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Build Confidence with Affirmations and Self-Talk

Bruce Jenner used to interpret increased heartbeat, muscle tremor, rapid breathing, increased sweating, and a need to urinate just before the decathlon as a sign that he was nervous, excessively aroused, and wasn't going to do well. These thoughts inevitably led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Over time, he reframed those feelings and thoughts and told himself that he was ready, prepared both physically and psychologically, and that those symptoms were a sign of readiness and positive signals to compete. The result? An Olympic gold in the decathlon in 1976. I saw him compete in the Olympic trials a few months before, and he definitely shifted his focus between the trials and his tremendous performance in Montreal.

My friend and colleague, the late Dorothy Harris, PhD, who was a professor of sport psychology at Pennsylvania State University in University Park, used to say, "The only difference between the best performance and the worst performance is the variation in our self-talk and the self-thoughts and attitudes we carry around with us." Dr. Harris was not only speaking of sport but also life in general. During her career, she wrote many articles and books and spoke about the relationship of self-talk to attitudes and behavior—right up until a few days before her death from pancreatic cancer. After her initial cancer diagnosis, she challenged her doctors by declaring that she would outlive their medical predictions by more than a year. For years she had practiced imagery, visualization, and positive affirmation strategies, and she believed this would improve her health. She won the bet and outlived the doctors' prognosis by 2 years!

THE POWER OF PAST EVENTS

Dr. Harris and others have written extensively about the fact that our awareness in sporting events goes way beyond what is happening at the moment when we compete. Our awareness level during a tennis match, for example, is triggered by earlier events and memories of previous matches. We often find ourselves searching the unconscious for memories of the past, when we were in similar situations. Most of us go back to those situations in our minds and reflect on how that previous match affected us and our performance.

We then take an inventory of that previous competitive situation and decide how we are going to play this match based on the pleasant or unpleasant thoughts that surrounded that previous event. If we had unpleasant experiences in the past, negative thoughts might seep into our minds, affecting our muscle control and overall self-image of how we might play the game today. If we had prior pleasant athletic experiences, the feelings of competence, usefulness, and high self-esteem might reemerge at the appropriate moments. These emotions and experiences have a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies that either work to our advantage or disadvantage.

When we talk about building confidence with affirmations and self-talk, it is important to look at the link between self-confidence and success. Certain athletes have been able to build on their confidence through years of positive thinking and reminding themselves of positive outcomes brought about by positive affirmations. These are athletes who do not give up, even though they may be four games behind in a tennis match or a quarter-mile behind in a marathon.

Tennis great Pete Sampras, who retired in August 2003 after a stunning career, is one who uses positive affirmations and self-talk to remind himself that he can conquer an opponent even if he is behind and not playing well. He will often remind himself that he has been on this court before, played the same opponent, and now needs to shift gears with some positive self-talk reminders that "everything is okay." Kenny Moore, two-time Olympic marathoner, never gave up in the grueling 26.2-mile race, even though he often experienced pain and fatigue in the last 4 to 5 miles. He told me over lunch recently, "I often reminded myself of growing up in Oregon and training on those cold, wet nights. It was tough, and I know I can work through this experience as well."

BOOSTING BELIEF IN YOUR ABILITY

Most of us don't even realize that we spend a good deal of time talking to ourselves. We are unaware of this internal dialogue; we just know that we are feeling some discomfort. Nevertheless, thoughts directly affect feelings and, ultimately, athletic movement and activity. Negative thoughts lead to negative feelings, low self-esteem, and poor performance. How can we turn these thoughts around to create positive emotions, peak performance, and a belief that we are consistent winners?

Confident athletes such as Moore and Sampras think positively, use self-talk to build on their confidence, and believe in affirmations. They focus on mastering their sports and not on worrying about poor performance or negative consequences of failure. Building on previous success and not dwelling on failure or poor performance fosters a positive self-image, confidence, and personal belief for the "can-do" athlete. In talking to a gaggle of top Olympic coaches (for instance, Russ Hellickson, head wrestling coach at Ohio State University in Columbus and two-time Olympic silver medalist), I learned that effective coaching begins by building an individual inventory of positive outcomes.

So when a coach works with a top-ranked tennis player like Sampras, the coach needs to take stock of the physical and emotional strengths of a given performance, then remind the player that he has the skills to do better after a particular match. The coach is in a unique position to observe court presence, shot selection, and footwork and reiterate performance objectives and goals so that the player can enhance his sense of worth and self-confidence. This initiates and reinforces the player's feeling of power and internal control, which builds the athlete's confidence in his tennis performance.

To be able to build confidence with affirmations, athletes have to genuinely believe in themselves. My colleague, sport psychologist Jim Loehr, PhD, founding director of sport sciences for the United States Tennis Association and co-founder of LGE Sport Science Training Center in Orlando, Florida, has worked with some of the top tennis players in the world. These players have wonderful physiological gifts. They hit hard with great precision and their reflexes are swift, but many lack basic confidence and have very low self-images. The key, says Dr. Loehr, is to identify when and where their self-concept breaks down and try to intervene with positive selftalk and affirmations that foster strength, grace, and consistency in their tennis strokes. Positive intentions can result in positive outcomes.

Dr. Loehr suggests that we have to get to "basic confidence and early images of success," and other sport psychologists express the same sentiments. For some athletes, this might mean going back and exploring childhood concerns, fear of failure, embarrassment, humiliation among friends and family, and childhood trauma. This base of understanding builds consistently, right up to and during competition.

Mel Rosen, 1992 Olympic track and field coach and former track and field coach at Auburn University in Alabama, used to approach one of his student athletes, a three-time Olympic sprint champion, with a keen and sensitive eye to building last-minute confidence and self-image. "I would see Harvey Glance with his head down before the Olympic Trials and know that he wasn't emotionally prepared to race. I would remind him of his other big races, remind him of his need for positive self-talk and positive images when he set up in the blocks. Most of all, I would tell Harvey to keep his head up and remind him that he was the best in the business and that he could get the job done."

Glance, now head coach at the University of Alabama, uses a similar but more elaborate formula to build confidence levels. He writes notes to his athletes congratulating them on their workouts and reminding them to stay positive and refreshed when they train. He reminds them to keep a healthy and positive attitude in their daily workouts so that they can bring these images and affirmations to each race.

PERSONAL PEP TALKS

What does self-talk mean, and how does it affect athletic performance? The frequency and content of thoughts vary from individual to individual and situation to situation. Anytime you think about something, you are "talking to yourself," which is a type of self-talk.

Affirmations, on the other hand, are a very specific and individualized type of self-talk. For instance, if I say to myself before shooting white-water rapids, "Steven, stay focused," that's self-talk. Affirmations, however, would be more specific to me. I might say to myself, "I know I'm really good at doing this. I know my emotional state. I'm very positive."

Self-talk and self-affirmation become great emotional strengths when they enhance self-esteem and self-worth. It works to great advantage when this self-improvement leads to a terrific performance.

Here's how self-talk works. Pete Sampras, whom I mentioned earlier, tended to let anger trap him as a child, and he allowed it to lead to negative tension on the court. To combat this tendency, Sampras says positive things to himself, such as, "I need to get out of this mind-set," "I need to let go of that last point and stay focused on the present," and "I need to stay focused on the present and prepare for the next point." When Sampras does that, he stays fresher, he is less easily distracted, and his mind is more receptive to being able to focus on the game.

Such positive talk and affirmation may help an athlete stay in the present, completely focused on the task at hand. These mental skills may allow an athlete to perform at peak output, while blocking out images or thoughts from previous unsuccessful events. Ideally, the ultimate goal of affirmation and self-talk skill development may be to help the athlete's actions become automatic, yet intuitive. Allowing the athlete to feel and sense his way through a competition is the path to a peak performance. Most athletes at any level of sport rarely go through a competitive event without some degree of thought or feeling. Therefore, it's best to try and make those thoughts and feelings positive ones.

It is important for coaches to teach competitors how to recognize and control those thoughts. It's not the thinking itself that leads to poor performance, but rather, misguided or inappropriate thinking. These are concepts that noted sport psychologist Jean Williams, PhD, has written about and discussed extensively in her work with college and Olympic athletes. She recommends that athletes learn positive self-talk and affirmations so that they can correct bad habits, prepare for performance, focus attention, build confidence and competence, and create a positive constructive mood.

The ultimate goal of teaching self-talk and positive affirmations is to have the athlete achieve a sense of mastery—a proficiency that becomes automatic. This takes time, however, and you have to begin with the fundamentals. A coach or parent might want to suggest a cue word—a simple reminder that the athlete can incorporate into his motor skill. Dr. Loehr suggests that a young player should have many short, concise cue words that accompany forehand, backhand, crosscourt, overhead, and down-the-line shots. These words might be as simple as saying out loud, "footwork, position, footwork." These reminders, over time, become internalized so that the athlete never thinks about the placement of feet in relation to timing of the racket swing. It becomes automatic and programmed into the neuromuscular response.

Different kinds of self-talk and affirmation are geared to the nature of the sport or physical activity. During a marathon race, for example, Olympian Moore would have used a different set of strategies than tennis star Sampras would during his match. A runner, for instance, may choose the word "steady" or the phrase "keep your pace" during races. Likewise, Olympic champion diver Greg Louganis would have used different self-talk reminders than two-time Olympic medalist figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. One athlete might have the luxury of pausing, reflecting, and conducting the self-talk and affirmation imagery, while another may have to use continuous talk and affirmation strategies. Concentration and control may not vary according to the sport, but timing and implementation do. (In Part Three of this book, you'll find examples of sport-specific self-talk and affirmation.)

SELF-CONFIDENCE THROUGH SELF-TALK

You can use self-talk and affirmations to correct improper form and bad habits in a number of sport-related movements. Consider tennis doubles great Gigi Fernandez, who struggled with staying focused, disciplined, and on top of her game during her professional career. She was notorious for inconsistent hitting, poor shot selection, and erratic serves and volleys. Julie Anthony, PhD, her former coach and a former tennis pro, designed specific self-talk exercises on a computer that helped Fernandez stay cool, relaxed, and in control of her game. Using verbal cues to remind Fernandez to stay loose in the knees and relaxed with her forehand shot and during follow-through on her overhead, Dr. Anthony set in motion a series of self-improvement exercises that contributed to Fernandez's gaining greater self-confidence and control of her tennis game.

Probably the most important things to remember about self-talk and using affirmations for building confidence are to stay in the present, stay focused only on the goals at hand, and concentrate. Admittedly, this is easy to say and difficult to do. If we focus too much attention on ourselves and become preoccupied with our own needs, anxiety creeps in, and we worry about every detail. These details often lead to an over-consuming fear that we don't feel quite right or that the weather and temperature are not what we expected.

These thoughts lead to negative emotions that take us away from the present competition. When this happens, small errors in our performance escalate into big ones, and we tend to overreact, leading to more errors and mental mistakes. Thoughts and statements such as "I never compete well in Stuttgart," "I never do well against the Russians," "I don't like the feel of those parallel bars at that gym," or "I never did like the lighting in that rink" can all sabotage a perfect performance.

The trick is to recognize this self-defeating pattern and reprogram the internal dialogue to positive statements. If you don't have a coach, you'll have to listen to yourself carefully and deliberately change the message you're sending to yourself if it's a negative one. Once you are able to find and shift these statements and affirmations and their associated feelings, emotions, and sport behaviors, you'll find yourself

reacting with a new confidence and self-esteem.

Leann Warren, a 1980 Olympian, had to leave track and field because of recurring injuries that led to debilitating knee surgery. Yet she readily made the transition into cycling, where she had early, tremendous success. She once noted that she transferred the memories, positive affirmations, and supreme confidence from her track days into cycling. "I had some unfinished business with my track career," Warren explained at the time. "It ended much too early without my fulfilling some important career goals. Consequently, I am taking that unfinished energy, imagery, self-talk, and wonderful confidence and carrying it into my new sport. Even though I am struggling with the nuances of competitive cycling, my confidence is high, and I am able to recall positive thoughts and emotions from my other life."

As we get older and switch from one sport to another, most of us will call up images, self-talk, and levels of confidence that will assist us in our new endeavors. The process of self-talk leading to self-confidence is a lifelong event that we never lose. Instead, we can continually enhance the process.

FROM: Mental Training for Peak Performance by Steven Ungerleider, PhD