

Psychological Barriers to Excellence in Sport Performance:

"The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence."
Vince Lombardi

Abstract: Most interventions in performance enhancement in sport involve mental skills training. Techniques such as goal setting, relaxation, visualization, and self-talk are among those usually described. This presentation will discuss an alternative approach, namely, the identification and removal of psychological barriers to performance excellence. These barriers may be cognitive, affective, behavioral, or conative. The process of removing psychological barriers is experientially based, and consists first of identifying it with specificity and clarity; then examining the meaning given to it; and finally creating a shift in this meaning. In examining the meaning given to the barrier, its content, origin, impact, or background can be explored. In creating a shift in the meaning, the focus of the work can be on options, anticipations, or fantasies. The method focuses on present experience and the language used by the athlete to express it. Examples of this process will be presented from my work with athletes, and indications for its use will be discussed.

Barriers- aspects of experience that interfere with excelling in performing.

External- weather, time, place, problems with work, school, others.

Internal- Physical- injury, illness, fatigue, poor nutrition, substance abuse.

Psychological- cognitive, affective, behavioral, conative.

Characteristics of Psychological Barriers

- they are going to happen to all athletes at some point in their career.
- they don't mean something is wrong with them.
- they represent something getting in the way of what's important to the athlete.
- they don't always require help from others to remove or get through.
- they are not as obvious as a cinder in the eye, but just as important to remove.
- they are often present in combination with other psychological barriers

Types of Psychological Barriers (with examples)

Cognitive- (thoughts, beliefs, opinions, judgments, expectations, attitudes) - self-doubt, self-criticism, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, perfectionism, blaming

Affective- (emotions, feelings) - anxiety, guilt, sadness, anger, shame, embarrassment, disappointment, emotional hurt

Behavioral- (action or inaction) - overtraining, impulsiveness, giving up, pushing too hard, getting into fights, poor communicating

Conative- (pertaining to issues of striving or desire) - conflicting wants (personal vs. others, sport vs. other interests), low motivation, excessive desire

Removing Psychological Barriers (Present focused; depends on consultant and athlete).

Identifying and Clarifying- "feeling uncomfortable" may need more specificity.

"I can't" may require helping athlete to take responsibility- e. g., "I won't."

Selecting- determining which of several barriers are in the foreground: work with either the most important or the most available for change. What did athlete come for?

Examining meaning and importance- impact on the athlete; part of a larger, deeper issue; if necessary, describing its origin- when and where

Initiating change- creating a shift in the athlete's perception of the situation, by exploring options; comparing actual experience with fantasy; identifying all-or-nothing and either/or thinking; evaluating anticipatory thinking ("what if" vs. "what is"). The goal in each interview is to start the change process (vs. "end results"). Discuss "Readiness"- look for what one is ready for, and start with that.

Audience Participation

- Think of a recent performance of yours- in sport, work, relationship.
- What in your performance needed improvement?
- What seemed to be in the way of accomplishing that improvement?
- What might be a first step toward removing the barrier?