting about it, so that's number one. Number two, a lot of what people are programmed to do in those moments is worry, and if you have a routine of things that you do that kind of occupy yourself and occupy your mind, they can distract you from otherwise being nervous. That's the second explanation. The third one is that some of these things, they may cue your body up to help it remember all the practice it did. Sort of like pressing the start button on a set of activities that culminates with the actual performance of the thing.

In terms of how you come up with this on your own, you have to find what works. Seinfeld's routine is fairly simple. It's a matter of, he uses some special music backstage. He has precise timing about when he puts his jacket on, and he recognizes that putting that jacket on is the symbol to start getting his body ready. Colbert's is a lot more superstitious. There's no logical connection between chewing a pen and appearing on late-night television, but it gives him confidence. It makes him feel better and if that happens, he's likely to perform better.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, fascinating stuff. And I'm beginning to think that I need to develop my own routine. I don't really have one. I guess probably

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the closest I come is before almost every speech I do, I have a relatively set uniform of clothes that I almost always wear. A black blazer, cowboy boots, typically a business shirt, that to me sort of gets me in that mental frame of mind. And you know when I'm up there in front, I think as you said, it does sort of evoke those many past situations where I was on a stage in roughly the same costume. But I probably need something a little more exotic than that.

Dan McGinn: Well here's one that I would suggest. A uniform strategy is a very good one, and it gets into that idea of there's a routine. You're doing the same thing every time. The other thing you could do to sort of prime yourself and to put yourself in the right frame of mind for this is if you have any videos of your past performances or even the audio of a past speech, and it doesn't have to be super long. Maybe it's a little snippet of it. Put it in your phone and five minutes before you go on, put on some headphones and just cue it up. It's a simple thing.

It's actually something I do. I was on NPR a while back, and the particular NPR program I was on they do a ton of editing on it. And you come out of the editing process just sounding more smooth and coherent and smarter than you actually are in real life. So before I go on a show like this, or if I'm speaking, I'll Google that, and I'll just listen to it for two or three minutes because it reinforces the idea, hey I can really do this pretty well. And that's the kind of thought you want to have in mind to boost your confidence before you go into a performance.

Roger Dooley: Great, I think I'll try that. Something else that I've written about is product contagion. That's if you put a disgusting product like kitty litter in your shopping cart next to cookies, some of that disgust will sort of magically transfer over the cookies, and they will be less desirable. It's even worse when the cookies are in a transparent bag as opposed to an opaque one because somehow the disgust cooties can apparently penetrate the transparent wrapper more easily. It's kind of strange research, and obviously it's sort of totally magical thinking on the part of the consumer. You talk about something that's kind of analogous: performance

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contagion. Why don't you explain about that, how that works, and your rather interesting Malcolm Gladwell experiment.

Dan McGinn: Sure. I'm aware of the kitty litter experiment you described. That was kind of a weird but important study in this field. In 2012, I came across a study by some researchers in Germany about an experiment involving a golf club and putting. They had taken a group of golfers who were fairly equivalent in terms of their skill level. They divided them into groups, and they had them putting under similar conditions, same distance, same surface. Some of the golfers, before they were handed the golf club, were told that that golf club had previously been owned by a PGA professional golfer. The rest were told nothing. They just handed them the club.

The people who were told they were using a professional golfers club putted about a third better than the other ones. They also, when they were asked to estimate the size of the hole, they estimated a somewhat bigger hole. Suggesting it was an easier putt for them. There've been other studies involving textbooks and study materials. People who were studying for an exam who were told that the last person that used this exam did really, really well, tended to do better. So there is this idea that if you use a tool or an object used by somebody who is a high performer, it might rub off on you.

To utilize that research and play around with it, I reached out to Malcolm Gladwell, the non-fiction writer. I offered to send him a computer keyboard, which he would write on for several months and then ship back to me. He agreed. He thought I was kind of funny. So I now have in my possession a white apple keyboard that was Malcolm Gladwell's keyboard for several months. I don't use it every day. It's sort of like family china. I only pull it out for special occasions. But when I do, it does give me a little bit more sense of confidence and power and skill. I know that Gladwell's fingers ran over these same keys, and I'm hopeful that some of that rubs off on me.

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Roger Dooley: That's great. I think a lot of us use those little kinds of inspirations. This is my grandfather's hammer and toolkit or something. A few years ago, I wrote an article about a company that was reintroducing the classic Blackwing Pencil, which I guess is sort of a cult thing. I hadn't heard of it, but it's the kind of pencil that was around for many years, and it was used by legendary figures like Frank Lloyd Wright and John Steinbeck. I think based on what we're talking about here, maybe that even could have a little bit of a rub-off effect. If you use this rather unique pencil, but you think well hey, this was the exact same kind of pencil that Frank Lloyd Wright used in his designs or that John Steinbeck wrote his novels with. Then maybe a little bit of that would rub off too because chances are we're not all going to be able to get Malcolm Gladwell's keyboard.

Dan McGinn: No that's true. I think that companies can sort of cultivate this sense that there are artifacts that physical objects associated with good experiences can ... You know, it's very subtle, and it's a subconscious kind of thing. There's other research looks at visual priming. Sometimes you may see in certain work places, posters that have sort of an inspiring image of teamwork with a saying about teamwork under it. There's been studies that have looked at how those impact the way people work in a workplace, and they have been found to make some sort of a difference.

I'm now jumping from that actual research to sort of conjecture and speculation. But I think the reason that when you walk into a high school gymnasium, the first thing you see is the trophy case. And the second thing you see up on the ceiling are all the banners for the championships they've won. I think there's a reason that those are there. They want the home team to remember the tradition and the artifacts from past success, and they want the visiting team walking in past those things to be somewhat intimidated by them. So visual and tactile reminders of past success, in a subtle way, can have a difference.

Roger Dooley: Yeah, it's really true. I know that there's a sort of ... A school can have a tradition of excellence in a certain area, and that can be more powerful than many other things. Back in Indiana, our local high

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school was rather a small school but had been a wrestling powerhouse for years and taken many state championships. I'm pretty sure that our students weren't genetically better constructed for wrestling or that had any big advantages in fact from a socio-economic standpoint. They were probably less able to afford any kind of outside lessons. But it was a mere tradition of excellence, and the way they underscored that through their both verbal communication and the sorts of banners and trophies and so on that you mentioned, actually allowed them for many years, to sort of maintain this domination. And excellent coaching too.

Definitely all these cues have an effect. In fact, that kind of leads me into talking about priming, which is an effect that I'm sure many of our listeners are familiar with. I've written about that from a marketing standpoint, but priming certainly affects or performance too, right?

Dan McGinn: Yeah, no question. Priming can be a little bit of a controversial technique. There was a famous study that came out in 2010 by Amy Cuddy of Harvard Business School and some colleagues that suggested that people who spend a couple of minutes doing power poses, very sort of dominant, hands on your hips or sort of wide expansive poses, that not only did they feel more powerful when they engage in different kind of tests after that. But also that there was a hormonal effect. They studied the saliva of these different people, and there was an effect in terms of testosterone levels and cortisol levels that suggested that if you're entering a moment when you need to be powerful, if you do a power pose beforehand, that's a good thing to do.

Some of those studies have failed to replicate, and there's some controversy over how legitimate that is and whether the effect is real or not. But that's only one priming study, and there's a whole ... There were 15 years of studies before that that suggest that sort of subconscious effects and subconscious influences can affect the way people behave. There's one study that sitting and writing about a powerful time is one way to do it. There's the study that I mentioned about inspirational imagery and how it affects success in different kinds of environments, so being aware of what

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your environment is. My office where I write a lot, I have on my walls images of my old stories. Just again, to remind myself of past successes because there's some evidence that that kind of priming can work.

Roger Dooley: Very good. We've been talking mostly about getting psyched up internally or getting psyched up yourself. What about sort of psyching up others? Do pep-talks really work?

Dan McGinn: It depends who you ask, whether they really work or not. I think whether you believe they work or not, if you're in certain jobs, there's some expectation that they're one of the tools you're going to use. I mean if you're a high school football coach or a high school wrestling coach, in the locker room before the game people are going to look at you and expect you to have something to say. If you're a sales manager at the beginning of the year or towards the end of the quarter, there's going to be some expectation that you have some inspirational words.

There's several bodies of research. There's research into sports pep-talks. There's research on military pep-talks, and there's research on managerial pep-talks. The third one is probably the most robust. I actually have an article in the July/August issue of Harvard Business Review that looks on this science of pep-talks. Basically that research suggests that a three-part formula works the best.

Number one, you need to do this sort of specific direction-giving and strategy. That's the sort of "what" of what you're hoping that people will do. Number two you need to sound some notes of empathy. You need to try to personally identify with the people, acknowledge that what you're asking is hard, and that you're thankful for them. And number three, it can help to do meaning-making, is the term they use for it. Basically, connect the task that you're asking someone to do to the larger meaning or experience, the long term goals of the person or the organization. This doesn't come naturally to everybody. You need to practice, and you need to sort of come up with a formula that works for you. There are people who do think that it can have a significant effect on how a team performs.

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Roger Dooley: It might be a personal power too. You mentioned the movie Hoosiers in your book, and I actually happened to be acquainted with Marv Wood who was the real Hoosiers coach, not Gene Hackman. He served on a committee for historic preservation that I was president of, and I'd been doing that for a while. It just didn't seem like we were making a lot of progress, typical sort of small-town political organization, hard to get stuff done. After one meeting, he came up to me and said, "Roger, you know, we really weren't getting anything done, but I feel like since you've been the president we're actually starting to make some progress and move ahead." In like two minutes, suddenly I felt like a million dollars. Then I realized, okay, this wasn't random. This guy is one of the most legendary coaches in history, which I wasn't thinking about at the time that he was talking to me. We were just talking about the task of our committee, but that was a pep-talk that at least worked for me. It had at least a temporary effect.

Dan McGinn: One of the things that surprised me as I was reporting out the pep-talk chapter was how influential that Hoosiers movie really is. I would run into business leaders who would say they made a point to re-watch it every year. I found out that before the special forces operation that took out Bin Laden, that the commanding officer there, he gave a speech that was sort of like the speech from Hoosiers, so that really affects the language we use in these pep-talks.

The other thing that's interesting here is so much of the way people approach these talks comes from sports and from our adolescent-mostly experience on teams. When you get into certain industries, technology especially, a lot of the people that run those companies don't have much formative experience in sports. They were programming computers during all their teenage years. One of the people I talked to for the book was Bill Campbell, the coach out in Silicon Valley who he really spent a lot of time trying to teach tech-titans who didn't play team sports, how to be a leader and how to give these kind of talks.

Roger Dooley: Interesting. One last thing I'll ask you about Dan is the effect of music in getting primed for performance.

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Dan McGinn: Sure in sports in particular, players and teams tend to listen to carefully chosen music before they perform. In some sports, music is a part of the performance itself. If you're at Fenway Park, or if you're at Gillette Stadium, there will be music during the game. That's not necessarily aimed exactly at the players, but it's aimed at the fans to get them pumped up so that they can kind of amplify the mood and give the home court advantage. I think individual performers, even if you're in business, can figure out a way to use this yourself, whether it's listening to the right songs on the way to a big event or a sales call or a job interview or a pitch meeting. I've talked to people who make a routine of doing that.

In terms of choosing the songs, there's a big body of research around it, but the simple version is songs are motivational for two reasons. Number one, the way the song sounds, even if you'd never heard it before, the combination of the musical elements, the rhythm, the tempo, the lyrics. And number two, songs can be motivational because of our emotional connection with the song. Maybe it played at your senior prom. Maybe it was the song that your high school football team listened to on the bus. Songs trigger memories, and those can impact our energy level, impact our confidence. And it's a matter of sort of finding the right songs that work for you and making it part of your routine to listen to them at the right time.

Roger Dooley: That's probably a good place to break off. Let me remind our listeners that we're speaking with Daniel McGinn, Senior Editor at The Harvard Business Review and author of the new book, *Psyched Up: How the Science of Mental Preparation Can Help You Succeed*. Dan how can our listeners find you online?

Dan McGinn: The website for the book is www.psychedupthebook.com. My twitter is @danmcginn, so I'm not too hard to find.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well we will link to those places and any other resources we mentioned on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a text version of our conversation there too. Dan thanks for being on the show.

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Dan McGinn: Roger, thank you so much.

Thank you for joining me for this episode of the Brainfluence Podcast. To continue the discussion and to find your own path to brainy success, please visit us at RogerDooley.com.