Can Your Own Thoughts Improve Performance? The Power of Self-Talk

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Athletes are susceptible to anxiousness and other performance inhibitors. Self-talk is a useful tool for athletes to control their thoughts and emotions, to allow them to focus on performance.

At the start of the 2019 summer, England broke their duck and finally won the Cricket World Cup, largely due to the heroics of Ben Stokes.

Fast forward a month, England are in trouble and at risk of losing the Ashes on home soil. Ben Stokes is at the forefront again. It appeared a formality that the Australians would retain the Ashes, as England required 73 runs with only one wicket remaining.

Stokes was able to put aside the barking Australians, the delirious Headingley crowd, and his own battle for redemption to steer England to the most remarkable win since the heroics of Botham and Willis at the same ground in 1981.

Stokes masterminded England’s win by controlling his own temperament. He was seen talking to himself after each run ticked down and, after each play-and-miss, telling himself to forget about it and focus on the next ball.

The skills required to remain calm and perform with such pressure is possible to develop.

“If you look at a tennis player it’s like solitary confinement out there, and what happens in solitary confinement? It always leads to self-talk.

“Talk to yourself and you answer yourself, and you tell me if you’ve ever seen another sport where an athlete talks to themselves as much as they do in tennis.” – Andre Agassi

Perhaps with an understandable micro-focus on tennis, Andre Agassi nicely illustrates the isolation that sportsmen and women can feel when competing, often leaving them alone with only their thoughts for company. This perceived isolation could lead to athletes feeling stressed, due to a desire to perform, ultimately inhibiting performance².

Sport psychologists have a battery of psychological techniques at their disposal to prepare athletes for competition and enhance performance³⁴. Both Agassi and Stokes demonstrate an awareness of the impact that an athlete’s inner dialogue can have during competition.

One of the key solutions to managing one’s inner dialogue is the process of self-talk.

What is Self-Talk?

Self-talk, defined by Van Raalte and colleagues – building on the conceptualisation by Hardy and colleagues⁵ – is “the syntactically recognizable articulation of an internal position that can be expressed internally or out loud, where the sender of the message is also the intended receiver⁶. Adding “syntactically recognizable” nicely differentiates from general audibles of frustration (Aaaahhhhi!) and celebration (Come On!), and focuses on the intentional conscious articulation of self-talk, the actual dialogue you are having with yourself.

A simple way to appreciate the affect that self-talk can have is through the ABC model, developed by famous psychologist Albert Ellis.

The ACTIVATING EVENT, like missing a longhop in cricket or shanking a drive in golf, are mistakes that trigger our patterns of thinking. Our BELIEF about the event, namely our self-talk, determines our CONSEQUENCE, or our response to the event. For example, missing a longhop may elicit a negative response with words like “Oh that was awful, that should have gone for 4”. Put more simply, the event itself holds no bearing on the consequence; it is our belief that determines this.

“Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re probably right.” – Henry Ford, Founder of Ford Motor Company⁷

Types of Self-Talk

To understand how self-talk can be implemented, it is important to know the different types of self-talk. Understanding the nuances is imperative for effective self-talk implementation.

The categorisations presented are not independent, meaning a particular self-talk is not exclusive to one category and may serve several purposes.

Van Raalte and colleagues proposed the following taxonomies⁸.

Valence (Emotional Tone)

When talking about valence of self-talk, we are talking about the tone of the statement. Which can be split into the following:

Positive self-talk refers to encouraging and self-assuring talk, aimed at ensuring confidence in one’s ability. Motivational self-talk is also encompassed in positive self-talk, aiming to do what it says on the tin.

Negative self-talk are self-statements that are disparaging in tone, thought to hinder performance. Recent literature has suggested that it may not be as black and white as that, with negative self-talk being found to be motivating for some athletes⁹.

Neutral self-talk comprises of talk that may be about tactics or strategy, including instructional self-talk.

System 1 and System 2

This categorisation features informational processing. System 1 uses the automatic, gut feeling responses to stimuli, whereas System 2 involves conscious processing requiring the use of cognitive effort. System 2 is the type that is usually worked on for performance enhancement, used to direct attention and focus, encompassing motivational and instructional self-talk for different purposes.

Grammatical Form

The use of pronouns has been found to impact sporting performance. The use of “we” instead of “I” has been found to improve one’s belief in one’s own capabilities.

The use of one’s own name instead of “I” has also been shown to help self-regulate thoughts, feelings and behaviour¹⁰. The use of non-first person pronouns are used in self-regulation to negative situations.

Why Use Self-Talk?

The reason to use self-talk, or any other performance enhancing intervention for that measure, always begs the same question: DOES IT WORK?

With self-talk, the evidence suggests YES it does.

Research into the use of self-talk has found significant support in the use of this intervention to enhance performance⁸.⁹

However, success will rely on careful and systematic implementation, with a little bit of trial and error needed to find the best action.

When implemented correctly, self-talk can lead to considerable benefits:

- Competition creates a demand for players to motivate themselves, to ensure top performance. Self-talk can be used by players to psych themselves up during competition to stay on top, or conversely to pick themselves back up after levels have dropped¹⁰.
• When looking to develop performance, new skills are invariably learnt. Self-talk has been found to aid the skill acquisition process, so either adding a completely new skill to your repertoire or changing technique can be assisted through self-talk containing instructions\(^{11,12}\). For example, when trying to change batting technique in cricket, success may be helped with “bend your knees, stay side on, head going towards the ball”.

• Performance anxiety can be debilitating, with some finding the use of self-talk a useful moderator\(^{13}\). The awareness of anxiety is key; taking a step back and understanding what is going through your head in that moment will help make a change. Reframing your thoughts in anxious situations may make it easier to thrive in them. By identifying situations where anxiety is felt, self-talk can help in triggering appropriate action: “I know that I am going to be ok;” “I’ve coped with this situation now, next time it will be easier”.

• Naturally, by reducing anxiety, we should see an increase in self-confidence. Research has found self-talk with a positive/motivational slant can really help an athlete’s self-confidence\(^{14-16}\). By using self-talk with a positive undertone, it can give an athlete a greater belief in his or her own ability: “I can do this”; “I can make this shot”.

A common use, particularly useful during competition, is attentional focus\(^{17}\). Focus can drift during competition with various stimuli all firing at once. It is easy for negative thoughts to creep in and to shift from the performance at hand. The use of relevant cues can be useful to re-direct attention back to task at hand or reinforce key areas of performance\(^2\). We have seen this recently from Australian cricketer Mitchell Starc, who used a cue on his wristband of “****” it, bowl fast\(^{18}\), to overcome over thinking his game and play to his strengths.

“Baseball is 90% mental. The other half is physical.” – Yogi Berra, New York Yankee\(^{17}\)

Now that we have a grounding in what self-talk is, we can really look at how to efficiently implement it and start seeing performance improvements.

How to Implement Self-Talk
This section can help inform how to create and effectively implement self-talk intervention. Attention is paid to the complexity of the individual, as well as the complexity of the sports context, self-talk and sporting performance.

We will be viewing self-talk through a dual process lens (System 1 and System 2), suggested by Van Raalte and colleagues\(^6\).

**System 2**

System 2 self-talk requires the conscious effort and intention to structure self-talk. Using intentionally motivating self-talk – “Come on! You can do it!” – or instructions self-talk – “Stay relaxed, head still, get your weight into the ball” – enhances sport performance\(^5,6,8,9\).

However, coaches and athletes need to be aware of poor implementation and suffering from Paralysis by Analysis\(^5\); essentially overthinking. Self-talk requires mental effort, effort that uses up mental resources possibly taking away from performance.

Optimal utilisation would be self-talk that focuses attention, yet still leaves enough attentional resources for the sporting task.

Complex self-talk strategies used in training may not be as suitable to match-day, as the demand for attention during competition is far higher than in training. Simple self-talk strategies that have been worked on may be the most appropriate for match days to meet the attentional demands\(^6\).

There is an idea that arousal levels, or the extent to which an athlete feels fired up or calm, should be matched with self-talk type. So, when an athlete is fired up, self-talk such as “Get in! I can do this!” may be more effective than “that was good, but stay calm, stay even”. The mismatch of self-talk type and arousal level can have a detrimental effect on performance\(^6\).

**Questions**

Important questions to answer for intentional (System 2) self-talk interventions.

1. Does athlete arousal level and self-talk match?
2. How much self-talk is too much?
3. Should a new self-talk approach be taken?

**Does athlete arousal level and self-talk match?**

Understanding situations that may elicit higher levels of arousal for an athlete is imperative in matching with appropriate self-talk. Matching high arousal, from nervousness for example, with “I can’t wait to get going” or “This is my time” rather than “calm down”, which conflicts.

Increasing athlete awareness, to understand when they get these feelings and when best to apply these certain self-talk strategies, is imperative for successful implementation\(^{-21}\).

**How much self-talk is too much?**

Overloading an athlete with too much self-talk can have detrimental effects. Each athlete is different, so the self-talk for one athlete may cause an overload for another. Trying out self-talk and evaluating its effectiveness to see if adjustment is required, is the most effective way to get to the right amount of self-talk\(^6\).

**Should a new self-talk approach be taken?**

It is important to understand the reason for implementing self-talk. There must be a requirement, otherwise we are adding to the attentional load for the sake of it. New approaches should be implemented in a forgiving environment, allowing for practice and the chance for an athlete to get comfortable with it. The most forgiving environment would be training, where optimal amounts of self-talk can be determined\(^6\).

**System 1**

Whereas System 2 works the conscious memory, System 1 is very much the unconscious automatic processing of self-talk, expressed as exclamation after a positive or negative event\(^5\).

Some suggest after a negative event, to take a step back and use thought stoppage to change the negative self-talk into a positive. However, without practice, this requires attentional focus that athletes could find taxing in competitions\(^22\).

It is imperative to understand what this self-talk is saying, as some negative self-talk is used a motivational for some athletes, therefore intervention to alter may not be necessary\(^8\).

**Questions**

1. What is the self-talk saying?
2. Is intervention required?

What is the self-talk saying?

Research suggests that automatic System 1 self-talk is a reflection of deeply held beliefs a person holds about himself or herself. However, there is another idea that this automatic self-talk occurs when attentional resources are depleted. Therefore, it is important to understand the root cause of the self-talk\(^6\). It may not be suitable to implement a self-talk intervention to increase self-belief, where automatic system 1 self-talk may have occurred from being cognitively overloaded and frustrated.

**Is intervention required?**

Though it is tempting to intervene when there is emotional self-talk, it is important for a coach to take a step back themselves, before encouraging an athlete to do the same. The self-talk may be an ingrained belief and need addressing; however, there could be other underlying reasons and an athlete may be overloaded\(^2\). In which case, intervening may be unsuitable and actually hinder future performance.

**Behaviour**

Behaviour can respond to self-talk, however behaviour can also influence self-talk. After successfully bowling someone out in cricket, it is not unusual to see a bowler confident and overt in what he is saying to the opposition; a positive behaviour influencing self-talk. You may also see a negative form of self-talk take place after making a mistake to something routine, misplacing a pass for example\(^23\). It is important to understand the role of behaviour in influencing self-talk strategies

**Questions**

1. Are there patterns in self-talk after behaviour?
2. What could the patterns mean?
3. Does the self-talk fit with the athlete?

Are there patterns in self-talk after behaviour?

Behaviour after an action has occurred can present a nice insight into an athlete’s true beliefs. Overt self-talk is easy to spot, however covert may be more difficult. Talking to athletes to raise awareness of certain situations may aid all parties in understanding when patterns may occur\(^24,25\).

What could the patterns mean?
Understanding the meaning of behaviour after an action can inform intervention. If we see a behaviour that is often followed by positive self-talk – that action may be something they see as a strength or something they get a sense of enjoyment out of – we can start to understand how the behaviour is held in an athlete’s core beliefs. However, if a behaviour is followed by negative self-talk consistently, we may have an area that needs to be addressed. An athlete may be placing extra emphasis or importance on certain aspects of performance, and by their own standards are coming up short.

**Contextual Influence**

Context can be a very influential factor for the individual. The immediate environment the team climate, training, competition, will all influence how to use self-talk. The broader cultural context, the athlete’s background, will also influence how self-talk strategies are received.

**Personal Factors**

The individuality of athletes mean self-talk will have a different impact on each person. Confidence, self-esteem and skill level are all different factors that play their part in self-talk implementation. For example, individualistic self-talk has been found useful when trying to implement new skills, however it has been shown to be a hindrance to performance when completing tasks that have already been learnt and mastered.

**Top-Tips for Implementing Self-Talk**

A lot of information has been presented. Below nicely sums up what has been covered to help implement self-talk successfully and start seeing performance increase.

**References**

tags: coaching, psychology, psychological, sport, performance-enhancing, performance, self-talk, athlete