



the extra gear

Mental Toughness Training for Peak Sport Performance

9601 Gayton Rd. | Suite 206 | Richmond, VA 23238 | 804-754-THE X

Self-Talk Strategies

Introduction

What we think has an effect on how we feel, which, in turn, has an effect on what we do. In sports, negative thinking has been shown to have a negative effect on performance. When self-talk is negative, it produces both negative feelings, like anxiety, as well as physical tension, which leads to decreased motor coordination and speed. It also takes your focus away from what you should be doing, which makes it more likely that you will miss something important or make a mistake. So, when we talk negatively to ourselves, it affects other important mental skills such as intensity regulation, confidence, and concentration. When these mental skills deteriorate, performance is likely to suffer, which serves to reinforce the self-talk, (e.g., you prove to yourself that, “I really do stink at this”) creating a vicious cycle.

Many times we are unaware of our self-talk; therefore, it can sabotage our performance without our even realizing it. At its worst, our self-fulfilling prophecies of poor performances in certain situations lead us to label ourselves negatively (e.g., “loser”) which makes it even more difficult to break the negative cycle.

Just as negative self-talk can hurt performance, positive self-talk can improve it. **The key to using self-talk for performance-enhancement is to be able to recognize what you say to yourself so that you can control your self-talk and use it to facilitate performance. Staying positive in negative situations is the hallmark of a superior athlete.**

With practice, athletes can learn to change their self-talk so that they will get the maximum benefit from their successes and learn from their failures without being overly self-critical. The uses of self-talk are varied – it can be used to improve performance, psych yourself up, cope with anxiety, increase motivation, strengthen confidence, elevate mood, focus your attention, prepare for a competition, break bad habits, and acquire new skills.

Common Problems With Self-Talk (taken from USOC, 2002)

- *Focusing on the past or future.* For example – “I can’t believe I missed the break!” or “If I’m going to podium I can’t let him pass me.” All you can control is what you do in the present.
- *Focusing on mistakes or weaknesses.* For example, “My start sucked.” or “I hope this doesn’t end in a sprint, I suck at sprints.” Acknowledge areas in need of improvement in practices, but beating yourself up, especially in competitions, will erode your confidence.
- *Focusing only on outcomes.* For example, “I have to win” or “I have to beat her.” You can only control your own performance, not the performance of others. Concentrate on what you can do.

- *Focusing on things out of your control.* For example, “I hate racing in the rain.” or “Why did he have to show up – now I’ll never win.” This takes your mind off of what you can do to improve your performance.
- *Demanding perfection from yourself.* For example, “I must win.” or “I have to pass this guy in the next mile.” This can set you up for frustration.

Self-Talk Assessment

To rate your own use of self-talk, rate the following questions on a scale of 0=Never, 1=Sometimes, 2=Almost Always (taken from USOC, 2002):

- _____ Before competition, I purposely tell myself what to do and how to focus.
- _____ I am able to focus on what I am doing instead of the outcome.
- _____ While competing, I am my own best friend (e.g., supportive, encouraging, positive).
- _____ I know what to say to myself to “get over” a mistake.
- _____ I have specific things I say to myself to stay focused.
- _____ I have specific things I say to myself to stay motivated during practice.
- _____ I know how to talk to myself to perform my best.
- _____ I focus on my strengths, not my weaknesses, prior to and during competitions.
- _____ TOTAL

Scoring: 11-16 excellent, 6-10 good, 0-5 need improvement.

Other Self-Talk Assessment Techniques

Before you can change your self-talk, you have to know what it is. There are several ways to become more aware of self-talk and each have their own advantages and disadvantages.

- *The “Paper Clip” Technique* – Take a pocketful of paper clips and put them in your left pants pocket when you get dressed in the morning. Each time you have a negative thought during the day, take one out and put it in your right pants pocket. When you get undressed at night, count the paperclips in your right pocket. Repeat this exercise for four or five days. This is a quick and simple technique that can help you discover the extent of your negative thinking, although it doesn’t provide you with any details of the content of your thoughts.
- *Recall Through Imagery* – Take a deep breath, close your eyes, slowly exhale and relax. Imagine an especially good competition. Imagine it as vividly as possible, that is, what it looked like, how it felt, and what you were thinking. As you relive this experience in your head, become aware of your self-talk. Take several minutes to do this, then open your eyes

and write down what you were thinking and what was going with you and around you at that time. Repeat this exercise, but now imagine one of your worst performances. For even more detail, try recalling two or three best and worst performances, and then compare your self-talk. This technique can be done rather quickly and has the advantage of focusing on particular performances, although it does presume you are competent at imagery.

- *Self-Talk Log* – In your training log, make a page with four columns with the headings “Positive,” “Negative,” “Distracting,” and “Situation.” As soon as possible after training or competitions, write down the date, where you were, and whether it was training or a competition. Write down what you said to yourself under the appropriate columns. Next to each thought, in the “Situation” column, write down what you were doing and what was going on around you at the time. Pay special attention to when you are performing well or performing poorly to see if your thoughts differ at these times. Journaling is probably one of the most comprehensive and accurate ways to assess self-talk, but it does take a good deal of preparation and time to complete.
- *The Two-Minute Journal* – To make the process of journaling easier, use the Two-Minute Journal's Self-Talk Rating Scales. This journal is designed to provide practical, quantitative information that can be used to track your progress in acquiring mental skills. Each part of the journal focuses on a different mental skill. In this journal, there is space provided for you to write as much information as you wish, but the essential ratings can be completed in two minutes or less.
- *Using Video and Audio* – Using video tapes and audio recordings can augment many of the above assessment procedures. For example, replaying a video of an athlete's performance can help in the recall of self-talk at specific moments. This can assist in recalling self-talk with imagery or in completing a self-talk log. Using a small digital recorder and external microphone, athletes in some sports could talk out loud during training, a simulated race, or even a competition to record their self-talk “live.” If you are a cyclist and have a power meter, you could even have the potential of seeing how your thinking affected your wattage! That way you might prove the adage, “Watts you think is watts you get!”

Taking Charge Of Your Thinking

After you have assessed your self-talk in various situations and developed an understanding of the connection among your thoughts, feelings and behavior, the next step is to take charge of your thinking and use it to maximize your performance. Research has shown that the best athletes are able to stop their negative thinking and quickly change it to more positive and productive thoughts without beating themselves up. Two of the most common and easily learned methods to help you take control of your thoughts are thought stopping and thought replacement.

- *Thought Stopping* – This procedure involves three steps: **(1) Identify the Thought.** The first step in changing negative thinking is to become familiar with what you say to yourself so you can recognize it quickly. After you've assessed your self-talk you should be able to recognize it when it starts and even anticipate it as you get into situations that typically bring it on. When bad things happen it's normal to have some feelings about it, so it's OK to have a negative thought or two. In fact, discharging some of the negative feeling is important to help you move on. What you want to do is prevent yourself from spiraling down into a black hole of negative self-talk. To do this, you must first stop the negative

thoughts. **(2) Stop the Thought** – Think of a signal that will tell you to stop. For example, picture of a stop sign, imagine yourself or your coach yelling “STOP!,” imaging hearing a buzzer or shake your head “NO.” Choose any stop signal that works best for you. Every time you notice yourself having a negative thought, immediately use your stop signal. **(3) Practice.** To become effective, you must practice this technique over time. As a way to begin, try imagining yourself in a situation that typically produces negative thoughts and rehearse thought stopping in your imagination. Continue doing this over time until the process becomes automatic. If you have a verbal stop signal, it’s best to say it out loud at first. This will make you more conscious of stopping the negative thinking. Remember that old thoughts, like old habits, die hard. Don’t become discouraged if your negative thoughts take time to stop. If you get to the point where you are beating yourself up for beating yourself up, it will only make the situation worse. The best attitude to take is to be supportive of yourself and treat yourself like you would treat a teammate struggling with their self-talk.

- *Thought Replacement* – A stop signal is necessary to stop negative thinking, but insufficient to keep it from coming back. At times telling yourself not to think something can backfire - it’s like trying not to think of a white rhinoceros. Therefore, after stopping the negative thoughts, you need to replace them with thoughts that are more productive. Think of alternative thoughts that are both more positive and realistic. For example, what might you say to a teammate? What might your coach say to you? To help with this, use the list of negative thoughts you created during the assessment phase. Next to each one, write down at least one positive and realistic alternative thought. For example, if you thought, “I suck at time-trialing.” You could replace the thought with, “I’ve improved in many areas through hard work. If I stick with it, I’ll improve this skill too.” Replacing negative thoughts with positive ones will help you stay motivated and refocus your attention to what you need to do right now that you can control. Finally, since negative thinking can produce anxiety and physical tension, it can be helpful to use a quick relaxation technique (like diaphragmatic breathing) between stopping the thought and replacing it.

Making Positive Self-Talk Even More Positive

Mikes (1987) suggested six rules for self-talk for improved performance:

- Keep your phrases short and specific
- Use the first person and present tense
- Construct positive phrases
- Say your phrases with meaning and attention
- Speak kindly to yourself
- Repeat phrases often

Other research has shown that incorporating personally-meaningful metaphors into your self-talk (e.g., “I am climbing like a train.” or “Sprint like a cheetah.”) can be especially effective in enhancing performance (Hanin and Strambulova, 2002).

Practice Make Perfect

As with any mental or physical skill, practice is required. Use the following as a guide to incorporate self-talk into your sport. First try the technique out in imagery. Practice using the technique successfully in situations that typically produce negative thinking. Strive to master the technique so that it can be used without thinking or hesitation. The goal is to make it automatic. Next, try the technique out in practices. For example, if you tend to think negatively before and during a hard climb, practice the technique in these situations in training. Do it several times in several different situations that you've found lead to negative thinking in the past. Next, practice the technique in simulated competitions, like during group training. Finally, incorporate the technique in a competition. You may wish to try it first in a "B-race," that is, a competition that is less important, so that you can evaluate the effectiveness of the technique and make any changes necessary before using it in an important event.

For more information on goal-setting and other mental skills techniques to improve sport performance, contact sport psychologist Dana Blackmer, Ph.D. at Dana@TheExtraGear.com or visit The Extra Gear online at www.TheExtraGear.com.