

## **Self-talk in Sport – think your way to being better.**

**Theory** - Positive self-talk relates to the ability to overcome negative thinking and, by practicing positive self-talk, we are able to “talk over” negative thoughts, allowing our performance to be more relaxed and focused. Negative thoughts will increase anxiety levels. In reverse, positive self-talk creates happiness and excitement that lead to successful performance.

**Practice** - It is important that you are in control when practicing positive self-talk. Focus on those areas over which you have direct control and try to ignore external factors. Use positive self-talk during both training and performance, giving yourself praise each time you perform well, achieve an objective or feel that self-support is merited.

**Application** - Positive self-talk will negate negativity, helping develop an awareness of how well you perform and attain positive outcomes. Recognising your achievements will result in growing confidence and performance related arousal.

## **Self-talk as a tool for performance development.**

Self-talk is one of the main psychological strategies for developing a better mental state in sports context and may take several forms: positive (motivational), instructional and negative (Weinberg & Gould, 2003).

*Positive* self-talk does not contain “instruction phrases” such as “Work hard”, “Stay positive”, “I can do it” but specifically recognises positives in performance terms: “good effort”, “I nailed that move”, “that was a great line through the rapid”. It will increase motivation, energy, effort and positive attitude.

*Instructional* self-talk focuses more on technical and specific tasks, helping the performer improve execution (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). This might be interpreted as “being your own coach” with self-messages as: “stay loose at the waist”, “drive through your feet”, “look at your target”. Such short phrases are used by coaches looking to sharpen technical performance and can be used by performers to help with task related focus.

A potential dysfunctional side is *negative* self-talk which WILL limit or even prohibit performance and should be avoided or, if recognised, replaced by positive messages. Examples include: “the river is too fast today (but I’ve been on similar water and know this river well)”, “the waves are too big (but will ease off as the tide turns / we clear the headland)”, “I can’t paddle through that eddyline (but I can see a far more attractive eddy just below that one)”, etc.

Negative self-talk seriously knocks confidence, reduces performance arousal and increases anxiety levels, fostering self-doubt. Typically 70-80% of our self-focussed thinking tends to be negatively weighted while in a study group of elite athletes this figure falls to 40-50% (Stevens, 2009); perhaps most of us would benefit by adopting positive self-talk?

Studies carried out by sports psychologists suggest that positive key words and thoughts “prime” both our conscious and sub-conscious resulting in improved performance and that developing motivational self-talk strategies that fit with you as a person and in the context of your sporting performance is a central element in achieving success (Blanchfield et al, 2014).

If we accept even part of these findings it makes absolute sense to adopt positive self-talk to help improve our performance.

We can do this by consciously recognising how we talk to ourselves generally and in a sporting context; take control over our thoughts and trigger-words and develop an increasingly positive sense of being.

It may be helpful to draw up a list of motivational and instructional keywords to use under differing circumstances: where improved performance is required, where we need that extra burst of speed or focus on technical execution and when to relax and feel calm. Determining when to be motivational and when to be instructive in our inner dialogue will improve our effectiveness and the words and thoughts we use daily and in a sporting context will affect our general well-being, self-confidence and likelihood of success.

“Talking yourself out of exhaustion: the effects of self-talk on endurance performance.”  
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