

YOU CAN DO IT!

Helen Davis looks at how you can become a self-confident athlete

What makes a confident athlete?

Confidence is one of those priceless traits that athletes consistently attribute to their success; but who is the confident athlete? According to research, the confident athlete is the person who thinks about themselves and the action in hand in a different way to those who lack confidence. Confident athletes think they can, and they do – they never give up. Typical characteristics include using positive self-talk, visualising positive images and having positive dreams of success. Confident athletes can imagine themselves winning, performing well, focusing successfully on mastering a task, rather than worrying about performing poorly or the negative consequences of failure. This confidence is no accident, it is usually as a result of particular thinking habits; habits that when consistently practised, enable athletes to use their self-confidence to enhance their performances.

WHAT IS SELF CONFIDENCE?

Most dictionary definitions of confidence will include phrases such as “a belief in one’s powers” or a “state of assurance”. There are a few related concepts to self-confidence that are important to mention: optimism and self-efficacy. Optimism is defined as a tendency to expect the best possible outcome – this is an athlete with a propensity to look for opportunities to score, to win, to excel, regardless of the circumstances. Self-efficacy refers to the conviction that one can successfully execute the specific behaviour required to produce the desired outcome. Taken together, confidence, optimism and self-efficacy make up the “I can do it” belief; a belief vital for sporting success.

WHY IS SELF-CONFIDENCE GOOD IN SPORT?

Research clearly and consistently shows self-confidence to be one of the most important psychological factors relative to sport performance outcomes. Higher levels of confidence encourage athletes to cope with and enjoy performing under pressure, as well as offering an athlete the freedom to express their abilities and talents. In addition, with increased confidence individuals work harder, are more persistent in their objectives, and set challenging goals for themselves – all of which contribute to superior performance.

How confident am I? Take the test!

This self-awareness test will give you an idea of where you are with your self-confidence. Once you have completed the test, work out your average score (add all the scores together and divide by four).

To what extent do you agree that...

	COMPLETELY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	COMPLETELY AGREE
Failing has a huge effect on my confidence	1	2	3	4	5
My confidence goes up and down (fluctuates) a lot	1	2	3	4	5
When things don't go to plan, my confidence hits rock bottom	1	2	3	4	5
My confidence depends on success and failure	1	2	3	4	5

If your average score is: **BELOW 2:** Your confidence is quite 'robust'. It may not be as high as it could be, but it remains pretty stable regardless of success and failure. **BETWEEN 2 AND 4:** Most of the time your confidence is stable, but sometimes failure brings it down and success boosts it a lot. **ABOVE 4:** Your confidence is really affected by success and failure. You can feel really confident one day, and then it can drop really low the next.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? As an athlete, what you think or say to yourself is critical to your self-confidence. We spend a huge amount of time talking to ourselves, yet we are often not aware of the content of this internal dialogue. Nevertheless, our thoughts directly affect our feelings and ultimately our actions and research consistently show that self-confidence is a hugely changeable state. Inappropriate or misguided thinking usually leads to negative feelings and poor performances, just as appropriate or positive thinking leads to enabling feelings and good performances. The message to be encouraged here is that we can train our mind to think effectively. By learning to become aware of our thoughts, we can learn to control thought and use what we say to ourselves to facilitate our performance. You can learn to replace self-defeating thoughts with more positive ones, thoughts that build confidence and bring an expectation of success.

Techniques and tips for boosting confidence

SELF-TALK

What you say to yourself is one of the best ways to change your self-confidence. Thoughts are very powerful and can have a huge impact on our feelings and behaviour.

NOTICING

The first step is to recognise and deal with thoughts that are preventing you from getting into the confident mind-set you are striving for. Write down some of the negative thoughts you are having, you can then move on to focus on strategies to help you think more positively.

RETROSPECTION Reflect back on situations where you performed

particularly well and try to re-create the thoughts and feelings that occurred prior to and during performances. Look for typical thoughts and thought patterns associated with good performances.

IMAGERY Reliving a past experience through visualization and remembering other sensory experiences has proved a very effective technique for athletes. Those who are effective at imagery can usually describe exactly what happened during the competition and what thoughts and feelings preceded, accompanied, and followed the performance.

SELF-TALK LOG Keeping a daily diary or self-talk log of thoughts is an excellent tool for accurately creating awareness of self-talk. Ask yourself questions such as:

‘When I talk to myself, what do I say?’
 ‘How frequently am I talking to myself?’
 ‘When I swim badly, do I put myself down?’
 ‘Do I dwell on past performances?’
 ‘Do I call myself names?’
 ‘Does the content of my self-talk focus on any of these things: how I feel about myself; how others are viewing me; letting down friends or team-mates or how unlucky I am?’
 It is also important to monitor self-talk in training, not just during competitions

← TECHNIQUES FOR CONTROLLING SELF-TALK

Using self-monitoring techniques is an essential first step in the process to producing performance-enhancing thoughts and eliminating unwanted ones. However, just monitoring thoughts is not usually enough. Paying too much attention to negative thoughts can be detrimental if they are not linked to some form of action or commitment to change. Here are a few ideas of what you can do:

THOUGHT STOPPAGE

This is an effective technique for eliminating negative or counterproductive thoughts. The technique begins with an awareness of the unwanted thought(s) and then a trigger is used to interrupt the undesirable thought. The trigger can be a word, such as stop! – or a physical action, such as clicking of fingers. Use your trigger consistently when negative thoughts appear and commit to making a change.

CHANGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS TO POSITIVE THOUGHTS

When you find yourself saying a negative statement, practise coupling it with a positive one immediately. Often negative thoughts happen in moments of pressure, so you might want to combine this with a relaxation technique; stop your negative thought with a trigger word, then take a deep breath.

REFRAMING

This is the process of looking at something from a different point of view. By learning this process, reframing can help athletes to control their inner dialogue in a positive self-enhancing manner. Almost any self-defeating statement or negative thought can be interpreted from a different perspective so that it can aid you, rather than hinder you. Here, you can acknowledge what is happening and decide how to use it to your best advantage.

Examples of re-framing

'I'm feeling tense and anxious about swimming today'
'I'm feeling excited and ready!'

'The water is way too cold to swim fast'

'Cold water is going to bother my competitors more than it bothers me!'

'My arms are so tired; my technique is terrible!'

'My body is still swimming and I'm moving along towards the finish'

'I'm so nervous, I'm racing some really fast people'

'I have a great opportunity to challenge myself in this race'

BOOSTING YOUR SELF-CONFIDENCE

SEEK OUT SOURCES OF CONFIDENCE:

re-living successful past experiences can be very powerful in helping to boost your confidence. Look back at old photographs, video clips, race reports, medals, finisher photos or anything that reminds you of your past successes.

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH A SUPPORT NETWORK THAT HELPS TO BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE:

confidence is very influenced by not only what we say to ourselves, but by what others say to us. Although we cannot control what other people say to us, we can surround ourselves with important people who do boost our self-confidence; this might be by travelling to an event with someone, training with a positive partner. Listen to what they say to you (see next month's issue all about 'control'). Do you notice confident team mates? Notice how they talk to themselves and others.

REMINDE YOURSELF OF THE PREPARATION AND EFFORT YOU HAVE PUT IN FOR YOUR EVENT-

focus on what you have done, rather than what you haven't. Pat yourself on the back for getting to the start line if it's been a difficult or busy time leading up to your race.

TRY AND LOOK CONFIDENT by sending your body a physical message of confidence by the way you stand, even if you are having difficulty feeling it. People make judgements about people depending on their body language. Research suggests that athletes who look confident are perceived more likely to be successful.

FEELINGS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE CAN BE ENHANCED by writing your own self-affirmation statement.

Build your confidence and write your own self-affirmation statements.

Make it **strong**
Make it **positive**
Make it **present tense**

Affirmations are statements that reflect positive attitudes or thoughts about oneself, stating what you want and how you want your behaviour to be, as if you already had it. Send yourself a personal, positive message of something that is happening in the present. See these statements as filling you up with confidence, belief and strength, do not allow room for doubtful or harmful thinking.

KEEP PRACTISING!

Over time by acting like a confident athlete, you will also start to think and feel more like a confident athlete. Psychologists call this 'embodied cognition' and it simply means that not only do you need to think confidently in order to act confidently, you need to act confidently in order to think confidently. By learning to think confidently your body is telling your brain that you are confident, dominant and ready to perform. Repeat your positive affirmations to yourself often and it will help you to quickly draw from it what you need, when you need it. This helps you perform to match your affirmed beliefs.

TO SUM UP...

Confidence is one of the most important psychological factors related to effective sport performance. It can be derived from many sources and in sport it can greatly impact what you do. Remember that confident athletes are athletes who work hard and always believe they can do it. So it makes sense that positive people are more likely to be successful, because deep down they think they will be. They will always look to find a solution to a problem, even in the most difficult situations, and will persist in the face of setbacks.

The key is not to give in to negative thoughts and allow them to control you and dominate the mind – work at boosting your self-confidence on a daily basis – research says it really will pay off in the long run!



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.

Find out more: thinkbelieveperform.co.uk. Follow Helen on Twitter @ [helenDav22453](https://twitter.com/helenDav22453)