

Chapter 4

Self-Talk

After you have learned to relax, it's a good time to start developing your positive self-talk skills. Without these skills, you are prone to negative self-talk, which leads to a decrement in performance.

Generally people tend to focus on what they are doing wrong instead of what they are doing right. Consider coaches who become error correction specialists. Most of what has been modeled to us is negative, so we rapidly learn to be the same way with ourselves. Reardon and Gordin (2002) estimate that around 70% of feedback on performances is negative.

Successful athletes learn to control their self-talk so it enhances their ability to perform. Positive self-talk counteracts the mind's tendency to be negative. Positive self-talk helps you manage performance situations and puts you in control.

In this chapter, we will take a look at our self-talk. We will start off covering guidelines for establishing positive self-talk, then go over activities to positively change the way you talk to yourself.

Activity 4.1 The Power of Being Positive
Activity: Find a partner and face each other. Person 1 closes their eyes and extends their arms out to the side like a cross. Person 2 stands in front of person 1 and grasps the wrist of person 1. Person 2 instructs Person 1 to think of something that makes them sad and depressed. When person 2 gets this in his head, he nods his head, Person 2 then puts person 1's arms down, while person 1 attempts to keep his arms up. After the arms are pulled down, the two people exchange places and repeat the exercise. After both have completed with a sad thought, they both do the exercise with a positive, happy and energizing thought.
For thought: Compare the two different exercises. Was there a difference? What was the difference? Why did the difference occur?
Wrap-up: Normally, people are much stronger when thinking positive thoughts. The exercise demonstrates the thoughts that affect the energy level of the body and overall performance.

Activity 4.1 illustrated that more can be accomplished by using positive thoughts and often there are negative consequences associated with negative self-talk. You should develop a solid understanding of your current self-talk patterns. Once an understanding occurs, then a variety of strategies can be proactively implemented to increase the number and quality of the positive thoughts. Finally, you should be able to change negative thoughts into positive thinking.

Athletes can identify their pattern of self-talk by completing logs after practice and competition. Post practice logs can be kept daily or occasionally. Start by completing the Self-Talk Log Form for a few practices and preferably for at least one competition.

Activity 4.2
My Self-Talk Log

Select three positive and three negative situations from a practice or a competition. A positive situation is an event in which you execute correctly, show improvement, demonstrate team unity or have fun. Briefly, describe each situation and highlight the positive nature. Then record the specific positive thoughts you recalled. For example in learning a new skill it might be, "I got it!" "I want to try it again!" Repeat the process for up to three negative situations in practice or competition in which there was poor performance. Describe each negative situation and identify the specific negative thoughts you had during the experience.

My Self-Talk Log
Day _____

Positive Situations	Positive Thoughts	Effect on practice or competition
1.		
2.		
3.		
Negative Situations	Negative Thoughts	Effect on practice or competition
1.		
2.		
3.		

Wrap-up: Is your self-talk harmful or helpful?

If you are having trouble assessing positive and negative situations, then record a PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) score for each day in Activity 4.3.

Activity 4.3
My PMA Scores

Record a PMA (Positive Mental Attitude) score for each day. Rate your PMA from 1 to 10, with 1 being the most negative day of your life, 5 an average day and a 10 the most positive day of your life. The PMA score should represent the quality of the day.

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1							
Week 2							

What did you learn from the exercise?

Guidelines for enhancing self-talk

Concentrate on the process

Our thoughts generally focus on what needs to be done, rather than on how we are doing it. When your thoughts turn to focusing on an outcome, such as “I have to clear the high jump bar,” your self-talk creates anxiety because the outcome is uncertain until the performance is over. An outcome-oriented self-talk detracts from the ability to focus on what is happening in the here-and-now process of the performance. The high jumper repeating the words “rhythm” and “flow” during each attempt is practicing positive self-talk and focusing on the process rather than the moment.

Concentrate on the present

Immerse yourself in the present and trust in your abilities. Worrying about the last negative performance or worrying about the outcome takes you out of the present moment. Jumpers telling themselves to be fast on the approach instead of telling themselves not to do what he/she did in the last attempt is concentrating on the present. We will focus more on concentration and how to increase focus in Chapter 6.

Focus on composure

Focus on what you can control (more in Chapter 6) to attain your proper level of arousal. Anxiety decreases concentration. Thinking about anxiety only increases anxiety. Focus on staying calm and keeping your composure. Believe in your ability to make it happen. If you have learned the skill of relaxation, then that is the response your body will produce, flowing the direction of your mind. You are what you think. When you think nervous, you become nervous. When you think calm, you become calm.

Try smarter not necessarily harder

Many athletes try too hard and they do not believe in their self-talk. Believing in your positive self-talk frees you to perform on auto-pilot. Use different self-talk in practice than in performance. The goal of practice is to improve, explore and identify areas to work on. Practicing self-talk may include questioning, and considering areas to change.

Competition self-talk is different self-talk because during performance, self-talk needs to be encouraging, minimal, and positive. It should contain elements of affirmation, trusting one’s self and enjoying the moment. An example of positive self-talk in practice would be to focus on what it feels like to do a jump correctly. Competition self-talk would include more oriented cue words such as strong and high.

Affirmations

Once you can develop the ability to relax, it is time to move to the affirmation stage. Affirmations are powerful statements that, repeated over and over, will lead to changed beliefs. Some example affirmations are: *I am strong! I am fast! I run relaxed! I explode!*

Here are the 5 P’s of Affirmations:

1. Positive
 - a. All affirmations should be stated in the positive.
2. Present Tense
 - a. Affirmations should be stated as “I am.”
 - b. “I can” or “I will” or “I’ll try” is an early quit and gives athletes a way out.

3. Personal
 - a. Affirmations are your words, which mean something personal to you.
4. Powerful
 - a. Action words such as power, strong, explode should be used.
5. Point
 - a. Be short and to the point.

Use *Activity 4.5 Effective Use of Affirmations* to develop your understanding of the effective use of guidelines.

Activity 4.5 Effective Use of Affirmations		
In column 1, an example affirmation is given. In column 2, there is information on why the affirmation needs improving and in column 3, there is a re-write for an improved affirmation. Read the examples provided in 1-5 and then create your own and fill in columns 2 and 3 for numbers 6-10.		
Affirmation Examples	Why it needs improving	Improving the affirmation
1. I will not slow down	Stated in negative terms	I focus on maintaining correct pace
2. I've tried in the past	Turn into present tense	I give a great effort every day.
3. Run faster	Not personal	I run faster and faster every day
4. I jump	Needs more power	I explode off the board.
5. I will get around to it	Get to the point	My training makes me powerful.
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Now that you have a better understanding of the guidelines to develop affirmations complete *Activity 4.6 My Affirmations*.

Activity 4.6 My Affirmations		
Fill in the following chart, listing five affirmations that might apply to your events. In column 1, list your affirmation. Review your affirmation. How could you improve it? List how you could possibly improve your affirmation in column 2. In column 3, rewrite your affirmation to make it better.		
Original Affirmation	How to Improve?	Improved Affirmation

You are well on your way to developing good affirmations and improved self-talk. Now let's take a look at the difference between general and specific affirmations. Activity 4.7 gives three examples of general affirmations and three examples of specific affirmations.

In the blank space provided after the examples, list three general affirmations and three specific affirmations. If you become stumped on what affirmations to use you might want to take a look at Table 4.1, which lists several general affirmations.

Activity 4.7 General and Specific Affirmations	
General Affirmations Examples	Specific Affirmations
1. I am strong	1. I run off the board
2. I run with power	2. I explode out of the blocks
3. I am relaxed and focused	3. I attack the bar
Your General Affirmations	Your Specific Affirmations
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

Table 4.1 lists several general affirmations. More specific affirmations related to your event are found in the event-by-event chapters.

Table 4.1 General Affirmation Examples
<p>I am strong.</p> <p>I am relaxed.</p> <p>I am confident and ready.</p> <p>I am in control and focused.</p> <p>I am physically tough and mentally tough.</p> <p>I train harder and smarter than my opponents.</p> <p>My determination and drive makes me a winner.</p> <p>I accept the challenge and the body responds.</p> <p>My enthusiastic attitude makes me great.</p> <p>I have the courage to perform.</p> <p>My weight training, diet, sleep, and mental training all help me to perform better.</p> <p>When fatigue sets in, I am mentally tough.</p> <p>My form is fluid, smooth, controlled and relaxed.</p> <p>I seize the moment. I make my own opportunities.</p> <p>I am always positive.</p> <p>I am willing to do the extra things to be great.</p> <p>I am fit.</p> <p>I am a competitor.</p> <p>My training and attitude make me great.</p> <p>I enjoy training and reaching my goals.</p>

Within each affirmation is a powerful word called the cue word. A cue word is a positive word within an affirmation that that is repeated over and over while the body is performing. Cue words can be used to help focus with applying many mental skills such as focus and relaxation while performing a physical skill. In the affirmation, “I am strong,” the power word or cue word is “strong.” The more often affirmations are repeated, the more noticeable the desired effect. If practiced over a period of time and incorporated into mental skill training, when you repeat the cue word, your mind draws up the image to allow your body to perform at a high level.

A cue word is a word you choose that reminds you of something to focus on. By staying focused on the cue word, the mind doesn't analyze the performance and interfere with it. The mind is only thinking of one thing at a time and the cue word has it occupied.

Example: A 400-meter runner is tying up at the end of a race and starting to slow down. Using a cue word such as "strong" and repeating the cue word over and over during last 100 meters of race, keeps the runner's mind off of focusing on pain.

Important Note: Self-talk must be practiced so habits of positive self-talk can become integrated automatically for performers.

Table 4.1 listed several general affirmations for track and field athletes. Go back and look at Table 4.1 and identify the cue words. Ok- maybe you figured it out, the cue word within the affirmation is in bold print. Within the event specific chapters later in the book, specific event affirmations are provided as examples.

The following chart lists general cue words and specific cue words. As you develop a few affirmations to use and practice, consider using some of these words. After looking at the list of cue words you could use, add five general cue words and five specific cue words.

Activity 4.8 Cue Word List General Cue Words	
Focus	Ok
Calm	Do it
Relax	Control
Tight	Confident
Add five more general cue words	
1. _____	
2. _____	4. _____
3. _____	5. _____

Specific cue word examples	
Go	Push
Fast	Explode
Run	Catch
Swing	Cast
Up	Steady
Land	Straight
Twist	Leap
Power	Explode
Pull	Stick
Add five more specific cue words	
1. _____	
2. _____	4. _____
3. _____	5. _____