

Talk your way to success: Self-talk and the power of flexible thinking

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Self-talk

Sports psychologist of the England rugby union team and AFC Bournemouth, Dan Abrahams, lauds the benefits of self-talk as an easy to use and essential to embrace performance aid.

- **Self-talk is the practice of repeated affirmation, either out loud or silently through internal dialogue.**
- **Simply put, the more you talk to yourself about what you want, the more likely you will behave in the manner needed to achieve those goals.**
- **Coaches should tap into the memory and imagination of their athletes to select key words that resonate with them and describe them at their best so these can be used as mantras.**
- **Another effective form of affirmation is to break down an athlete's responsibilities within their role to two or three controllable actions that they have to enact during competition.**

The average person, I read recently, has around 70,000 thoughts a day. An endless invasion of random ideas, memories, reflections and reminders speeding through our minds every 24 hours.

Multiply that figure by seven for the days of the week, and then times the total again by 52. That's an astounding 25,480,000 scattergun intrusions every year – give or take the odd million.

For anyone with a glass half empty perspective on life, I'd imagine an unhealthy percentage of these impromptu thoughts will have a negative slant.

A person prone to pessimism may spend many more hours still ruminating on their thoughts. When such introspection is directed towards the stresses of work, exams, money or relationships, these worries can manifest themselves as physical symptoms over time.

In terms of the sporting landscape, besides putting a muzzle on your mojo, broadly speaking if you have a

pessimistic attitude to competition and a negative approach to practice, it is logical to assume it will stifle your development and prevent you reaching your full potential.

Turning things about face, it is logical to assume then that positive thinking holds the key to happiness and success. Right?

Turning a negative into a positive

As with most things in life, it pays not to generalise. The picture I have painted, as it turns out, is far too simplistic, as leading sports psychologist Dan Abrahams explains.

Flexible thinking is the term we should be latching on to, not positive thinking per se. In fact, when it comes to maximising sporting performance there is, says Dan, a time and a place for negative thinking.

‘I think it’s a slightly more complex landscape [than what you describe] and it comes down to the complexity of human beings and how people function in the world and what certain tasks and environments demand from us,’ he begins, before embellishing on what this means from a sport and competition perspective.

‘The reality is – whether it is elite sport or developmental sport – it’s probably flexibility of thinking that is more important than positive thinking.

‘So – regarding people who might be seen as negative or pessimistic and how this mindset might affect their ability to perform or function at their best – actually exploring weaknesses is an important process.

‘It’s important to spend some time in that mode – that way of thinking – as you are developing your game day to day in training and competing. That ability to look at yourself in the mirror and have some honesty about your game is a necessary requirement.’

For Dan, the best sportsmen and women are flexible thinkers. When they watch their matches back or engage in personal [reflection](#), they are careful to remove the blinkers to give an all-round, warts and all picture of their performance.

Failure to budge from the conviction that positive thinking is the be-all and end-all, and refusing to cast a critical eye on your shortcomings, can be hugely detrimental.

At the same time you need to then be able to shift up to a positive mindset going into a game and think about how you are going to play and how you are going to deal with the opposition, adds Dan.

‘In the heat of battle, the vast majority of their mindset needs to be can-do positive attitude.

‘If you were to put a very crude measurement process on it I would say, during the week you might spend 20-30 per cent of your time critiquing what needs to go better in your behaviour and your actions. On match day itself, while you need to have some self-reflection while the game progresses and a bit of a negative talking to at times, your main focus should be on positive thinking.’

Neuroplasticity and fooling your brain

Neuroplasticity

Self-talk is the practice of repeated affirmation, either out loud or through internal dialogue.

Your emotions and mood, and in turn your behaviours and actions, stem from your thoughts. When we switch off autopilot and take control of our thoughts, we can shape our unconscious beliefs and biases so they align with our goals.

We can rewire the circuitry of our brains by establishing new neuronal connections. The constant reinforcement of these connections through self-talk leads to new pathways being formed, which lead to the formation of new and improved behaviours and actions.

It's not just words and [language](#). The same reprogramming principle is at play when we visualise pictures in our minds that elicit feelings of heightened motivation and determination, [self-confidence](#), excitement or [relaxation](#).

It's incredible to think that simply repeating a small string of words or conjuring up a mental picture can have such a transformative effect on physical actions.

Our susceptible brain, in other words, is easy to trick if you know how.

Dan thinks the scientific community might be split on what exactly is happening inside the deeper recesses of the brain to make language – in the form of basic sentences repeated on a loop – impact so profoundly on the level of someone's performance?

Some lean to the **computational model of perception** and others to the **ecological model**.

'The computational explanation of how we process information asserts that, when you picture something or speak to yourself about how you want to behave and what you want to do, you are creating a representation in your brain and nervous system and possibly even your body. You are probably reducing your levels of cortisol, and starting to release performance hormones like dopamine and testosterone that help you to feel better. In short you are getting clarity in your mind. This representational approach is very much internal. Input comes in, you do something with that in your brain, and that leads to an output.

'Now the ecological approach is slightly different. In very simple terms, this argues that we are not necessarily creating a representation in our brain and our nervous system. All it is, is that we have an interactive relationship with our environment. We are talking to ourselves about what we are going to exploit in our environment and how we are going to leverage and interact better with it.

'For me I think it is a bit of both. Both ring true in as much as there is something going on inside the brain and something going on in the body. So there will be a biological and a psychological shift, and then there will be a behavioural shift in terms of how we utilise our environment.'

Thought management

Self-talk can be utilised to make you feel better, more confident or to build your self-esteem, but in sporting terms it is most often used as a means of targeting specific areas of development or to help athletes perform better in certain environments or in certain in-game situations.

Self-regulation goes hand in glove with self-talk, as athletes must remember to keep it front of mind at all times before and during an event, and relate a meaningful objective to the process.

‘I say to my athletes that there is a difference between your thinking and your self-talk, in as much as thoughts happen to you, whereas you **do** your self-talk.

‘I think it’s useful for athletes to differentiate between the two to help them become more acquainted with and better at using their self-talk.

‘Our brain cells are constantly connecting, processing and reprocessing, so thoughts and feelings are being thrown out there all the time. They are really not under our control. Thoughts pop into our head and it is not always connected to the environment we are in. I tell my athletes to talk to yourself and utilise your self-talk to manage those thoughts.’

Repetition, repetition, repetition

A favourite method of Dan’s is to tap into the memory and [imagination](#) of the athletes he works with and get them to pick a persona or a couple of key words related to them at their best. Those key words have to resonate with them.

‘I will talk about responsibilities within their role and breaking that down to just two or three controllable actions that they have to go out and enact on the pitch. They are the most effective forms of affirmation,’ says Dan.

The idea is to create a blueprint that they can repeat to themselves Monday to Friday, like an actor memorising a script before a live performance.

‘So not just to use visualisation but physically talk to themselves as they drive back from training or when they are eating their breakfast: “This is what I want to do on Saturday”, “This is how I want to do it”.

‘And then on match day, in the heat of battle, be prepared to tell themselves this at various points of the game: “Come on, stay alert and lively”, “Get on my toes, get on my toes”, “Relax, calm, patience – good decisions”.

For optimum results, the mental process has to be relentless, undeviating in its intention and with an unswerving belief in its capability.

In short, athletes must make a habit of talking a good game.

According to [thefreedictionary.com](#), people who talk a good game ‘speak very convincingly about one’s plans, abilities or intentions, especially when one’s actions don’t live up to one’s words’.

In the case of self-talk, learning to speak to yourself very convincingly about your plans, abilities or intentions can ensure your actions **DO** live up to your words.

Further reading:

If you enjoyed this blog you might want to read my other articles with Dan.

- [Use your imagination: The value of visual metaphors in sports coaching](#)
- [The art of practice: Intentional training a model way of embedding new skills](#)

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tags : psychology, self-talk, Brain, mind, affirmation, negative-thinking, positive-thinking, thoughts