

SELF-TALK

Helen Davis explains how to control your inner voice by thinking smartly

WHAT DOES THE VOICE SAY INSIDE YOUR HEAD?

If you could listen to your voice and what it says, what would you think? It is an interesting question to consider as everyone has an inner voice and listening to it is the first step in learning whether this voice is helpful to us or not. Every time you have an internal dialogue with yourself, you are engaging in self-talk. This might present itself by speaking out loud, mumbling to yourself or silently having a conversation with yourself inside your head. However your self-talk presents itself, it can be very powerful.

SELF-TALK IS POWERFUL

Self-talk can be powerful as it can be constructive, destructive, positive, negative and move us to or away from action. In the world of sport, this influence can greatly affect our performance outcomes. Self-talk can be many things; it can help you to:

- self-calm or relax
- self-educate
- self-motivate
- focus
- self-reward
- self-criticise

Consider your self-talk when you think about open water swimming; does your inner voice direct inwardly to yourself or towards others? Perhaps your self-talk is neutral or so quiet that you are not consciously aware of the conversation being held. Perhaps your self-talk is full of worry or self-

doubt? Do you think your self-talk is believable or not? Evidence suggests that self-talk can have a big impact on your performance as an open water swimmer. If you are able to channel your self-talk in the right direction and your self-talk is positive and constructive in nature, this can result in improved performance. Unfortunately, self-talk that is negative and destructive in nature can have a detrimental effect on performance. Firstly, it is important to recognise how self-talk can help you.

WHAT CAN SELF-TALK HELP ME WITH?

Self-talk for skill acquisition

In swimming, which is such a technical sport, self-talk can help with certain key aspects of movement, for example changing technique in swimming. Here, planned cue words to direct your focus on the desired movement, such



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as 'strong and long' for a swimmer working on their underwater front crawl pull, can be beneficial. Evidence suggests that focusing on what you are trying to achieve, rather than the mechanics of the stroke is more useful.

Self-talk for changing bad habits

Self-talk can help when changing a bad habit or a well-learned skill is required. Self-talk can facilitate the process of directing attention to the replacement movement. The more drastic the change, the more detailed self-talk you would need. If you cross over your arm when swimming front crawl for example, focus on what you want to happen (ie, hand remaining to right hand side of body), rather than what you want to avoid (ie, hand not crossing over the centre line).

Self-talk for attention control

Self-talk can help you to remain in the present when, during competition or practice, it can be easy to be distracted by focusing on the past or the future. Focusing the mind on what is desired right now gives you the best chance of success.

Self-talk for creating effect or mood

Self-talk can help you create a desired emotional state. Studies have shown that swimmers who perceived their precompetitive anxiety symptoms as debilitating could be taught to use self-talk interventions to reinterpret them as facilitative and enhance their performance.

Self-talk for controlling effort

Self-talk can be an effective technique for maintaining energy and persistence. You may find increasing effort in training challenging. Phrases such as 'easy', 'pace', 'pick it up' or 'push' etc can be very effective in controlling effort. Here, you can not only use self-talk to direct action, but also to sustain it.

Self-talk for building self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to one's expectation of succeeding at a specific task or meeting a particular challenge, such as completing a tough open water challenge. Efficacy expectations affect performance because they determine how much effort athletes will expend on a task and how long they will maintain effort when confronted with setbacks and obstacles. Many studies show that



← athletes with high self-efficacy will outperform those with lower self-efficacy on strength, endurance and skill tasks, all pertinent to open water swimming. Self-efficacy is influenced by verbal persuasion, that is, you can enhance your confidence by what you tell yourself (see August issue).

Self-talk for increasing and maintaining exercise

What you tell yourself and feel about yourself can significantly predict whether people start or continue to exercise. By using self-talk to improve your self-efficacy you can change your thoughts and feelings about what you feel about exercising. You really can talk yourself into doing that extra training session!

LISTEN CLOSELY TO YOUR INNER VOICE

The first step in discovering how self-talk can work best for you is becoming aware of what you say to yourself. Surprisingly, most people are not aware of their thoughts, much less the powerful impact they have on their feelings and behaviour. A simple way of trying to create awareness is to ask yourself in different types of situations: 'What thoughts appear helpful to me?' and 'What thoughts appear unhelpful to me?'. Once you develop this awareness, you will probably discover that your self-talk varies from short cue words and phrases to extremely long monologues, with the content ranging from self-enhancing to self-defeating. The key is to know both when and how to talk to yourself. Creating a self-talk log of thoughts in performance situations is an excellent tool for accurately creating awareness of self-talk.

When keeping a log, have a go at asking yourself the following questions to help your awareness:

- What do I say to myself before,

during and following my good performances?

- How frequently am I talking to myself?
- When swimming badly, do I put myself down?
- Do I stay in the present or focus on past performances that haven't gone well?
- Does the content of what I am saying to myself focus on myself or how others feel about me?
- Do I think about letting people down?
- Do I focus on how unlucky I am?
- When do I have negative thoughts?
- Do I begin doubting myself even before I have a chance to perform?

By focusing on these questions, you can begin to notice patterns in your thinking.

HOW CAN I CONTROL MY SELF-TALK?

There are many different cognitive strategies that athletes can use to control their thoughts, (see August issue). One way that is proving to be increasingly popular in sport is a 'Smarter Thinking' approach, a phrase coined by Turner (2014), which is based on Albert Ellis's well documented rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) framework, found to be increasingly effective with helping athletes change their way of thinking.

IRRATIONAL THINKING VERSUS SMARTER THINKING

In situations that matter a lot to us, we can find ourselves rigidly demanding that we must do well in our open water swimming event because if we didn't it would be terrible, awful or the end of the world! In reality, we really want to do well in our event, but if we didn't, it might be bad or annoying, but certainly not the end of the world! This type of thinking is called 'irrational' as holding

IRRATIONAL

RIGID DEMANDS

"I must do well in my open water swim, I have trained so hard"

AWFULISING

"IT WILL BE TRULY AWFUL IF I GET KNOCKED IN THE MASS START"

LOW FRUSTRATION

"I can't stand it; the water is far too weedy!"

PUTTING YOURSELF DOWN

"I WAS AN IDIOT IN THAT RACE, I'M RUBBISH AT SWIMMING"



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BELIEFS

PREFERENCE

"I would really like to do well in my open water swim as I have trained so hard"

ANTI-AWFULISING

"IT WILL BE ANNOYING IF I GET KNOCKED IN THE MASS START, BUT IT WON'T BE TRULY AWFUL"

HIGH FRUSTRATION

"It's not ideal that the water is weedy, it might be difficult, but I can stand it"

SELF-ACCEPTANCE

"I DIDN'T RACE WELL, BUT THIS DOES NOT MEAN I AM A BAD SWIMMER"

these beliefs causes much of the stress and resulting self-defeating thoughts and feelings athletes can experience during performance. Study the table left. Compare the irrational types of thinking and examples with the more 'smart' approach. Pay close attention to the language used; the choice of words you use when you engage in self-talk is paramount to how you will feel.

THINK 'SMARTLY!'

We often believe that when an event happens, it is the event itself that causes an unwanted emotional reaction. For example, you get hit at the start of the race in a mass start and you feel really upset – you think your race is ruined. However, what 'smarter thinking' gets you to do is realise that it is not the event (being knocked in the mass start) that causes your upset, it is the way that you think about it that causes the unwanted emotion. Evidence indicates that this way of thinking (awfulising your situation) can lead to unhealthy emotions such as anxiety. Smarter thinking helps you to think in a more rational, logical way. The language that you use is an important factor to take into consideration; just a few small changes in your word choices can make a big difference. In this case "it will be annoying if I get knocked in the mass start, but it won't be truly awful" brings more logic to your thinking. It is annoying, and just that – not truly awful. Smarter thinking helps you to rationalise your situation and interpret events more logically.

CHALLENGE YOUR THINKING AND IDENTIFY ANY IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

What is your self-talk like? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are your beliefs based on objective

reality? That is, would a mixed group of people all agree that the event happened the way you perceive it, or do you exaggerate and personalise your experiences?

- Are your beliefs helpful to you? Self-destructive thoughts are usually irrational.
- Are your beliefs useful in reducing conflicts with other people, or do you set up a me-versus-them situation?
- Do your beliefs help you reach your short and long-term goals or do they get in the way?
- Do your beliefs reduce emotional conflict and help you feel the way you want to feel?

PRACTISE DISPUTING YOUR IRRATIONAL BELIEFS

Smarter thinking gets you to challenge any irrational thoughts you have by disputing them. This is where you actively question and challenge the thoughts that you are having by using logic and realism. The idea is that you change your irrational thinking to healthier emotional alternatives. As an example of how to dispute irrational self-talk, I will use the example of a common belief held by many athletes: "I must, at all times, perform well." This can be challenged by disputing this belief in three different ways:

- Where is the evidence? Have you always performed well every single time you have raced? No. Then do you have a right to demand that you should now?
- Where is the logic? Has every open water swimmer always performed well, every time they have swum? No. Then it is illogical for you to expect to achieve this every time you swim.
- Where is the pragmatism? Is there an advantage to you continuing to think in this way? (This is an important one as it makes you realise that it is not the event itself causing the emotional distress, but yourself.)

FINALLY

Self-talk is a powerful concept which can influence many aspects of your sporting performance and certain types of thinking can be detrimental to our performances. Learning to be aware of your thinking is the first step to making changes. Think 'smartly', be more rational and logical with your interpretation of events. If you practise disputing as evidence suggests, you really will see the benefits.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE: IMAGERY AND RELAXATION

THE BENEFICIAL USE OF IMAGERY BY ATHLETES IS WELL DOCUMENTED WHERE WE RUN AN IMAGE OVER IN OUR MIND. THIS ARTICLE WILL EXPLAIN HOW IMAGERY CAN HELP YOU COPE EFFECTIVELY WITH CHALLENGING SITUATIONS AND HOW TO FOCUS ON RELAXATION SKILLS TO HELP WITH STRESS AND ANXIETY IN CONJUNCTION WITH SPORTS COMPETITIONS.