



## **Areas & Techniques in Sport Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

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*Sports psychology consists combined study of Kinesiology and Psychology. It shows effect of participation in sports & exercise affects psychological & physical factors. Personality, Youth Sports, Coaching, Team Dynamics, Evolutionary perspectives are common areas of study in Sports Psychology. Arousal regulation, Goal setting, Imagery, Preperformance routines, Self-talk are commonly used Techniques in Sports Psychology*

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**Sport psychology** is an interdisciplinary science that draws on knowledge from the fields of Kinesiology and Psychology. It involves the study of how psychological factors affect performance and how participation in sport and exercise affect psychological and physical factors. In addition to instruction and training of psychological skills for performance improvement, applied sport psychology may include work with athletes, coaches, and parents regarding injury, rehabilitation, communication, team building, and career transitions. Common areas of study in Sports Psychology Listed below are broad areas of research in the field. This is not a complete list of all topics, but rather, an overview of the types of issues and concepts sport psychologists study.

## **Personality**

One common area of study within sport psychology is the relationship between personality and performance. This research focuses on specific personality characteristics and how they are related to performance or other psychological variables.

*Mental toughness* is a psychological edge that helps one perform at a high level consistently. Mentally tough athletes exhibit four characteristics: a strong self-belief (confidence) in their ability to perform well, an internal motivation to be successful, the ability to focus one's thoughts and feelings without distraction, and composure under pressure. *Self-efficacy* is a belief that one can successfully perform a specific task. In sport, self-efficacy has been conceptualized as sport-confidence. However, efficacy beliefs are specific to a certain task (e.g., I believe I can successfully make both free throws), whereas confidence is a more general feeling (e.g., I believe I will have a good game today). *Arousal* refers to one's physiological and cognitive activation. While many researchers have explored the relationship between arousal and performance, one unifying theory has not yet been developed. However, research does suggest perception of arousal (i.e., as either good or bad) is related to performance. *Motivation* can be defined broadly as the will to perform a given task. People who play or perform for internal reasons, such as enjoyment and satisfaction, are said to be intrinsically motivated, while people who play for external reasons, such as money or attention from others, are extrinsically motivated.

## **Youth sport**

Youth sport refers to organized sports programs for children less than 18 years old. Researchers in this area focus on the benefits or drawbacks of youth sport participation and how parents impact their children's experiences of sporting activities.

*Life skills* refer to the mental, emotional, behavioral, and social skills and resources developed through sport participation. Research in this area focuses on how life skills are developed and transferred from sports to other areas in life (e.g., from tennis to school) and on program development and implementation. *Burnout* in sport is typically characterized as

having three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of accomplishment. Athletes who experience burnout may have different contributing factors, but the more frequent reasons include perfectionism, boredom, injuries, excessive pressure, and overtraining. Burnout is studied in many different athletic populations (e.g., coaches), but it is a major problem in youth sports and contributes to withdrawal from sport. *Parenting* in youth sport is necessary and critical for young athletes. Research on parenting explores behaviors that contribute to or hinder children's participation. For example, research suggests children want their parents to provide support and become involved, but not give technical advice unless they are well-versed in the sport. Excessive demands from parents may also contribute to burnout.

### **Coaching**

While sport psychologists primarily work with athletes and focus their research on improving athletic performance, coaches are another population where intervention can take place. Researchers in this area focus on the kinds of things coaches can say or do to improve their coaching technique and their athletes' performance.

*Motivational climate* refers to the situational and environmental factors that influence individuals' goals. The two major types of motivational climates coaches can create are task-oriented and ego-oriented. While winning is the overall goal of sports competitions regardless of the motivational climate, a task-orientation emphasizes building skill, improvement, giving complete effort, and mastering the task at hand (i.e., self-referenced goals), while an ego-orientation emphasizes demonstrating superior ability, competition, and does not promote effort or individual improvement (i.e., other-referenced goals). *Effective coaching practices* explore the best ways coaches can lead and teach their athletes. For examples, researchers may study the most effective methods for giving feedback, rewarding and reinforcing behavior, communicating, and avoiding self-fulfilling prophecies in their athletes.

## **Team dynamics**

Sport psychologists may do consulting work or conduct research with entire teams. This research focuses on team tendencies, issues, and beliefs at the group level, not at the individual level.

*Team cohesion* can be defined as a group's tendency to stick together while pursuing its objectives. Team cohesion has two components: social cohesion (how well teammates like one another) and task cohesion (how well teammates work together to achieve their goal). *Collective efficacy* is a team's shared belief that they can or cannot accomplish a given task. In other words, this is the team's belief about the level of competency they have to perform a task. It is important to note that collective efficacy is an overall shared belief amongst team members and not merely the sum of individual self-efficacy beliefs. *Leadership* can be thought of as a behavioral process that influences team members towards achieving a common goal. Leadership in sports is pertinent because there are always leaders on a team (i.e., team captains, coaches, trainers). Research on leadership studies characteristics of effective leaders and leadership development.

## **Evolutionary perspectives**

Recently many studies have been influenced by an evolutionary psychology perspective. This includes studies on testosterone changes in sports which at least for males are similar to those in status conflicts in non-human primates with testosterone levels increasing and decreasing as an individual's status changes. A decreased testosterone level may decrease dominant and competitive behaviors which when the status conflicts involved fighting may have been important for preventing physical injury to the loser as further competition is avoided. Testosterone levels also increase before sports competitions, in particular if the event is perceived as real challenge as compared to not being important. Testosterone may also be involved in the home advantage effect which has similarities to animal defense of their home territory. In some sports there is a marked overrepresentation of left-handedness which has similarities to left-handed likely having an advantage in close combat which may have evolutionary explanations. Simply wearing red clothing has been found to

give a significant advantage in sports competitions which may be because red color psychology links red with health, anger, and dominance.

### ***Commonly used techniques in Sports Psychology***

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Below are five of the more common techniques or skills sport psychologists teach to athletes for improving their performance.

#### **Arousal regulation**

Arousal regulation refers to entering into and maintaining an optimal level of cognitive and physiological activation in order to maximize performance. This may include relaxation if one becomes too anxious through methods such as progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and meditation, or the use of energizing techniques (e.g., listening to music, energizing cues) if one is not alert enough. The use of meditation and specifically, mindfulness, is a growing practice in the field of arousal recognition. The Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) Theory is the most common form of mindfulness in sport and was formed in 2001. The aim of ACT is to maximize human potential for a rich, full and meaningful life. It includes specific protocol that involves meditation and acceptance practices on a regular basis as well as before and during competition. These protocol have been tested various times using NCAA men's and women's basketball players. In a study done by Frank L. Gardner, an NCAA women's basketball player increased her personal satisfaction in her performances from 2.4 out of 10 to 9.2 out of 10 after performing the specific MAC protocol for several weeks. Also, the effect of mental barriers on her game decreased from 8 out of 8 to 2.2 out of 8 during that same time period as a result of the MAC protocol. Another study of the MAC protocol performed by Frank Gardner and Zella Moore on an adolescent competitive diver showed that when the MAC protocol is tailored to a specific population, it has the potential to provide performance enhancement. In this case, the vocabulary and examples in the protocol were tailored to be more practical for a 12 year old. After performed the MAC protocol for several weeks, the diver showed between a 13 to 14

percent increase in his diving scores. This finding is important because previously the majority of tests performed using the MAC protocol had been on world class athletes.

### **Goal setting**

Goal setting is the process of systematically planning ways to achieve specific accomplishments within a certain amount of time. Research suggests that goals should be specific, measurable, difficult but attainable, time-based, written down, and a combination of short-term and long-term goals. A meta-analysis of goal setting in sport suggests that when compared to setting no goals or "do your best" goals, setting the above types of goals is an effective method for improving performance. According to Dr. Eva V. Monsma, short term goals should be used to help achieve long term goals. Dr. Monsma also states that it is important to "set goals in positive terms by focusing on behaviors that should be present rather than those that should be absent." There are several specific mental skills to help athletes achieve the zone. Goal setting is a crucial building block in a successful psychological skills training program. Goals make the athlete accountable, focused, direct their behavior, and help in making a plan to achieve maximum performance. Research has shown that goals must be observable, measurable, and performance oriented. For example, a track star might set the goal of being one second faster or a skier might commit to imagery training two days a week. With performance goals the athlete has more control over the outcome. Mental skills trainer Jeff Troesch believes that measuring success in terms of personal progress through performance goals is key to improving skills.

### **Imagery**

Imagery (or motor imagery) can be defined as using multiple senses to create or recreate experiences in one's mind. Additionally, the more vivid images are, the more likely they are to be interpreted by the brain as identical to the actual event, which increases the effectiveness of mental practice with imagery. Good imagery, therefore, attempts to create as lifelike an image as possible through the use of multiple senses (e.g., sight, smell, kinesthetic), proper timing, perspective, and accurate portrayal of the task. Both anecdotal evidence from athletes and research findings suggest imagery is an effective tool to enhance

performance and psychological states relevant to performance (e.g., confidence). This is a concept commonly used by coaches and athletes the day before an event.

### **Preperformance routines**

Preperformance routines refer to the actions and behaviors athletes use to prepare for a game or performance. This includes pregame routines, warm up routines, and actions an athlete will regularly do, mentally and physically, before they execute the performance. Frequently, these will incorporate other commonly used techniques, such as imagery or self-talk. Examples would be visualizations done by skiers, dribbling by basketball players at the foul line, and pre shot routines golfers or baseball players use prior to a shot or pitch. These routines help to develop consistency and predictability for the player. This allows the muscles and mind to develop better motor control.

### **Self-talk**

Self-talk refers to the thoughts and words athletes and performers say to themselves, usually in their minds. Self-talk phrases (or cues) are used to direct attention towards a particular thing in order to improve focus or are used alongside other techniques to facilitate their effectiveness. For example, a softball player may think "release point" when at bat to direct her attention to the point where the pitcher releases the ball, while a golfer may say "smooth stroke" before putting to stay relaxed. Research suggests either positive or negative self-talk may improve performance, suggesting the effectiveness of self-talk phrases depends on how the phrase is interpreted by the individual.



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