A humanistic model is one that emphasizes the personal worth and dignity of all people. Happiness and a person’s quest for happiness are important themes. A pivotal notion among humanistic psychologists is that human beings continue to develop throughout their entire lives (Jacobsen, 2007).

The humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, formulated a model and a psychotherapy that centers on happiness and the self. He saw the goal of the human being as becoming a “fully functioning person” (Rogers, 1961). The fully functioning person is engaged in a process of change, and is not characterized by having achieved a certain stable, lasting condition. The primary therapeutic goal is for the client to become less defensive and more receptive to the experiences of inner and outer life. A secondary goal is for the client to achieve an increased ability to live in the here and now. A basic tenet is that what one does in the future grows out of the experience of what one does in the present. A third goal is that one develops an increased confidence in one’s self, so that one can increasingly base decisions and actions on what immediately feels right (Jacobsen, 2007).

In the 1940s and 1950s, Rogers developed person-centered therapy (PCT), which is also known as client-centered therapy or Rogerian psychotherapy. The basic elements of PCT, for the therapist, involve showing genuineness, authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard toward clients. By taking this stance, the therapist creates a supportive, nonjudgmental environment in which the practitioner encourages clients to reach their full potential (Bruno, 1977). Roger’s humanistic theory and model for psychotherapy focus on the client as the agent for self-change. A foundation of the person-centered approach is the self-authority and self-determination of the client. It is the client who directs and orches-trates the process and progress of therapy.

Rogers is sometimes called a self-theorist. He believed that the self is constantly evolving and that people have free will and the ability to make choices that are growth-enhancing. He also believed in the concept, similar to other humanistic theorists, of self-actualization. Self-actualization is based on the assumption that there is an internal, biological force to develop one’s capacities and talents to the fullest. The individual’s central motivation is to learn and grow. Growth occurs when individuals confront problems, struggle to master them, and through that struggle develop new aspects of their skills, capacities, and views...
about life. Life, therefore, is an endless process of creatively moving forward, even if only in small ways (Robbins, 2007).

Rogers looked at the self in terms of the “ideal self” versus the “real self.” The ideal self is the person one would like to be; the real or actual self is who one currently perceives oneself to be. When one is self-actualized, there is congruence (i.e., harmony or agreement) between the real and the ideal selves. One has become the self one wants to be. There is congruence for an athlete who is working hard every day, following prescribed physical training, sleeping well, eating well, following a sound mental routine, and feeling that the place the athlete is in right now is where the person needs and wants to be. Rogers also described a second kind of congruence. This congruence is between the actual self and experience. The experiences in one’s life should fit with the type of person one thinks one is. An example of this type of congruence would be, “If I work hard, I will obtain good results. If I think I am important and valuable as a person, good things will happen to me within my life experience.” Individuals feel incongruence as negative and detrimental experiences, and consider it something to avoid. When someone is experiencing incongruence, it means there is a breakdown in one’s unitary sense of self. Incongruence may lead to anxiety, whether the incongruence is between ideal and real selves or between actual self and experience. For example, if athletes are naturally mild-mannered or passive, but need to be aggressive to participate in their sports, there may be incongruity. Many athletes may quit their sports during times of incongruence. Rogers believed we defend ourselves against incongruence or even the perceptions of incongruence; we are always trying to seek ways to become congruent.

When athletes are experiencing congruence, they trust themselves and their training. They are motivated and have a desire to compete, and believe that they can continue to grow and improve. With incongruence, they may experience low confidence, early stages of burnout, loss of motivation, lack of improvement, an inability to be able to perform well at competitions, and either performance anxiety or choking. Athletes would be sensing differences between their current selves and experiences and of needing to move closer toward their ideal selves. The key idea is that consciously or subconsciously, athletes know they are not performing to their ideal or optimal performance states.

One example of experiencing incongruence is Ivan, a professional boxer. He had a history of physical abuse and violence in his childhood by his father. As a result of this abusive childhood, Ivan felt that he had so much rage and anger within him, that “competing in this sport was quite easy” for him. Ivan stated that it felt natural to unleash this anger onto his opponents during competition, which served him well in his sport. After competing for a number of years, he fell in love, got married, and started a family. He was cognizant of his more positive emotions, and his ability to feel love and care for others. With these newfound feelings, he had difficulty competing at the same intensity as he had in the past, but was still interested in boxing, not only because he still enjoyed it, but because it was his livelihood. He began consulting with me to help him get back in the ring, and he wanted to find a way “to tap back into his anger,” which he believed was the reason for his past success. His love for his family literally felt incompatible with competing, and he felt incongruent within himself. He recognized that he did not want to go back to carrying around anger most of the time, but he didn’t know how to move forward. Over a period of time, after establishing a genuine trusting rapport and good relationship with each other, we were able to develop a type of pre-competitive routine that allowed him to create a level of intensity similar to the energy he had when he was angry, but without the negative emotions, to compete again successfully at a high level. Seeing himself in a healthier place had now allowed him to establish authentic congruence.
Another example of incongruence is a young professional golfer, named Ryan. Ryan was performing well in his sport and climbing his way up the ranks. One afternoon while competing in a high-level tournament, he found himself doing so well that his name was on the leader board. His first thought, as he told me later, was “I’m not as good as these guys.” It is not hard to guess what happened next. The incongruence he was experiencing created anxiety. Rather than believing in himself and his capabilities and feeling he deserved to compete at the top level of this tournament, his confidence diminished, along with his level of play. Never recovering from his incongruent thinking, he continued to feel anxiety and tension throughout the remainder of the round. His scores went up dramatically, and he performed poorly throughout the rest of the tournament, reinforcing to him that he truly was not as good as his competitors.

Core theoretical concepts

Within person-centered therapy, for change to occur in a therapeutic relationship, Rogers (1959) believed that six necessary and sufficient conditions are needed.

Therapist–client psychological contact

A relationship between the client and the therapist must exist, and either person’s perceptions of the other are important. One central consideration is the understanding that many athletes have not experienced working with a therapist and may have preconceived notions that need to be demystified. Establishing rapport with an athlete is early core business. A therapist does not have to have experience playing the sport of the athlete(s) or that of actually being an athlete, but demonstrating an interest in, and understanding of, the sport is foundational to the extension of trust from the individual to the therapist that creates the groundwork for the therapeutic relationship.

In addition to establishing rapport, the therapist tries to meet individual athletes where they present, from their own experiences. A major goal is to treat all athletes as individuals and to recognize that they bring their own life experiences, their varying skills in communicating with others, and their abilities to identify and verbalize their own thoughts and feelings.

Client incongruence or vulnerability

Incongruence often exists between clients’ experiences and awareness. Furthermore, clients are vulnerable to anxiety, which motivates them to stay in the relationship with the therapist. Administering pencil and paper assessments to athletes to help both parties understand where gaps may be in experiences and awareness may be useful especially with taciturn clients. It is my experience that the majority of athletes who consult sport psychologists recognize that their problems are that they are not getting the results they once had, that they have lost their confidence, or that they have been told by others that their problems are “mental.” Giving them assessments related to sport performance and then asking specific questions that relate to their subjective experiences helps them evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and see areas for improvement. Rather than thinking they are head cases, they now know what specific situations make them tense or when they have lost their confidence. We then work on the skills necessary to increase their performances. This process
allows each athlete to be in control of their own performances by working on specific objectives, similar to them working on their physical skills.

**Therapist congruence or genuineness**
Therapists using a humanistic model are congruent within therapeutic relationships. Therapists are deeply themselves. They are not acting, and can draw from personal experiences (self-disclosure) to facilitate the relationships. Demonstrating genuineness is a starting point for change to occur. If therapists are unclear about, or are simply unfamiliar with, the jargon and sport-specific experiences athletes are discussing, they need to ask questions to gain clarity. I have had athletes draw examples of plays or provide websites that would be helpful for me to better understand their sports. In my experience, athletes have appreciated my interest in understanding their sports, especially when they know the objective is to help their performances.

**Therapist Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR)**
Person-centered therapists accept clients unconditionally, without judgment. This acceptance facilitates increased self-regard in clients, because they can begin to become aware of experiences in which their views of self-worth were distorted by the influences of others. Depending on the level of competition (e.g., junior, sub-elite, elite) and the strength of perceived social support, athletes rarely have opportunities to discuss personal, and sometimes painful, issues openly. Discussing how they feel about themselves or their roles in their sports is often perceived by athletes as too risky, especially if their thoughts are unpleasant. These thoughts may clash with the perceptions others may have of them, including fans, coaches, teammates, spouses, parents, and agents. Due to self-induced or perceived external pressures, athletes may feel they will let down or disappoint coaches, teammates, or parents if they express their thoughts or feelings. Furthermore, there is a perceived fear of current or future contracts being put at risk should sponsors become aware of their sport-related anxieties. Therapists' abilities to be nonjudgmental, allowing conversations to happen without negative consequences, can prove extremely helpful for athletes to sort out feelings and career/life paths in a psychologically safe place.

One example demonstrating UPR is a middle-aged, married, competitive recreational athlete named John who came to see me for performance enhancement for golf. I gained his trust after a number of sessions, and he began to share that he was gay and stated that he had never discussed his sexuality with anyone before. He felt he could not live in his current situation any longer, but did not know what step to take to move forward. Over the next few months, because of the establishment of a comfortable, safe, nonjudgmental place to explore his feelings, John was able to discuss his issues with his wife and family and made arrangements for separation. Because John sensed nonjudgment and unconditional positive regard from me, he felt sufficiently comfortable and safe within the relationship to share an incongruent and uncomfortable part of his life. A therapist with UPR sends the message to clients that all that is shared will be cared for, in a respectful, nonjudgmental manner. The UPR stance helps open many closet doors.

**Therapist empathic understanding**
Therapists experience empathic understanding of clients' internal frames of reference. Accurate empathy on the part of therapists helps clients believe in the therapists'
unconditional love for them. Acknowledging understanding of the client through body language such as eye contact, leaning forward, and nodding one’s head, or through sincere phrases such as “I can understand why you are feeling this way,” or “I can see why …” are excellent ways to demonstrate empathy.

**Client perceptions**

Clients perceive, to lesser or greater degrees, therapists' UPR and empathic understanding. Therapists will see that athletes are perceiving the therapists’ understanding by watching the clients’ body language as well as the depth and flow of their conversations. Athletes will appear to become more relaxed, make better eye contact, move closer to the therapist, and demonstrate more open body language. The athletes may direct the consultations, revealing and discussing information openly rather than the therapists asking many questions.

Another example of providing UPR is Sam, a professional motocross athlete, struggling over his fear of injury while competing. Referred to me by his spouse, he had never seen a psychologist before. He presented cautiously and was initially guarded. For Sam, it was important to not jump into traditional sport psychology interventions immediately, but to build rapport and demonstrate patience and understanding. He was assured of confidentiality, and rapport was established quickly. His eagerness to share knowledge of his sport with me provided an avenue for trust, allowing the opportunity to move into the therapeutic process. He had been in the sport for many years. As he was getting older and had children, he had developed a fear of getting injured, resulting in being unfocused and worried prior to and between his events. Although he had never been seriously injured, he knew several friends who had. Even though he had a history of being able to produce the intensity and focus needed to perform well in his sport, he now approached his races tentatively. His friends were also his competitors, so he did not feel comfortable discussing his thoughts and feelings with them, assuming it would give them an edge, as well as make himself appear weak. He also felt in jeopardy of losing his sponsorship. Discussions involved his preconceived beliefs about age (being too old to continue to perform at a national level), that he had thus far “pressed his luck,” and it being just a matter of time before he would be seriously injured. We established his overall goals, as well as pre-competition routines that included focus and intensity issues. Demonstrating patience, empathy, and understanding allowed Sam’s confidence to increase dramatically, and he now feels much more in charge of his ability to compete.

As individuals are accepted and valued, they tend to develop caring attitudes toward themselves. As individuals are empathically heard, it becomes possible for them to listen more accurately to the flow of inner experiences. As people grow to understand themselves, the self becomes more congruent with their experiences. The individuals thus become more real, more genuine to themselves and to others. These tendencies, the reciprocal of the therapist’s attitudes, enable the clients to be effective self-growth enhancers. There is greater freedom to be the true, whole individuals they desire to be (Rogers, 1980).

**Additional applications of the model to athletes:**

**more case examples**

Rosa was an athlete who was deemed gifted in tennis at an early age. Her sister had special talents in gymnastics. Rosa’s family decided Rosa could benefit from being enrolled in an elite year-round program out of state to increase her skills in tennis. Similarly, her sister and
mother also moved to another state to allow her sister to fulfill her dreams in gymnastics. During Rosa's few years at the academy, the owner of the program told her that she had the capability to become a world-class tennis player. This information spurred her on, and she worked hard to achieve this dream. Her focus was to become a professional player. About six months after she began her training at the academy, Rosa was not playing well and felt she was not being given the attention she had received previously. During this same period of time, she overheard the owner telling a newer player that she also had the capability of becoming a world-class tennis player. Rosa began to develop a sense of mistrust toward the owner, wondering whether he told this story to all his athletes. Her self-esteem began to plummet, along with her play. Showing significant signs of burnout and depression, she verbalized to her parents the desire to quit her sport. Her parents were deeply concerned about her well-being and decided to move her from the academy to the city where her mother and sister lived. A psychiatrist, who thought that Rosa was depressed and anxious, referred the family to me. Rosa presented with a quiet, dejected, flat affect, and exhibited low self-esteem with significant symptoms of burnout from tennis. Knowing she had talent in the sport, the family was not ready to stop considering the possibility of her playing in the future.

With the time and space needed to work through the perceived betrayal she experienced at the academy, Rosa created a new life plan, accepted that she may not play professionally, and was able to balance her time with friends, family, academics, and tennis. She had the luxury of time and family support to help her find a comfortable path. She currently has a full sport scholarship at a highly ranked university.

The therapeutic conditions in this case were met. Rosa and I established a therapeutic relationship early on that continued solidly throughout the consultation. Rosa demonstrated incongruence/vulnerability initially, but through genuineness and UPR, she trusted me and the process, allowing her to work through her issues. In this case, family support was critical, and worked in her favor.

Most parents of adolescents in my practice are concerned that they may place undue pressure on their children to succeed or continue in their sports. I am asked to explore within sessions whether there is a feeling of pressure coming from one or both parents. If indicated, we discuss this issue collectively to alleviate any misperceptions. In some cases parents are unaware of this pressure. Their vision is myopic, and they lose sight of the bigger picture as it applies to their children as whole people. When a situation like this one occurs, it is difficult to meet the therapeutic needs of the client, regardless of the client's recognition of feelings of discomfort or incongruence. For example, a client named Annie was a high school athlete and played for an elite soccer club. The club had the reputation of producing Division I (i.e., highest level of U.S. university competition) collegiate scholarship athletes. Annie's father brought her in because he felt that she was not aggressive enough on the field. He believed that for her to stay on the team, and to eventually obtain a full scholarship, it would be essential for her to be more aggressive. While her father was in the session, she was quiet, but agreeable to us working together on the presenting issues. Over a period of sessions without her father present, she expressed experiencing a great deal of stress, and said she no longer wanted to play with her particular club or at that level of soccer. She was not ready to discuss this problem openly with her parents because, from her perspective, she knew quitting was not an option: her father was determined that her sport was "their path to college." Her mother came into one of the sessions, and when Annie explained how she felt; it was clear that communicating this information caused tension for her mother. Annie's mother stated that they could not discuss this issue with her father.
Sometimes parents build their expectations too high and seem to lose perspective. They invest time, money, energy, and sometimes subconsciously their own self-worth into their children’s futures. They seem to forget the big picture and the importance of their children and their happiness. What may have started as positive support turns into pressure. In this particular case, because the father did not see results quickly enough with his goal of increasing his daughter’s aggression on the field, he refused to continue with additional sessions, so I could no longer help this athlete. Perhaps at some point in her life, this athlete will be able to become whole. It is not always possible to apply the model when there are outside agendas. In this case, it was not possible to apply the model because the father, as well as the mother (because of her own inability to be congruent within the relationship to the father) were not allowing their daughter to communicate what she now desired. Within the therapeutic setting, establishing congruence was outside of our control. Because Annie was not being heard by her parents, in the future she may feign an injury, truly get injured, or sabotage herself in some other way. What will probably result is resentment in the relationship between Annie and her parents until they can communicate about Annie’s life more freely and lovingly.

**Benefits of using the model**

There are many advantages to using this model. It is a humanistic, whole-person model that allows athletes to consider how they feel and where they are in the here and now in order to make decisions that will influence many aspects of their experiences for the remainder of their lives. Having the opportunity to process where they are with another human being without judgment and with unconditional positive regard is often a rare experience, especially for athletes. For adolescents, there often is pressure from coaches, and especially parents, who directly or indirectly verbalize how much time, energy, and money has been contributed to their sports, along with expectations of full university scholarships. For professional athletes, there are also perceived and real pressures. Some professional athletes have no one with whom to talk because they perceive that most people involved in their lives have a vested interest in them. Applying this model also allows athletes to be not only introspective, but also able to gain perspective. Participating in sport is one aspect of life; it does not make up the whole.

**Disadvantages of using the model**

The disadvantages of using this model depend on the context in which the athletes are being seen. Although there are times athletes may be struggling about wanting to be involved in their sports or just wanting to improve mental performances, as they aspire or begin to climb the ranks as elite athletes, they automatically begin to create imbalances in their lives. There are times when sacrifices will be made and seeing what may be missing from their lives (e.g., social opportunities, perceived normal activities) may feel daunting or overwhelming, and perhaps impossible. Another disadvantage of the model, especially if used exclusively, is not having a set agenda with the number of sessions or the content of the sessions. Athletes are used to having a plan placed in front of them and being coached through issues. When using this model, clients are the true drivers of the agenda, not the therapist. This model may be too slow and loose for result-oriented athletes. Additionally, using this model in isolation may not be economically feasible for many, because there is no
set number of sessions. Exploring one’s life will take time, and can be troublesome if an athlete is already in the midst of a busy and demanding competitive season. There is also a risk, especially if athletes are in season, that they may temporarily perform worse due to being emotionally distracted from examining various incongruencies in their lives.

**Conclusions**

Athletes are used to being coached. Even though giving athletes space to discuss what is occurring in their environments is helpful, they are also looking for direction and effective techniques from the therapist. Using a combination of modalities seems to be beneficial. For example, using in-between session homework employed in a cognitive-behavioral approach creates a familiar structure and gives a measurable means of improvement for the athlete, aiding in the ability to create relatively rapid change (see Chapter 14 on cognitive-behavioral models). See Box 13.1 for key points from this chapter.

**Box 13.1**

*Key points from the humanistic/person-centered model*

- Unconditional positive regard, empathy, congruence, and understanding from the therapist are essential for an athlete to self-explore.
- Athletes have free will and the ability to make choices that are growth enhancing.
- The importance of self-awareness is stressed; athletes who are self-aware make better choices.
- Athletes are capable of acting in responsible and caring ways in interpersonal relationships.
- Human beings have an innate drive toward growth that enables them to benefit from counseling.
- As athletes grow to understand and value themselves, their selves become more congruent with their experiences.

**References**


