

THE FEEL GOOD FACTOR

Sport psychology is the study of how psychology influences sports, athletic performance, exercise and physical activity. Contemporary sport psychology is a diverse field that can help a range of areas, such as optimising performance, improving motivation, coping with pressure, overcoming injury or enhancing wellbeing of athletes, just to name a few.

Each month Helen Davis, a sport psychology consultant, will explore a different area of sport psychology and how you can relate it to you and your swimming.

This month: The 'feel good' factor: the relationship between exercise and self-esteem.

We all know that regular exercise is good for us. It strengthens our bones and muscles, keeps our heart and lungs in good condition, helps us to relax, can keep our weight in check and can make us less likely to get ill. However, exercise can do more than just give us physical benefits, it can also boost us psychologically.

Individuals who engage in exercise often report 'feeling good' afterwards, people can feel energised or just generally feel happier. The belief that exercise positively influences mood is widespread and long standing, with individuals often claiming that by 'feeling good', they often mean they feel better about themselves after physical activity. Feeling better about yourself or self-esteem is often seen as the single most important measure of psychological wellbeing.

WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Firstly, it is important to understand what self-esteem really is. Self-esteem can be referred to as the value we place on aspects of 'the self'. It is closely related to self-concept, which

is our identity or a 'description' of ourselves. This 'description' could be all the information we have gathered about ourselves in our lives based on our abilities, qualities, traits and roles in life. It is a part of our self that we are aware of and can describe. This self-concept becomes increasingly complex as we mature from infancy to adulthood. Our self-esteem is a self-rating of how well 'the self' is doing. As a mental construct self-esteem is abstract, not directly observable or measurable and exists only in the mind of each of us; we are the only people who know how we truly feel about ourselves!

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Self-esteem is paramount to our mental and physical well-being. If people feel good about themselves, they are likely to be in better physical and mental health. Our level of self-esteem determines how we operate in life – how we interact with others, such as our spouses, children, friends and strangers. Self-esteem can determine our goals and what we strive for, our achievements and our satisfaction and

happiness in life. It therefore makes sense that anything you can do to boost your self-esteem is going to benefit you.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXERCISE AND SELF-ESTEEM?

There are two main approaches in sports psychology to looking at the relationship between exercise and self-esteem. Can you decide which approach you fit into?

One approach says that self-esteem can be a motivator for physical activity. Individuals who have higher self-esteem and physical self-worth are more likely to take part in physical activity contexts as this is an area where they are competent and their self-worth can be maintained. We all

enjoy feeling good about ourselves and are therefore drawn to opportunities and experiences that enable us to have high self-ratings. Therefore if you have higher self-esteem, it can motivate you to engage in physical activity.

The other approach states that self-esteem can be changed through experience that is either positive or negative, through development in skills, mastery, success and so on. You may recognise this approach from PE lessons at school. In this approach self-esteem is seen as an outcome of physical activity (as opposed to self-esteem facilitating engagement in physical activity).

In reality, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive as initial engagement in physical activity could be externally motivated, may lead to enhanced self-perceptions, which, in turn, may motivate subsequent activity.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

Reviews of literature in this area do conclude that physical activity can enhance physical self-worth and self-esteem, however the strength of the effect is less clear. The belief that exercise just improves self-esteem is considered too simplistic, it may be that although exercise can enhance self-esteem, it may be that this is due to changes in physical self-perceptions.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

One of the most important aspects of sport psychology is becoming self-aware and learning about yourself. Contemplating your own self-esteem in relation to your swimming, or any exercise that you participate in, is one that you may or may not have considered before. Try answering some of the following questions to get you thinking.

YOUR SELF-ESTEEM CAN INFLUENCE YOUR HAPPINESS OR SUCCESS



Helen Davis is a sport psychology consultant who works with individuals, teams and coaches on all aspects of sporting performance. Helen has a BA (Hons) in Psychology, an MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology and is currently working towards chartered status with the British Psychological Society. She is also an active masters and open water swimmer.

Consider the last time you engaged in physical activity:

1. How did you feel immediately after the exercise?
2. How did you feel several minutes later?
3. How do you feel days later?
4. Do you notice a difference in your mood related to exercise/physical activity?
5. How do you feel if you don't exercise?
6. Do you feel differently after a high intensity bout of exercise or a gentler bout of exercise?

Knowing how you feel about exercise, and having an awareness of the benefits it can give you, is the first step to working on building your self-esteem.

HOW CAN I BUILD MY SELF-ESTEEM AND PROTECT IT?

Your self-esteem can influence your happiness or success. It can, however, be swayed by everything from the people in your lives to your own inner voice. Here are some tips to help you build up your own self-esteem through exercise.

- Try identifying and challenging any negative self-beliefs about yourself. It can be helpful to practise talking to yourself in the same way you would talk to others.
- Connect with people who care – this can be family members, but also people you swim with, friends or members of your club. Listen to what they say about you, take it on board, it can help you to feel good about yourself.
- If you like swimming and enjoy it, then do more of it! Try and focus on the process of what you are doing, rather than the outcome.
- Focus on the positives – celebrate your successes! No matter how small they may seem to you, take time to praise yourself.
- Keep practising and working on all of the above, try and see boosting your self-esteem as a habit you can work on daily.

Next month's issue: How are you viewing your next performance? As a challenge or as a threat?

Find out more: thinkbelieveperform.co.uk. Follow Helen on Twitter @helenDav22453