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Management of psychological pressures in competitive situations with cognitive appraisals

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Abstract
Psychological pressure or what we call stress is experienced by sportspersons and athletes because the consequences of failure are important to them. Stress occurs when there is an imbalance between requirement and the person's capacity or abilities. It fluctuates based on the individual differences and the environment, which is especially relevant to athletes. How can the athletes whose emotional investment is negatively impacting their personal performance in sports be helped. Players still need some form of demand to function best, but too high can be unfavorable to their well-being, health and performance. This paper tends to illuminate the effects of various techniques which can help combat stress. Stress management is made up of treatment techniques, which have the ability to "reduce stressors, modify cognitive appraisals, reduce affect states, increase positive affect states and facilitate effective coping Behaviors". Techniques like self-talk, imagery and relaxation work efficiently in competitive stress situations. Self talk involves cue words used strategically to enhance performance, raise confidence and increase motivation whereas Imagery is the mental creation of sensory experiences and relaxation involves voluntary reduction in psychological and muscle tension. These techniques have proved to be very helpful in enhancing performance of novice and elite athletes.

Keywords: Stress, performance, relaxation, imagery, self-talk

Introduction
Whether the stress is related to competition or not, every kind of stress will somehow affect the performance of the athlete. It is a misconception that the greatest athletes in the world are unaffected by stress. The athletes who produce the best results are simply the best at suppressing the negative effects. During the course of competition, there is even the added stress of unexpected events. Bad judgment from the referee or foul play from the other players can add to the mountain of stress that is already built up. The most difficult part is that in the midst of competition, all of the senses and emotions are enhanced so that even a nagging annoyance can be blown out of proportions. The most important thing to realize is that stress is a natural survival instinct. Since it is originally designed to increase survival rate, it is better to formulate a way to put stressors into perspective rather than trying to avoid them.
Stress can have either a positive or negative outcome for performers. This is supported by the Inverted-U model which is also known as Yerkes-Dodson Law. The Yerkes Dodson law states that as an athlete's stress increases his arousal also increases. Thus allowing performance to reach an optimum level and then regress. It states that incentives, whether good or bad, raise our arousal levels. The greater and more important the demands are to us, the higher the associated arousal and stress. Stressful situations like not clearing the selection trials for any important competitions can result in such arousal levels. These examples are referred to as stressors.

Stressors are "the environmental demands or the stimuli encountered by an individual". During the time leading up to a competition, there are four main categories of stressors experienced by athletes

- Cultural and team issues
- Leadership and personnel issues
- Performance and personal issues
- Logistical and environmental issues.

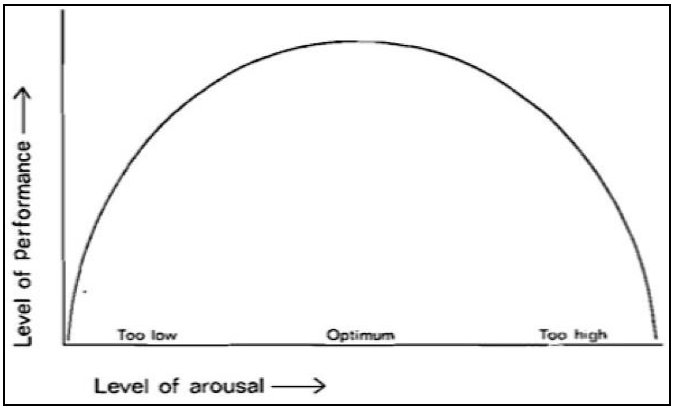

Fig 1: Relationship between stress, and thence arousal, and performance according to the Inverted-U Hypothesis

The athletes also experience three types of stressors

- Competitive (e.g., expectations)
- Personal (e.g., family issues) and
- Organizational (e.g., organizational requirements).

Organizational stressors are the most predominant of the three and produce the most negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) and outcomes in performers. It is defined as "an ongoing transaction between an individual and the environmental demands associated primarily and directly with the organization within which he or she is operating". Still, some stressors can be associated with positive emotions, determination, commitment, pleasure, and satisfaction.

It is important to be aware of the demographic differences in gender, sport type, and performance level. Males have been found to experience higher frequency, intensity and duration of operations and logistics organizational stressors e.g., weather conditions. Alternatively, females experience higher frequency, intensity and duration of selection organizational stressors e.g. starting line-up requirements. Athlete responses to stressors can rapidly spread throughout the team according to emotional contagion and group affective tone.

Some stressors are unavoidable. This is where stress management comes in. Generally, a variety of stress management interventions are linked with an optimized stress experience and enhanced performance. Stress management is the utilization of tools to reduce stress when levels of arousal are too high. If little can be done about the organizational stressors affecting the team or individuals, the best way to reduce their impact is through a secondary intervention.

A secondary intervention is a form of stress management, which assumes that we are unable to change stressors but we can improve athletes' reactions to them. There are two categories of techniques used in stress management:

- **Problem-focused coping:** Behaviors used to reduce stressors (e.g. planning) are called problem-focused coping.
- **Emotion-focused coping:** Behaviors used to express or manage emotions (e.g. self-talk) are called emotion-focused coping.

Males tend to use problem-focused coping techniques whilst females tend to use emotion-focused coping techniques. These differences may be a result of the types of stressors that predominately affect these groups, most likely stemming from differences in gender norms around emotional expression.

Stress management is made up of treatment techniques, which have the ability to "reduce stressors, modify cognitive appraisals, reduce affect states, increase positive affect states and facilitate effective coping behaviors". Moreover, by combining treatments in the same intervention, more positive results were discovered. These are called multimodal interventions. It has been reviewed that multimodal interventions showed positive effects on performance. There were three main treatment techniques that warranted the most encouraging outcomes: self-talk, relaxation techniques and imagery.

1. Self-talk

Self-talk is defined as an athlete's thoughts and statements voiced internally or out loud and have been shown to enhance sport performance. It involves cue words used strategically to enhance performance, raise confidence and increase motivation. Positive self-talk as opposed to negative self-talk allows athletes to focus and move on from mistakes. Positive self-talk can be either motivational or instructional. Both are beneficial, but motivational self-talk tends to be more valuable during competition. Motivational is best for endurance and strength tasks by optimizing confidence building, effort input and positive mood. Instructional is best for skilled, precise and timed tasks by optimizing attentional focus, technical information and tactical choices.

Self-talk is most effective when implemented on its own or when combined with imagery. On its own, it is the most effective technique for reducing state anxiety. Begin by introducing the concept of self-talk and how it can help the athletes and let them choose their own statements. They can choose motivational, instructional or a combination of both. It is recommended to practice two cues in a drill first. Then instruct them to practice two different cues in the next drill. Once they have had time to exercise and adjust these different cues, allow them to choose which ones work best for them. Encourage athletes to choose cues that match their level of arousal as well. If an athlete is not relaxed and uses "I am relaxed," then this cue will not be effective and should be replaced with "I am excited" or something similar. It must feel right, be simple, and be easy to remember. Once they have chosen the four cues that they are happy and comfortable with, you can have them post the list in their lockers or on their equipment as a daily reminder.

It is most effective for reducing cognitive and somatic anxiety when combined with imagery. This can be developed alongside imagery by having athlete's practice their chosen cues in real time during their visualization just as they would in a competition. They should still be introduced and explained separately in order to focus properly on each skill individually. You could also choose to make them entirely separate and encourage them to use both techniques independently during training and competition. You can see what works best for your team or leave it up to the athletes to decide what works for them individually.

2. Relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are the voluntary reduction in psychological and muscle tension. It "reduces muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure". Relaxation techniques effectively reduce state anxiety on their own or combined with imagery. They can be used to help athletes recover during small windows of time to accumulate energy, avoid overstimulation and assist cool-down. It could be a great addition to the warm-up routine if completed in the locker-room or on the playing surface before beginning an event or competition. Players get in a comfortable position and close their eyes. Instruct them to relax their muscles, pay attention

to the present moment, listen to their body and relax their breathing. Make sure they are performing abdominal breathing instead of chest breathing. This should allow rhythmic, deep breaths with a longer exhale than inhale. You can have athletes place a hand on their abdomen and feel it rise and fall with their breaths to ensure they are executing it correctly. They can use imagery of a serene setting to assist. Encourage them to focus on slowly relaxing each muscle. You can also have them tighten certain muscles for a few seconds and then relax to improve awareness of their muscles tensed versus relaxed. This technique can be performed for as long or as short of a time period as you and your players desire.

3. Imagery

"Imagery is the mental creation or re-creation of sensory experiences that appear to the person imagining them to be similar to the actual event". Motor imagery is a type of imagery often used in sport contexts. Instead of using imagery as entirely separate from physical practice, motor imagery views it as a continuum on which it is closer to physical practice.

I will be explaining the PETTLEP model of motor imagery, which has been found to be as effective as physical practice and positively associated with performance. This is a beneficial alternative for injuries, weather/travel inconveniences, and fatigue. The model is made up of seven components:

Physical: Focus on making it as physical as possible. Performing this while wearing their uniform or holding their equipment would enhance results.

Environment: Execute this technique in the same environment in which the team will be performing. For example, leading them while on the pitch before their warm-up. Their eyes can be open or closed, whichever they prefer. You can use video-assisted imagery as well; teams can watch game film or highlights while visualizing themselves executing the action.

Task: Ensure the content is unique to the athletes' preferences and their skill levels. Have them focus on the aspects most relevant and crucial for themselves and the skill or action they are visualizing.

Timing: Emphasize the imagery happening at a real time pace.

Learning: Encourage athletes to adjust/update imagery as they become more skilled. If they learn something new, have them apply it to visualization. This is also a good way to reinforce memory of plays you have introduced to the team.

Emotion: Performers should apply the same emotions from competition to imagery. They should mentally recreate the event. Emotions make this form of visualization more vivid and therefore more effective. According to Holmes and Collins' (2001) PETTLEP model, imagery is slightly more effective when applied at a different time as relaxation, but you can choose what works best for your team and your time limitations.

Perspective: Use the viewpoint of the performer for the most part. Athletes can use an external viewpoint for certain actions, but the majority should be perceived from an internal viewpoint.

Imagery has the most positive effects when combined with relaxation, self-talk or both. These techniques can be implemented during the pre-game routine, warm-ups, after mistakes as an alternative to punishment, before the start of a drill, before subbing on and at half time. If the players desire to simultaneously merge imagery with relaxation, they can do relaxing imagery. For example, they made to vividly imagine a calm place such as a beach, meadow, or forest. This can still assist athletes in developing their motor imagery skills. They can also visualize their successful playing actions after or whilst relaxation is being done. If motor imagery is preferred, it is recommended that they not be executed simultaneously. As stated above, whilst performing imagery, athletes can implement self-talk as well. These two skills are mental practice as very useful practicing for all athletes to enhancing the performance. Murphy, Nordin and Cumming (2008) said that imagery can aid learning and performance, support important psychological qualities such as self-confidence, and is characteristic of high-level performance. Besides that, according to Cox (2002), mental practice is most effective for activities that require some thinking and planning. The more they are used these skills, the more helpful mental practice will be for them and it proved by Cumming and Hall (2002) said successful and highly skilled athletes are more likely than less accomplished athletes to use imagery regularly.

These may be familiar terms, but implementing these concepts can be challenging. These are skills just like throwing or shooting, which must be practiced over and over to master. Therefore, they are to be practiced during and outside of training as much as possible before utilizing them in high-pressure competitions. It is advantageous to have a sport psychologist implement the intervention because of their athletes' held respect and their ability to incorporate it into the team's normal regimen. As per the literature this is the best way to facilitate development of mental skills. The intervention should be implemented for at least a season or a year in order to allow athletes to reach sustainable behavior change. Coaches and Psychologists who are attached with the players should understand these concepts. They can also tailor their intervention in a way that best fits their style and their team's needs to create significant impact on their performance and get an edge on their competition.

Conclusion

Stress management in sports competition means how someone copes, controls and reduces the occurrence of the negative conflict of stress. The main sources of stress are the hopes of the athlete; what he hopes to achieve or win in the competition; the fear of failure, anger, frustration, injury, discomfort which he would like to avoid. Other stressful situation includes crow's demand, muscular tension, over motivation and inability to cope with sensory information. The psychologist should increase the control of emotion in individual athlete and group situations. And participants should be grouped together for the purpose of reducing excessive level of stress and should concentrate and block out stress provoking thought. Special attention should be given to the athletes with low level of stress; imagery practice should be adhered to. Mental rehearsal should be observed by the athletes before the actual physical performance.

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