

“What is Sports Psychology?”

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With the ever-increasing attention put upon sports, athletes are being called upon to challenge themselves to exceed previously set standards in their chosen sport. While there has long been vast attention given to the physical aspect of their performance, and what can be done to enhance it, only recently has the importance of the “mind game” been considered. As sports psychology has emerged as a prominent piece of athletic success, many athletes, coaches, trainers and others involved in the sports world have seen the positive impact this type of work can have on an athlete’s performance.

In general clinical mental health work, the symptoms the person is experiencing will limit their ability to function well and lead a happy and fulfilling life. In working within the arena of sports psychology, the symptoms have a profound impact on the athlete’s ability to perform and win. In sports psychology, I work with the athlete to help them learn and use specific psychological techniques that help them to more easily achieve their potential. The goal of sports psychology is to improve the performance of the athlete on the playing field, wherever that may be.

A major misconception of sports psychology is that it is all related to anxiety reduction. This is not the case, as many athletes need to have a certain level of anxiety prior to a game or match in order to feel fully prepared to play. Most athletes do not want or need to experience deep relaxation prior to or during their athletic performance. In fact, a main goal of the work I do is to assist the athlete in learning how to channel and manage their anxiety to enhance their performance. This typically involves assisting the athlete in calling up the pre-game feelings of anxiety they have experienced in the past and tying those into a positive performance. By making a connection between the two, the athlete learns to associate anxiety with a positive outcome and successful performance.

Another misconception is that the athlete must be able to visualize a perfect performance as a part of the treatment. In actuality, it is most helpful for the athlete to be able to instead develop mental techniques to deal with the personal and/or team problems that arise during the course of any event. This is another main focus of the work I do as I teach these techniques and tools to the athlete. This process is about creating a protocol for the athlete to use during practice, before a game, and at any point during the game when they are likely to lose focus. It may involve elements such as music, meditation and repetition of positive statements about performance.

One client found great success in developing the protocol to deal with increased anxiety related to her coach and teammates. She found herself profoundly affected in a negative way by the harsh critiques of the coach as well as fighting among teammates. I had her create a list of positive statements about her athletic skills, very specific and tailored to her as an individual. By incorporating those into a process of focusing on an object, in this case, a volleyball, and repeating these statements to herself, she was able to

effectively block the negativity she had previously felt and continue to play to the best of her abilities.

One very good approach for working with an athlete is to use the “miracle question” technique (Steve de Shazer, 1988). This involves asking the athlete “If a miracle happened tonight, while you were sleeping, how would you know it had happened?” “What is the first thing you would notice that would tell you a miracle had taken place and your athletic problem was resolved?” Asking these questions greatly assists in narrowing down the focus of treatment to achieve the best results possible.

Ultimately, it is key that the athlete truly believes in the work they are going to do and that they are doing it for themselves. As with most issues in life, we are more likely to be successful if we are working to achieve our own goals.

How can I learn more?

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Other resources:

Association for the Advancement of Applied Sports Psychology (AAASP)
www.aaasponline.org
North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity (NASPSPA)
www.naspspa.org
International Society for Sport Psychiatry (ISSP)
www.mindbodyandsports.com/issp
Winning the Mind Game, John H. Edgette, PsyD and Tim Rowan, MSW, Crown House Publishing, 2003