



PSYCHOLOGY

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PSYCHOLOGY



Applied sport psychology involves recognizing and understanding the powerful psychological dynamics that occur in sport. Because of sport's public nature and scrutiny, and the passion necessary to excel, it can bring a host of psychological and emotional challenges. The role of the sport psychologist is to optimize the psychological "effects" occurring and develop the psychological skills and attributes that facilitate the pursuit of excellence.

The most effective approach in applied sport psychology is long term, preventative and developmental work. Athletes and coaches who know themselves well, and have developed a positive perspective, a support team around them, and the psychological and emotional skills to cope and excel, have the best chance for success.

Applied sport psychology can make important contributions in many areas including:

- preparation and readiness for competition
- refocusing and regaining perspective
- improving the quality of training and recovery
- coping with injury response and rehabilitation
- understanding team dynamics and positive rivalries

A. Preparation and Readiness For Competition

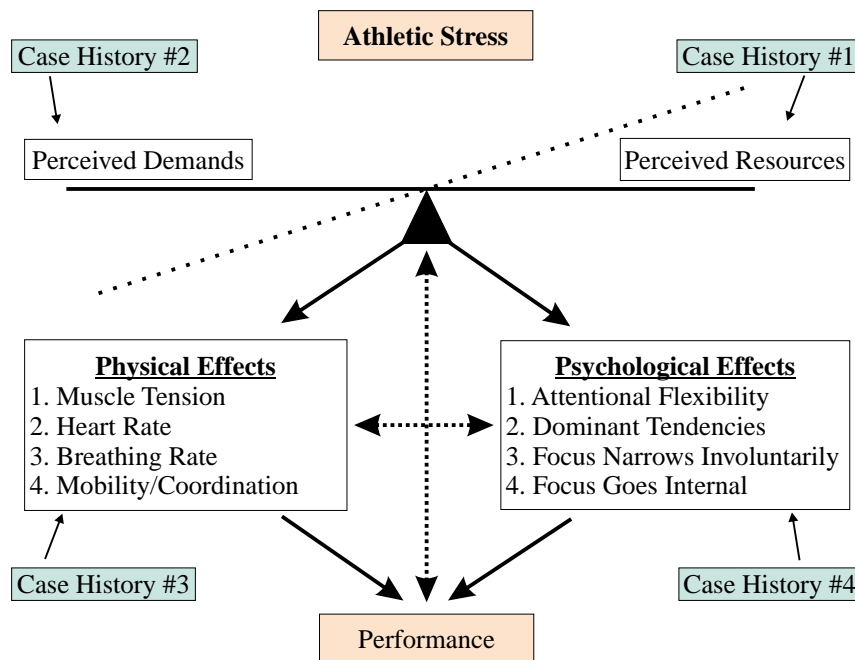


Figure 14.1 Model of athletic stress proposed by Robert Nideffer.



An Olympic athlete's motivation is high, and the pressure during training and competition is great. While some athletes may perceive a situation as an exciting challenge, others may see it as threatening and stressful. Athletes constantly assess the demands of a situation and their ability to deal with these demands. If perceived demands are greater than perceived resources, then the athlete may feel stressed and may result in many of the negative physical and psychological effects outlined in Figure 14.1.

1. Low Perceived Resources

Case History - Low Perceived Resources

A 21-year-old female gymnast is preparing for her first Olympic Games. She arrived in the Olympic Village seven days ago and has been growing increasingly nervous throughout the week. While her perception of the demands of the situation seems reasonable, her confidence is extremely low. She doubts her ability to perform complex manoeuvres and says she “doesn't deserve to be an Olympian”.

Discussion

The best approach to this problems is preventative. Through strong technical, tactical, physical and psychological preparation, athletes will have the best chance of perceiving they have the resources to handle the situation. However a number of short-term approaches can help an athlete whose confidence has been shaken.

List of Accomplishments - Sometimes athletes need to be reminded of how well they have prepared. One way of doing this is to have the athlete generate a list of accomplishments. The athlete may have kept a training diary or a log in which all successes during her training have been documented.

Basic Training Session - As physical performance is the most powerful influence on one's level of confidence, one method to raise confidence is to have a good training session. This training session should focus on work that the athlete can accomplish successfully.

Imagery - Imagery can serve as a powerful intervention for improving confidence levels. The athlete should attempt to invoke positive images in which they see themselves performing skills correctly, winning games and achieving goals. See Section C for a description of imagery techniques.



2. Irrational Perceived Demands

Case History - Irrational Perceived Demands

A 25-year-old volleyball player is experiencing irrational feelings and beliefs. He feels he must perform successfully for his family, friends and country. Failure to do so is of great concern to him.

Discussion

There are two techniques that might be helpful with this situation.

Reframing - Stress can be reduced by helping the athlete to “reframe” his perspective in a more rational and healthy way. For example, the volleyball player must realize that self worth is never defined by a single moment, and that perfection is impossible, so he must simply try to do his best.

Short Term Goal Setting - The athlete should be encouraged to focus on goals and tasks that are within his control. For example, the volleyball player could set a skill objective such as “I will block my opponent 90% of the time”. The athlete could also set a cognitive goal like “each day I will write down three things I did well in training today”. Both skill and cognitive goals will shift attention from irrational thoughts towards task relevant constructive ways of thinking.

3. Physical Effects of Stress

Case History - Physical Effects of Stress

A 26-year-old swimmer reports feeling extremely “nervous” in the days leading up to her third race of the Games. While she seems to believe in her ability to perform well, her anxious anticipation leads to an uneasy stomach (“butterflies”) and muscle tension. The symptoms are most prevalent at night when she is trying to fall asleep and just prior to races.

Discussion

While a certain level of arousal is necessary for peak performance in any sport, over-arousal can be disastrous. A variety of strategies can be used to help relax the athlete.

Deep Breathing - One should be in a relaxed position, and inhale slowly and deeply for 5 seconds, hold the air comfortably, then expel it over 5 seconds. It is important that the athlete not solely expand the upper chest, rather the abdominal muscles should be allowed to expand as well. The navel is a good focus point to use during controlled breathing.

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR) - Two types of PMR can be used. Active PMR is often easier for those with little experience in muscle relaxation, while passive PMR is a more advanced technique.

Active PMR:

- sit/lie comfortably
- deep breathing (as described above)
- contract muscles in feet and hold tension for a count of two to three
- release and allow tension to flow from the area
- repeat steps 3 and 4 progressively throughout the body (lower legs, upper legs, trunk, arms, neck and facial muscles)
- stand and shake arms, legs and feet
- focus on feelings of looseness and relaxation



Passive PMR uses a similar progression to active PMR, however, the “tense-release” protocol is replaced with a simple “relax” command.

Meditation is a passive technique that combines breathing and muscle relaxation techniques with a cue word or mantra. The athlete should sit or lie comfortably and breath deeply (using the method described above). As they are passively relaxing, they should repeat a calming cue word or phrase such as “let it go”.



4. Psychological Effects of Stress

Case History - Psychological Effects of Stress

A 20-year-old basketball player has just missed the first of two free throws. There are six seconds remaining in the game and her team is trailing by one point and must win this game to advance to the next round of the tournament. A time-out is called and the athlete begins to worry about the consequences of a missed free throw “I can’t let my team down, I can’t miss this shot”.

Discussion

The athlete in the above scenario has made an attentional shift from an external task relevant focus to an internal task irrelevant focus. Clearly, focusing on the consequences of failure will not help this athlete perform well. The following technique will help to regain a positive and more effective pattern of thinking.

Thought Stopping/Cue Word/Imagery - The athlete needs to first become aware of her negative thoughts and then should create a cognitive break by saying the word “STOP”. Once this break has been created, she should replace the negative thoughts with a task relevant cue word and visualize a positive image. For example, this basketball player might use “smooth” or “rhythm” as her cue word and recreate a positive image of perfect basketball shooting technique that ends with a successful free throw.



B. Refocusing and Gaining Perspective

Case History - Non-Competition Disturbance

Upon arrival at the Olympic Village, a team of rowers discovers that they have to travel 80 minutes by bus in order to reach the training and competition site. This amount of travel time is very unusual for the athletes who are used to living at their training site.

Discussion

The keys to “refocusing” quickly after disturbances are having a good perspective before-hand and having rehearsed attentional and emotional refocusing in training. Anticipation of potential disturbances and response planning should be an important component of any athlete’s preparation.

Response Plans - Well prepared competitors will have competition focus plans, and will have rehearsed refocusing strategies in response to possible disruptions and disturbances. Prior to the Games, athletes, coaches and support staff should list all possible disturbances that they may encounter and determine effective responses to these.

Positive Interpretations - A planned positive interpretation of the disturbance should be a part of any Response Plan, or the team leaders should be able to create a more positive result of the situation. For example, rather than view the long bus journey as a major hassle, the rowers could use the bus journey as an opportunity for team discussion or mental preparation.

Task Relevant Focus - A return to a task relevant focus is vital if the athlete is to perform at his or her peak. Techniques such as goal-setting, cue words and competition focus plans can help inject a task relevant focus. Such techniques are most effective if rehearsed prior to the disturbance.



C. Enhancing Training and Recovery

Being mentally overloaded, emotionally exhausted or distraught can obviously affect mental, and emotional and physical capability. These can all be developed with training and adequate recovery. Physical training can often be enhanced with mental skills training (eg. goal setting, imagery and energizing). Three interventions will be discussed: Goal Setting, Imagery and Energizing.

Goal Setting - Goal setting has been shown to increase motivation and improve training intensity and performance.

1. Focus on short; intermittent range goals that are more tangible and provide immediate reinforcement for hard work. The goals should be specific, measurable and always stated in positive terms.
2. Set difficult but realistic goals. Athletes should feel that a goal is reachable only if they put forth maximum effort. For elite athletes, a properly set goal should be reached 20%-30% of the time. For younger athletes, this success rate should be 50%.
3. Along with each goal, there should be a specific plan and target date for when the goal will be reached. A log book detailing training and performance should be kept in order to evaluate success of these goals.
4. Athletes should be involved at every step of the goal setting process, to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the objective.

Imagery - Imagery may enhance training and performance by increasing readiness, providing alternate learning opportunities, or increasing confidence and motivation. Athletes should be encouraged to mentally rehearse according to the following guidelines:

1. Begin with imagining a simple task or situation that may or may not be sport related. As imagery skill is built, images can become more complex and lifelike, eventually including all five senses.
2. Keep the image positive. Always imagine success. If a negative image appears, stop the image and start again until a positive image is maintained.
3. Use external and internal imagery. Athletes should try to visualize themselves from both a third person perspective as though they were seeing a video of themselves, and a first person perspective, as though they were looking through their own eyes.
4. Athletes should use and practice imagery in two conditions:
 - following relaxation exercises
 - during periods of moderate to high arousal, such as during practice or training
5. Imagery training should be planned just like physical practice. Athletes should be encouraged to schedule approximately two imagery sessions into their weekly plan.

Energizing - If for some reason energy and emotion are low, the athlete may benefit from energizing techniques. Good food, hydration and recovery (physiology) can be the best sources of energy. Behavioural activities like light exercise, showers, massages, hand clapping, animated interaction, and read and react drills show that actively doing things can produce energy and readiness. Cognitive activities like imagery, goal setting and rehearsal can be self or other initiated and facilitated by music, videos, meditation or focusing.



Happiness and interest in the challenge/opportunity are probably the two best emotions to trigger energy and focus. It is important to remember, though, that fear, anger, guilt and surprise can all produce valuable energy as long as one can channel it effectively and maintain effective focus.

Recovery - If an athlete has low energy and emotion for a sustained period of time, it is possible that proper psychological rest has not been taken. Psychological rest or recovery must be equally important as physical rest and recovery, although athletes often do not spend as much time with it. Strategies to enhance recovery, such as massage, light exercise and stretching, are popular along with hydration, good nutrition and rest.

Mental relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, PMR and meditation, can sometimes help produce sleep and rest. Sometimes active rest produces the best recovery. An inspirational movie or concert can effect recovery, as can a walk with a friend, or the right amount and type of social activity. There is no doubt, though, that good recovery has physical, mental and emotional components and positive activities/stimulation in all three aspects should be included.

D. Response to Injury and Rehabilitation

Injuries often produce a very dramatic effect on the athlete including affecting their ability to perform, to realize important dreams, and their sense of identity, worth and meaning. It is important to accept and understand the feelings of anger, frustration and loss of opportunity that the injury presents while trying to encourage a positive overall perspective.

Case History - Response to Injury and Rehabilitation

A 27-year-old male volleyball player tore his MCL during the practice just before a pre-Olympic tour. Being concerned about a possible negative influence this player might have on other players, the coach tells him to stay away from the team until he is 100% fit to play. While his teammates are away practicing and playing, the athlete stays at home and trains with the team physiotherapist. He works hard and is ready to play in five weeks. However, when the athlete returns to the team, he doesn't play well and feels unfulfilled.

Discussion

While maintaining a positive team atmosphere is obviously important, excluding injured players is not the way to achieve this goal. Rather, injured players, in addition to implementing their own rehabilitation programs, should be encouraged to play a support role to the team throughout their recovery. These activities could include helping with practice or other team needs. By staying involved, the injured athlete will be current with team training and issues and will likely feel more motivated to train and recover quickly.

The athlete should practice some of the relaxation exercises discussed earlier, as these techniques can help reduce the effects of stress produced by return to play. Progressive practice simulations can also help the athlete systematically desensitize himself from fears and resensitize himself to task relevant cues. The athlete should gradually progress from drills and simulations into more game-like scrimmages and finally into full competition as confidence in his recovery increases. Guidelines concerning the progression of his return should be set and agreed upon by the athlete, coaches, medical staff and sport psychologist.



E. Team Dynamics and Positive Rivalries

Acknowledging the importance of everyone's role, and recognizing everyone's vulnerability without support, can be a good start at increasing respect and building trust. Once a player understands and accepts her role as important, she can begin to take pride in that role. From there, pride in one's team, unity of purpose and quality teamwork can help the team become stronger.

Case History - Team Dynamics and Positive Rivalries

A field hockey team has a set starting line-up - the same players begin each game and play the majority of the time. The reserves on this team usually play the last ten minutes of the first half and a five minute span midway through the second half. In the coach's opinion, the purpose of the second unit is to prevent any goals by the opposition, while giving the starters a few minutes to rest. While she has emphasized the importance of this role, the reserve players do not feel as though they are making a big contribution to the team's success.

Discussion

While the coach has defined the role of the reserves, the players have clearly not accepted it as important.

Re-defining Goals - The role should be redefined so it appears important. For example, when the reserves go in to play, they should know that they will only play for five to ten minutes at a time. As such should be encouraged to play at a higher intensity than players who will be on the field for the majority of the game.

Goal Setting - The coach and athletes should set specific measurable goals that define exactly what the spare players will try to accomplish. Achieving these goals contributes to the player's enthusiasm and self-worth.

Positive Rivalries and Professionalism - Top competitors and great "team" people thrive on positive rivalries. Selfish personal agendas can hurt team morale. Every team member should be challenged to actively manage their relationships with every other member. While individual needs are important, everyone must make sacrifices in order for the team to be successful.

F. Health and Values Challenges

The sport medicine physician can play a valuable role in assisting athletes through many difficult times. When an athlete becomes injured or ill, the team physician may need to work with the team physiologist in order to plan and monitor the athlete's training regime to ensure both the medical intervention and the emotional support promote an effective recovery.

For a recovering athlete, staff should discuss the effect that reduced training may have on his/her performance. The potential positive aspects of the change, such as the opportunity for rest and rejuvenation, should be emphasized. Once resources and demands have been accurately evaluated, physical symptoms of anxiety can be treated by the relaxation techniques discussed in section one. The athlete must begin to focus on factors that are within his/her control and set both cognitive and behavioural goals that help to maintain motivation and enthusiasm during this temporary period of reduced training.



Sport is not immune to “clinical disorders” such as depression, phobias, obsessions, paranoia, eating disorders and abuse. In fact, sometimes the demanding world of sport may actually contribute to some of these problems. For clinical disorders, early detection and referral, followed by emotional support are the most important initiatives.

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For further information, refer to the following web sites:

<http://www.aaasponline.org>

<http://www.sportdoc.com/>