



Sport • Psych news



Self-Talk

Hi Wildcats,

Have you ever been in the situation where you made a small mistake early in your competition and unable to recover? Have you ever been in the “zone,” performing effortlessly, made a small mistake, and suddenly lost your confidence? If so, your self-talk, or what you say to yourself, may be part of the problem. Self-talk can be either positive or negative; it can energize you and improve your play, or drag you down and take you out of your game. Just like you would physically train for any sport, you must also mentally train your mind to regulate your self-talk. Without good mental training, you run the risk of unproductive self-talk that can “psych you out.” You must train your mind to think positive effective thoughts while challenging and reducing unproductive ones.

Self-talk refers to the thoughts running through your mind that you say to yourself, either silently or aloud. Positive thinking acknowledges your success and abilities, motivates you, and serves as a guide, showing you where you need to focus on improving your skills. Unproductive self-talk is overly critical, damaging, and distracts focus from your performance.

Below are examples of mistakes people make that generally lead to unproductive self-talk and decreased performance levels.

Focusing on the past

Some athletes become too fixated on mistakes they made earlier in the performance or their career. By focusing on the past, they neglect what is currently happening in the present or what may happen next. Dwelling on the past hampers current performance.

Focusing on the future

Placing too much emphasis on the outcome (or the future) distracts

you from concentrating on your performance (the present). You will fare better if you focus your positive thoughts on your present performance. Remind yourself to stay in the here and now. Instead of focusing where you finish in the race, try focusing on the essential steps you need to take during the race. It will serve you much better.

Emphasizing weaknesses

Unproductive self-talk focuses too much on your weaknesses. While it is important to address them, that should be done in practice rather than in a competitive situation.



ARIZONA



During competition, it is more helpful to focus on the task at hand and the talents you have developed to handle them.

Too much concern over uncontrollable factors

If you focus your thoughts on factors such as the weather or the quality of the referee, you are taking your focus away from where it should be (your performance). Not only that, it is a waste of mental energy because these and other variables are largely beyond your control and will not change no matter how unhappy you may be about them.

Requiring perfection

While you may attempt to be perfect every time you perform, demanding perfection is unrealistic and will have a negative impact on performance. Demanding perfection on every performance, every time you compete, is not a realistic goal. If you make a mistake early on, it will bring you down due to unreasonable expectations.

Controlling unproductive self-talk

Self-talk, like any other skill, must be practiced in order to be mastered. Build up your positive self-talk, don't let unproductive



“Self-talk, like any other skill, must be practiced in order to be mastered.”



self-talk spiral out of control and work against you! If you do engage in unproductive self-talk, you risk falling into a pattern of continued unproductive self-talk. Here are some ways to control your thinking.

Monitor self talk

It is very important to be aware of your self-talk – to listen to it and make an assessment: How helpful is my self-talk? Is the statement I am thinking helping or hurting my performance? Another thing to monitor is your situational self-talk. There may be specific situations where you are being more negative than others. You should remember these scenarios so that in the future you can prepare to catch them and take corrective action.



Create a self-talk plan

If you frequently find yourself in situations where you are engaging in unproductive self-talk, it would be a good idea to come up with a self-talk plan to combat it. You want to be aware of the self-talk and identify what you are telling yourself. For example, if you were to engage in unproductive self-talk every time you miss a free throw in a game such as “I’m choking” or “I’m blowing it,” this would be a habit that you would want to change. Then when you have spare time, come up with words and statements you can use to negate the unproductive self-talk and to focus on positive alternatives. Research has shown the most productive self-talk plan is one that includes words that represent key elements of the skill you desire to execute. For example, before a free throw, you may say to yourself, “breath, focus, hand placement, elbow at 90 degrees, back of the rim, rotation, snap your wrist, fingers to the floor, execute.”

Let go of unproductive thoughts

If you are in a situation where you are aware of engaging in unproductive self-talk, there are various strategies to counteract these thoughts or let them go. A method that Alex Rodriguez has been reported to use after striking out is to look at the ground and channel any negativity he is feeling. He then quickly yanks his neck back, with his eyes closed, until his face is pointed upward

toward the sky. He has developed a routine to let go of negativity – something you might want to consider. Another way to derail your unproductive thoughts is to think of your mind as a computer and delete the “unproductive thought” files. Visualize yourself pressing the delete button and watching the file move to your trash. Both of these methods can be used in competition or everyday life. They will help clear your mind and allow you to focus on positive thoughts.

Increase positive thoughts

Use them to improve your confidence by focusing on your strengths and abilities as an elite athlete. Filling your mind with positive thoughts also prevents unproductive ones from entering your consciousness. A great place to start is to remind yourself how hard you practiced and trained for this event. Think about how all your preparation is about to pay off. Positive self-talk is vital during competition.

Replace unproductive thoughts with positive thoughts

This is similar to increasing positive thoughts. When you let go of your unproductive thoughts, a void will be left and it is important to fill it with positive ones. Otherwise you risk the unproductive ones returning and hurting your performance.



If you need help coming up with positive self-talk phrases, reducing unproductive self-talk, or if you would like to discuss other sport psychology techniques; please contact Angie at 621-8805 or ask your athletic trainer to schedule an appointment. I look forward to working with you.

Best Wishes,
Scott Goldman, Ph.D.

Sport and Clinical Psychologist for Student-Athletes

WISDOM