

A Counseling Approach to Performance Enhancement

Abstract: In sport psychology, performance enhancement consultation usually involves mental skills training, i. e., goal setting, visualization, concentration, relaxation, self-talk, etc. This presentation will discuss and demonstrate an alternative, namely, a counseling approach to performance enhancement. This is an experientially based (rather than skill based) approach that focuses on performance issues and present experience. It is grounded in counseling theory, and utilizes a growth and development model, in which problems are seen as the result of patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving learned in the past. This approach aims to change those patterns with new learning in the present, and thereby, diminish the impact of the problems. In addition, performance is viewed as a process ("performing") rather than an outcome, allowing the dialogue to include not only *what* was done, but also *how* it was done. The methods include following the athlete's lead as he or she describes the situation, and remaining focused on the athlete's abilities and options in the present. Following an introductory discussion, an interview will be conducted with a volunteer from among the participants in the workshop. The volunteer will be selected on the basis of a willingness to present a real life situation, preferably involving a sport performance issue. The objective of the interview is to illustrate the counseling approach to performance enhancement. An opportunity will be provided for discussion, comments, and questions after the interview.

Theoretical Basis

Psychoanalytic Theory- Basic Principles- all behavior has meaning; internal processes influence present functioning; the relationship between the practitioner and the client occupies a central role in the effectiveness of the consultative work.

Gestalt Therapy- "organismic self-regulation"- an inner process in which a need emerges into the foreground, is satisfied, and recedes into the background of our experience. This allows another need to emerge and be satisfied; and a continuing flow of needs and satisfaction occurs. This process may be interrupted by our thoughts, feelings, conflicting desires, or by external influences. When this occurs, the unsatisfied need remains and interferes with the flow. In this approach, the focus is on present functioning, aimed at removing the interruptions to satisfaction. It starts with what is known, and explores what is not in awareness.

Growth and Development Model- people have the inherent capacity for optimal functioning, and could do so if nothing interfered. Psychological problems, which are obstacles to this growth, are mostly the result of what we have learned, rather than sickness or disease. What we learned in the past can be changed by what we learn in the present.

Methods

Although originally trained as a clinician, with a background in medical research, I've come to see myself more as an educator. The focus of my work with athletes and others is to help them change the learned thinking patterns that contribute to distressed feelings or troublesome behavior, and to remove the barriers to their optimal functioning. This focus is primarily on present experience based on the hypothesis that past negative experience might recede unless present patterns of thinking and feeling keep it in the foreground. The language used by the athlete is followed closely, because it not only expresses the present thoughts and feelings, but also contributes to them. Describe entry points and leading/following in consultation. Explore behavior, thinking, feeling, and wanting.

Definitions (Dictionary)- "performance"- the execution of an action (an event).

"excellence"- eminently good (an outcome).

In this presentation, think of "performance" and "excellence" as processes, as "performing" and "excelling"- focus on how it is done rather than the result.

Performing and excelling as processes- internal experiences rather than external evaluations.

- fully present- Here, Now, "Present."
- fully focused- whole self- (Zen-"when you sit, sit" "when you practice, practice").
- requires awareness, commitment, and energy.
- can be applied to any task or situation.

"Golden-Haired Lion"- (Sufi story- modified)

-Disciple- "Master, when lions seize upon an opponent, be it elephant or rabbit, they make exhaustive use of their power. Where does this power come from?"

-Master- "It comes from the spirit of excellence- putting forth one's whole being, in which nothing is kept in reserve, nothing goes to waste. When you can perform in this way, you too can be a golden-haired lion."

George Bernard Shaw- "By the time I die, I want to be all used up."

Audience Participation

- Think of a recent performance of yours- in sport, work, relationship.
- Did you perform with excellence? If yes, how did you measure it?
- If not, what was in the way? What seemed to interfere?
- What is your concept of excellence when you perform?
- What would it take for you to perform with excellence?