Self-talk in Sports

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Preface

Self-talk refers to statements that athletes and exercisers address to themselves; these might represent automatic verbalizations or more deliberate forms of speech. Although such statements can be said aloud, most self-talk is said covertly as a silent voice in one's mind.

Despite the prominence of self-talk in the sport psychology literature, shared approaches to definition, theory, research, and measurement of self-talk have only begun to emerge over the past decade. Application of self-talk has been based heavily on intuitive ideas around the value of "positive" self-talk rather than on the most up-to-date research and theory. This book is provides an overview of the history of self-talk in sport psychology and performance with a focus on self-talk definitions, theory, research, and measurement.

The application of biomechanics to improve technique may occur in two ways: Teachers and coaches may use their knowledge of mechanics to correct actions of a student or athlete in order to improve the execution of a skill, or a biomechanics researcher may discover a new and more effective technique for performing a sport skill. In the first instance, teachers and coaches use qualitative biomechanical analysis methods in their everyday teaching and coaching to effect changes in technique.

Athletes in collision sports such as American football, hockey, and rugby have the highest risk of concussion. In American football, which has the highest rate of concussion among sports, data suggest that between 4% and 6% of athletes incur a concussion during an average year of exposure. This is an inevitable consequence of the purposeful collisions (e.g., tackles, checks) that occur in these sports.

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Emotional control and intensity are difficult to maintain during practice and competition for individuals and teams. For individuals mistakes often trigger quick emotional reactions like fear, frustration, anger, or disappointment from automatic (subcortical) brain areas. These quick emotions may be followed by additional mistakes (like hitting another poor shot in golf, giving up a second home run in baseball or committing a needless foul in soccer or basketball) unless a planned behavioral approach to prevent this is adopted.

A personality type termed "obligatory exercisers" describes individuals who participate in exercise at excessive and even harmful levels. For these individuals, exercise becomes the central focus of life, and their behaviour becomes pathological in terms of their need to control themselves and their environment. Clinical evidence demonstrates a similar link between anorexia nervosa, a psychopathological eating disorder, and compulsive exercise. Specialists in exercise psychology attempt to help individuals plan and engage in exercise behaviour that is healthy and non-controlling to enhance total well-being.

The sport-specific model of self-talk offers a range of self-talk hypotheses that may be tested over the coming years by providing a conceptual schema for understanding how personal factors, behavior, and context interact with self-talk. Further, the categorization of self-talk as it relates to System 1 and System 2 may provide further insight into existing sport psychology phenomena such as paralysis by analysis and choking and direct attention to little-studied areas related to individual differences and cultural and contextual factors. Thus, progress with regard to definition, measurement, and theory will provide the foundation for future developments in the field.

This book is provides an overview of the history of self-talk in sport psychology and performance with a focus on self-talk definitions, theory, research, and measurement.

—Dr. Arpita Mishra

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1

Introduction

There is a lot to think about during exercise such as maintaining proper body mechanics and posture, controlling effort and force, and breathing properly. These efforts all occur at the same time we motivate and push ourselves to do more and work harder.

An additional factor to consider during exercise is our own self-talk, also known as our internal dialogue or chatter. The thoughts we fuel our mind can impact an athlete's sports performance and overall workout experience either positively or negatively. This is because thoughts impact feelings, which in turn impact our behavior. The quality of our thoughts can impact how productive or motivated we are — especially with exercise.

The good news is that the more we practice the steps listed below, athletes and exercisers can rewire negative self-talk to create new thinking habits.

WHAT NEGATIVE SELF-TALK SOUNDS LIKE

Over the years, I have heard clients share their negative self-talk in training sessions, or before and after class workouts.

I have heard self-talk statements such as:

- "I can't do this!"
- "Exercise will never be easy for me..."
- "I'm not skillful enough..."

...and the list goes on.

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As you might imagine, negative statements like these listed above do not motivate performance or propel individuals forward in the way that they need to meet goals, challenge obstacles, and create sustainable behavioral change.

Instead, they decrease our self-efficacy belief in ourselves, and the resulting outcomes become self-fulfilling prophecies.

STEPS TO REWIRE SELF-TALK

Due to its impact on our behavior and motivation, it is important to note when negative self-talk emerges. Doing so can help prevent the negative influence on motivation, exercise adherence, and sports performance. Here are some tips on how to start cultivating mindfulness to notice self-talk, and reframe thinking to better enhance exercise behaviors.

Pay Attention Deliberately

Mindfulness practices start small and build over time. If cultivating mindfulness is new to you, start this journey by paying more attention deliberately to the thoughts you have right before, during, and after exercise. Shift your attention away from external distractions, and pay attention to your internal experience. Notice what comes up for you in the moment, such as thoughts and feelings.

Refine The Efforts Over Time

Refining new skills takes time, regardless of the skill. Keep this fact in mind as you practice staying present.

Since harnessing this awareness is a process, try not to put too much pressure on yourself to notice all of the time, and instead, focus on the self-talk statements you do notice.

Focus on the successes, and trust that the more you refine and practice paying attention deliberately, the more skillful you will become in these efforts.

Reframe The Unhelpful Thoughts

I suggest writing down the negative self-talk statements that come up for you.

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What exactly are you saying to yourself? Be very specific in the wording that you write down.

Then, ask yourself, *What might be a more helpful and adaptive statement?*

For example, an athlete while running who says to himself/herself: "*I'm so slow right now*" could reframe that thought to: "*I want to get faster, and will keep working on this*".

Both statements imply that one's running is slower than where they want it to be, but the reframed version propels positive future action in a way that the original version does not.

It is important to give the disclaimer that the process of reframing does not mean to replace all negative statements with an overly positive one.

The goal is to reframe negative, self-defeating thoughts in a way that encourages growth and motivation. Doing so will have a positive impact on sports enhancement outcomes.

Reinforce And Repeat

The next step is to continue reinforcing the newly reframed thought in moments when the old, negative self-talk emerges.

In other words, when you catch yourself defaulting to negative self-talk, say your newly reframed statement out loud or quietly to yourself. Continue to repeat this each time the negative self-talk pops up.

The more you use the new statement instead of the older one, the more it gets reinforced and becomes a habit.

Do you have another negative thought you want to reframe? If yes, repeat this process outlined above. The more you practice staying mindful to self-talk and reframing negative statements, the more skillful you will become.

Overall, the process of paying attention deliberately to our cognitions in order to reframe negative self-talk can have a profound impact on goal outcomes. When we shift "*can't*" to "can" and reduce statements which talk negatively on our current limitations and/or capabilities, it will have a positive impact on our athletic

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performance as well. This mindfulness process positively impacts exercise motivation and adherence and uplifts one's experience and enjoyment of exercise.

THE TOXIC EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

We all have an inner critic. At times this little voice can actually be helpful and keep us motivated toward goals—like when it reminds us that what we're about to eat isn't healthy or what we're about to do may not be wise. However, this voice can often be more harmful than helpful, particularly when it gets into the realm of excessive negativity. This is known as negative self-talk, and it can really bring us down.

Negative self-talk is something that most of us experience from time to time, and it comes in many forms. It also creates significant stress, not only to us but to those around us if we're not careful. Here's what you need to know about negative self-talk and its effects on your body, your mind, your life, and your loved ones.

What Is Negative Self-Talk?

Negative self-talk can take many forms. It can sound grounded ("I'm not good at this, so I should avoid attempting it for my own personal safety," for example) or it's downright mean ("I can never do anything right!"). It may seem like a realistic appraisal of a situation ("I got a C on this test. I guess I'm not good at math."), only to devolve into a fear-based fantasy ("I'll never be able to go to a good college").

The musings of your inner critic may sound a lot like a critical parent or friend from your past. It can follow the path of typical cognitive distortions: catastrophizing, blaming, and the like.

Basically, negative self-talk is any inner dialogue you have with yourself that may be limiting your ability to believe in yourself and your own abilities, and to reach your potential. It is any thought that diminishes your ability to make positive changes in your life or your confidence in yourself to do so. So negative self-talk can not only be stressful, but it can really stunt your success.

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Consequences of Negative Self-Talk

Negative self-talk can affect us in some pretty damaging ways. One large-scale study found that rumination and self-blame over negative events were linked to an increased risk of mental health problems.

Focusing on negative thoughts may lead to decreased motivation as well as greater feelings of helplessness. This type of critical inner dialogue has even been linked to depression, so it's definitely something to fix.

Those who find themselves frequently engaging in negative self-talk tend to be more stressed. This is in large part due to the fact that their reality is altered to create an experience where they don't have the ability to reach the goals they've set for themselves.

Negative self-talk can lead to a lowered ability to see opportunities, as well as a decreased tendency to capitalize on these opportunities. This means that the heightened sense of stress comes from both the perception and the changes in behavior that come from it. Other consequences of negative self-talk can include:

- Limited thinking: The more you tell yourself you can't do something, the more you believe it.
- Perfectionism: You begin to really believe that "great" isn't as good as "perfect," and that perfection is actually attainable. In contrast, mere high achievers tend to do better than their perfectionistic counterparts because they are generally less stressed and are happy with a job well done. They don't pick it apart and try to zero in on what could have been better.
- Feelings of depression: Some research has shown that negative self-talk can lead to an exacerbation of feelings of depression. If left unchecked, this could be quite damaging.
- Relationship challenges: Whether the constant self-criticism makes you seem needy and insecure or you turn your negative self-talk into more general negative habits that bother others, a lack of communication and even a "playful" amount of criticism can take a toll.

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One of the most obvious drawbacks of negative self-talk is that it's not positive. This sounds simplistic, but research has shown that positive self-talk is a great predictor of success.

For example, one study on athletes compared four different types of self-talk (instructional, motivational, positive, and negative) and found that positive self-talk was the greatest predictor of success. People didn't need to remind themselves how to do something as much as they needed to tell themselves that they are doing something great and that others notice it as well.

How to Minimize Negative Self-Talk

There are many ways to reduce the self-talk in your daily life. Different strategies work better for different people, so try a few on and see which ones are most effective for you.

Catch Your Critic

Learn to notice when you're being self-critical so you can begin to stop. For example, notice when you say things to yourself that you wouldn't say to a good friend or a child.

Remember That Thoughts and Feelings Aren't Always Reality

Thinking negative things about yourself may feel like astute observations, but your thoughts and feelings about yourself can definitely not be considered accurate information. Your thoughts can be skewed like everyone else's, subject to biases and the influence of your moods.

Give Your Inner Critic a Nickname

There was once a "Saturday Night Live" character known as Debbie Downer. She would find the negative in any situation. If your inner critic has this dubious skill as well, you can tell yourself, "Debbie Downer is doing her thing again."

When you think of your inner critic as a force outside of yourself and even give it a goofy nickname, it's not only more easy to realize that you don't have to agree, but it becomes less threatening and more easy to see how ridiculous some of your critical thoughts can be.

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Contain Your Negativity

If you find yourself engaging in negative self-talk, it helps to contain the damage that a critical inner voice can cause by only allowing it to criticize certain things in your life, or be negative for only an hour in your day. This puts a limit on how much negativity can come from the situation.

Change Negativity to Neutrality

When engaging in negative self-talk, you may be able to catch yourself, but it can sometimes be difficult to force yourself to stop a train of thought in its tracks. It's often far easier to change the intensity of your language. "I can't stand this" becomes, "This is challenging." "I hate..." becomes, "I don't like..." and even, "I don't prefer..." When your self-talk uses more gentle language, much of its negative power is muted as well.

Cross-Examine Your Inner Critic

One of the damaging aspects of negative self-talk is that it often goes unchallenged. After all, if it's going on in your head, others may not be aware of what you're saying and thus can't tell you how wrong you are. It's far better to catch your negative self-talk and ask yourself how true it is. The vast majority of negative self-talk is an exaggeration, and calling yourself on this can help to take away its damaging influence.

Think Like a Friend

When our inner critic is at its worst, it can sound like our worst enemy. Often we'll say things to ourselves in our heads that we'd never say to a friend. Why not reverse this and—when you catch yourself speaking negatively in your head—make it a point to imagine yourself saying this to a treasured friend. If you know you wouldn't say it this way, think of how you'd share your thoughts with a good friend or what you'd like a good friend to say to you. This is a great way to shift your self-talk in general.

Shift Your Perspective

Sometimes looking at things in the long term can help you to realize that you may be placing too great an emphasis on something.

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For example, you may ask yourself if something you're upset by will really matter in five years or even one. Another way to shift perspective is to imagine that you are panning out and looking at your problems from a great distance. Even thinking of the world as a globe and of yourself as a tiny, tiny person on this globe can remind you that most of your worries aren't as big as they seem. This can often minimize the negativity, fear, and urgency in negative self-talk.

Say It Aloud

Sometimes when you catch yourself thinking negative thoughts in your mind, simply saying them aloud can help. Telling a trusted friend what you're thinking about can often lead to a good laugh and shine a light on how ridiculous some of our negative self-talk can be. Other times, it can at least bring support. Even saying some negative self-talk phrases around under your breath can remind you how unreasonable and unrealistic they sound. This will remind you to give yourself a break.

Stop That Thought

For some, simply stopping negative thoughts in their tracks can be helpful. This is known as "thought-stopping" and can take the form of snapping a rubber band on your wrist, visualizing a stop sign, or simply changing to another thought when a negative one enters your mind. This can be helpful with repetitive or extremely critical thoughts like, "I'm no good," or, "I'll never be able to do this," for example.

Replace the Bad With Some Good

This is one of the best routes to combating negative self-talk: Replace it with something better. Take a negative thought and change it to something encouraging that's also accurate. Repeat until you find yourself needing to do it less and less often. This works well with most bad habits: replacing unhealthy food with healthy food, for example. It's a great way to develop a more positive way of thinking about yourself and about life.

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