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Self-talk

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Some athletes maintain an ongoing internal dialogue while competing: “I really need this putt,” or “I couldn’t hit the side of a barn today,” or “I own this court.” Other athletes shout aloud in frustration or exhilaration. “You cannot be serious!!” or “Come on!! Get there!” And then there are times when athletes compete in silence, step up, take a deep breath, and execute.

What mindset should athletes have to perform their best? Does thinking or talking to oneself affect sport performance? According to Confucius (n.d.), “the more man meditates upon good thoughts, the better will be his world and the world at large.” Many athletes and coaches believe that being positive enhances sport performance. But is being positive always right? James Hagerty (n.d.) once said, “One day I sat thinking, almost in despair; a hand fell on my shoulder and a voice said reassuringly: cheer up, things could get worse. So I cheered up and, sure enough, things got worse.” If positive thoughts are not always effective and sometimes things get worse, then perhaps negative self-talk, a mental kick in the butt, could be an alternative performance strategy. And what about the athletes who are “in the zone” or performance flow states and don’t seem to be thinking or talking to themselves at all?

These questions pertain to self-talk and the relationships among self-talk, personal factors, environmental factors, and sport performance. In this chapter, I will define self-talk, present research related to self-talk in sport settings, and finally, discuss how to apply research findings to work with teams and athletes. Understanding self-talk can help athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants meet their sport, exercise, and other goals.

What is self-talk?

Self-talk is a term used widely in the research literature to describe what athletes say to themselves out loud or internally and privately. A number of terms have been used to describe self-talk, including inner or internal dialogue, monologue, voice or speech, auditory imagery, private speech, self-statements, stream of consciousness, and more (Brinthaupt, Hein, & Kramer, 2009). Given this broad range of descriptive terms, it is not surprising
that definitions of self-talk range greatly in breadth and scope. Some definitions of self-talk focus only on self-directed verbalizations; other definitions include imagery, inner or internal speech, hand and body gestures, and even some verbalizations that appear to be directed at others (Van Raalte, Brewer, Cornelius, & Petitpas, 2006). The inclusion of gestures in definitions of self-talk seems to be warranted, based on recent cross-cultural research indicating that gestures are intimately tied to language acquisition and use (Guidetti & Nicoladis, 2008).

Consideration of self-talk definitions may seem to be solely an academic exercise but there are applied benefits. Defining self-talk facilitates clarification and a shared understanding of the construct. Broad definitions of self-talk suggest that a range of strategies might be used in self-talk interventions.

Types of self-talk

To help understand self-talk more clearly, researchers have classified self-talk according to a number of coding schemes. For example, self-talk has been categorized according to the manner in which it occurs. Some self-talk is self-determined, occurring spontaneously such as when an athlete shouts out a frustrated “I stink!” after a missed shot or an enthusiastic “awesome!!” after a great one. Other self-talk is purposefully used to change mood or behavior and may be chosen by an athlete or assigned by a coach or researchers as part of an experiment (Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2010).

Spontaneously occurring self-talk has been categorized as positive, negative, and instructional (Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994). Positive self-talk includes statements that people say to themselves that are encouraging or reflect favorable emotions. In a sport setting, positive self-talk might include statements such as “I can do it,” or “Yes!” Negative self-talk involves statements that are negative and/or reflect anger or discouragement such as “you are slow!” or “that’s horrible.” Instructional self-talk involves providing self-direction about the performance of a particular skill or strategy such as “nice loose swing” or “move your feet.” More recently, motivational self-talk such as “hang in there” or “come on!” has also been studied in sport settings (Zervas, Stavrou, & Psychountaki, 2007). Research on spontaneous self-talk has shown that discouraging events such as losing points in tennis can lead to negative self-talk (Van Raalte, Cornelius, Hatten, & Brewer, 2000). Further, spontaneous negative self-talk can lead to poor performance (Van Raalte et al., 1994). These results suggest that spontaneous negative self-talk is problematic for competitors.

If spontaneously occurring negative self-talk hurts performance, it might make sense that reducing negative self-talk and/or using positive self-talk would be helpful for performance. Research has been conducted to examine the effects of self-talk that athletes and coaches intentionally choose to use. Laboratory studies exploring the relationship between self-talk and performance usually involve participants coming into a laboratory setting and performing sport-like tasks such as throwing darts at a target (Van Raalte et al., 1995). Much of this research involves college undergraduates who are not competitive athletes and are not performing in real sport settings. In these studies, the preponderance of research data suggests that positive self-talk is associated with better performances than use of negative self-talk and that motivational self-talk is particularly effective for tasks requiring power (Edwards, Tod, & McGuigan, 2008). For tasks requiring precision, instructional self-talk is superior to motivational or no self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis, & Zourbanos, 2004).
From this laboratory research, it appears that intentional use of positive, instructional, and motivational self-talk may be helpful in sport settings. Field studies involving athletes performing sport tasks in non-competitive and actual competition settings confirm that negative self-talk can disrupt performance and that instructional self-talk is a preferred approach. For example, Harvey, Van Raalte, and Brewer (2002) found that golfers who were told to use instructional self-talk while putting showed benefits in terms of consistency. In contrast, the more positive and negative self-talk that golfers used, the less accurate were their putting performances.

Similar research conducted with endurance athletes has typically involved assessment of the effects of athletes’ associative and dissociative self-talk. Associative self-talk, a form of instructional self-talk, involves a focus on body sensations and noticing how performance is proceeding with self-statements such as “my legs are OK” or “keep shoulders down.” Dissociative self-talk involves self-distraction, thinking about tasks to be completed or other people or even listening to music. Skilled performers, especially those working at high levels of effort, perform best when using associative/instructional self-talk (St Clair Gibson & Foster, 2007). When considering laboratory and field studies together, it appears that negative self-talk can be harmful to sport performance and that instructional self-talk can be helpful.

How does self-talk affect sport performance?

A number of mechanisms by which self-talk affects sport outcomes have been proposed. Specifically, it has been proposed that self-talk affects sport performance by causing emotional (e.g., mood, motivation, anxiety) and/or cognitive (e.g., self-instruction, distraction reduction) changes (Zinsser et al., 2010). Emotional changes may help athletes maintain appropriate levels of motivation, reduce negative emotions and perhaps negative self-talk, and increase self-confidence. Cognitive changes can direct attention to the appropriate movement and help athletes correct errors and focus effectively on the task at hand.

If so much is understood about self-talk and the mechanisms by which self-talk affects performance in sport, then why isn’t self-talk used by athletes most of the time? The challenge related to self-talk is knowing exactly what type and how much self-talk is most effectively used for which athletes under which circumstances. Research on choking in sport has demonstrated that instructional self-talk can be performance enhancing for novices. The same type of instructional self-talk can induce choking in skilled performers. For example, Ford, Hodges, and Williams (2005) had skilled soccer players use instructional self-talk, directing attention to their feet during a soccer dribbling task. Those using instructional self-talk dribbled the ball more poorly than did those who did not use self-talk. Beilock, Carr, MacMahon, and Starkes (2002) demonstrated similar results in their study on soccer players and golfers. Overall, it seems that for highly skilled athletes, use of instructional self-talk can lead to increased attentional monitoring and worse performances, or to put it another way, under certain circumstances, skilled athletes using instructional self-talk may experience paralysis by analysis.

If too much instructional self-talk is problematic for skilled performers, then perhaps turning off self-talk is ideal for optimal performance. Leary and Tate (2007) discussed the mental states associated with peak performance, flow states, and mindfulness and noted that reduced self-talk is a defining characteristic of optimal performance mental states. It is not clear, however, if the beneficial effects of mindfulness are due to reduced self-talk or to the effectiveness of the other components of mindfulness. It may be possible for athletes to use
self-talk to achieve peak performance and flow states but then experience reduced self-talk during the actual experience of peak performances. This interpretation is supported by qualitative research with high performers and athletes describing flow and peak experiences. Athletes and coaches consistently indicate that self-talk is one of the key components that has contributed to their optimal peak performances (Krane & Williams, 2010).

**Personal factors related to self-talk use**

Another reason that it may be difficult to determine exactly what self-talk is ideal for performance enhancement is that a “one size fits all” approach may not work well for self-talk. Personal and environmental factors can come into play such that certain types and amounts of self-talk are effective for some people and not as effective for others. Van Raalte et al. (2000) studied competitive adult tennis players and found that nearly 75% of the athletes spontaneously used negative self-talk after losing a point, perhaps to express frustration. Half of the tennis players used positive self-talk after they lost a point, perhaps to get back on track and to perform better. When it came to the next point, almost all the tennis players performed worse after using negative self-talk, but one player tended to perform better. With regard to positive self-talk, only one player performed better after using positive self-talk, two players performed worse, and the rest were unaffected. These data suggest that there are trends in the ways that people use self-talk but also that there are important individual difference in self-talk uses and effects. What works for some may not work for others.

Wood, Perunovic, and Lee (2009) looked at another individual characteristic, self-esteem, to examine the effects of self-talk. High and low self-esteem participants in their study were asked to repeat positive self-talk statements or were assigned to a no-statement control condition. It might be expected that positive self-talk would be particularly helpful for the low self-esteem participants who might especially need encouragement. Instead, results showed that low self-esteem participants who used positive self-talk such as, “I’m a lovable person” or focused on how that statement was true actually felt worse than those low self-esteem participants who focused on how the statement “I’m a lovable person” could be true or not true. Further, low self-esteem participants who used positive self-talk also reported feeling worse than those who did not use positive self-talk at all. For high self-esteem participants, a limited benefit of positive self-talk use was found. Thus, use of positive self-talk may benefit certain people, but may be least effective for those with low self-esteem who appear to need positive self-talk the most. Clearly, further research exploring self-talk and other personal factors is needed. When applying these findings, performers may want to try using positive self-talk to see how it works. If positive self-talk appears to be helpful, then continued use makes sense. If not, then other strategies might be worth considering.

**Environmental factors related to self-talk use**

Self-talk affects individuals, but it is important to remember that individuals are not alone, but rather, function within an environmental context. When talking about environmental factors that contribute to self-talk, I use the term “environment” in a broad sense. That is, it includes the social team environment created by other athletes and coaches as well as the specific sport environment involving practice and competition settings. Research exploring self-talk across settings indicates that self-talk typically used in practice differs from that
used in competition. As might be expected, more self-talk is used during competition when intensity is high (Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2005). Self-talk use also differs across cultures. Peters and Williams (2006) compared East Asian and European American students in their use of self-talk and the effects of self-talk on performance. They found that East Asian students used a greater proportion of negative to positive self-talk than did European American students. This greater negative to positive self-talk ratio resulted in better performance for the East Asian students than it did for the European/American students. Thus, the social, sport, and cultural environments may all contribute to how and when self-talk is used and the effects that self-talk has on individuals. For those who find self-talk to be an effective or useful strategy, developing a self-talk plan that includes self-talk use that is matched to the environment and that is flexible might be a valuable tactic for training and competition.

Using self-talk in sport performance

The body of research reviewed above suggests that using self-talk can be a valuable strategy. How then might an effective self-talk program be designed? Based on the research highlighting individual differences in the effects of self-talk (Van Raalte et al., 2000), it is useful to start by understanding how teams or individual performers currently use self-talk. Is self-talk used at all? If so, is it spontaneously generated self-talk, or is it self-talk that has been selected by athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, or important others for a specific purpose? Under what circumstances is self-talk used or does self-talk occur? How does self-talk affect personal factors (e.g., self-esteem, confidence, motivation)? What is the environment like and how does self-talk fit into that particular environment? How are self-talk and performance related? That is, would reducing negative self-talk be helpful or do certain types of negative self-talk provide motivation?

Answering these sorts of questions usually requires athletes to think about themselves, their environments, and sport performances in an unfamiliar manner. Some athletes benefit from self-talk journals, in which they write down their self-talk used and the effects of such self-talk. Some athletes might speak their talk aloud and record it to assess their actual self-talk use. Other athletes might prefer a less academic approach, using imagery to recollect their self-talk or simply choosing to be more aware of their self-talk and then considering how (and if) they might like to use self-talk in a more systematic manner.

Once an understanding of current self-talk use is gained, it is important to consider the individual athlete involved. There are a number of self-talk techniques that may be effective for athletes in general. The challenge is finding the right techniques to consider for each individual athlete in his or her individual situation. Several self-talk techniques are described below.

Self-instruction

For athletes who want to correct or develop specific sport skills, instructional self-talk may be their strategy of choice. For these athletes, simple phrases such as “turn, hit,” are reminders that can help athletes reap the benefits of instructional self-talk. The goal is to select instructional self-talk that is at the appropriate level so that the performance decrements due to excessive attentional monitoring are minimized (Beilock et al., 2002). Instructional self-talk can also be used to develop psychological skills. For example, athletes may use self-talk to improve mood by choosing self-talk statements to use at critical times that
help them feel better, such as “I love this sport.” Self-talk can also be used to increase effort, “I can take more pain. I have trained, and I am ready for anything!” or to control attentional focus, “there is only the ball and me.”

**Thought replacement**

For athletes who find that they are overwhelmed by negative self-talk, thought replacement may be implemented to counteract the problematic effects. Thought replacement is based on the idea that suppressing negative self-talk (“don’t think about it any more”) works temporarily at best and sometimes cannot be accomplished at all (Zinsser et al., 2010). To use thought replacement, athletes identify their problematic negative self-talk. Next, they come up with and use alternative thoughts to replace the identified self-talk statements. For example, “this is too hard, I will never get it” might be replaced by, “I’ve learned hard things before. I can learn this, too.” In high pressure situations that lead athletes to say to themselves things such as, “I don’t belong here, the competition is too good,” negative self-talk can be replaced with the statement made famous by tennis star, Billie Jean King (n.d.), “Pressure is a privilege – it only comes to those who earn it.” With thought replacement, the intentional use of helpful self-talk is designed to provide direct benefits that replace the harmful effects of negative self-talk.

**Mindfulness**

Both self-instruction and thought replacement are effortful techniques that require athletes to purposely change their self-talk behaviors and patterns. Inherent in these approaches is a sense that self-talk is insufficient or wrong and should be controlled, eliminated, or improved. Athletes who attempt to suppress problematic self-talk such as “don’t think about how much I suck” may experience ironic effects of mental control or action such that the thoughts are suppressed for a time but then rebound more strongly later.

Mindfulness and acceptance approaches are based on the idea that self-talk and related internal cognitive and emotional states do not need to be replaced or eliminated (see Chapters 20 and 21). With regard to self-talk, positive outcomes can be achieved by practising nonjudgmental, present-moment awareness and acceptance of naturally occurring self-talk followed by commitment to action. Mindfulness states have been shown to be similar to flow states suggesting that athletes who use mindfulness may be likely to experience flow states more often (Bernier, Thienot, Codron, & Fournier, 2009).

As with any behavioral intervention, it is useful to get a baseline of the behavior in question, to try an intervention to enhance performance, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Modifications to the self-talk plan can then be made to help reach optimal performance states. This approach can work for athletes, coaches, and sport psychology consultants.

**Conclusion**

Self-talk, broadly defined, includes what athletes say to themselves via word or gesture, out loud, or internally and privately. Although more narrow definitions of self-talk exist, this one encompasses the full range of self-talk and related phenomena. Research conducted on self-talk in experimental and field settings generally suggests that negative self-talk is
associated with poor performance. Instructional self-talk can be useful in certain circumstances. Positive self-talk seems to enhance performance primarily in the laboratory. These generalizations should be carefully considered when applying self-talk interventions to any specific individual. There are large individual and environmental differences in terms of self-talk use and its effects. People who want to try using self-talk in a systematic way can begin by assessing their current self-talk use and its effects. Next, an intervention can be designed to modify self-talk in a particular way. Finally, the intervention can be evaluated and changed to better reach desired results. Athletes and coaches have identified self-talk as a key component in sport success. It seems valuable to consider self-talk as a part of a comprehensive sport or exercise training program. See Box 53.1 for a summary of practical points from this chapter.

**Box 53.1**

Summary of practical points about self-talk

- Self-talk broadly defined includes gestures and self-directed thoughts and talk.
- Negative self-talk is associated with poor performance.
- Positive self-talk use may result in lower self-esteem for some athletes.
- If choosing among positive, negative, and instructional self-talk, instructional self-talk is associated with the best performances.
- To use self-talk effectively, athletes should identify how and when they use self-talk, determine the effects of self-talk, implement interventions, and evaluate self-talk.
- One should modify self-talk strategies as skill and sport needs evolve.

**References**


