Self-esteem and self-perceptions in sport and exercise

Kenneth R. Fox, Magnus Lindwall
Published online on: 19 Mar 2014

How to cite: Kenneth R. Fox, Magnus Lindwall. 19 Mar 2014, Self-esteem and self-perceptions in sport and exercise from: Routledge Companion to Sport and Exercise Psychology, Global perspectives and fundamental concepts Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Oct 2022
Chapter 3

Self-esteem and self-perceptions in sport and exercise

KENNETH R. FOX AND MAGNUS LINDWALL

SUMMARY

Experiencing self-esteem is one of the most important of psychological needs. It is associated with good mental health, how well we cope with the stresses and strains we face, and has an important influence on our choice of and persistence in behaviours. Our level of self-esteem is determined by the way we see ourselves, or our self-perceptions in the many aspects of life in which we are involved. Those aspects closest to us are the most salient, such as family and friendships, and how we look and how we perform at school or work. This complex of experiences is used to form an overall impression of worth or esteem that carries powerful emotions such as pride and shame. Because we enjoy feeling good about ourselves, we tend to make the most of those aspects of life which provide success and achievement and avoid negative experiences. Sport and exercise involvement is very public and can have strong positive or negative effects on self-perceptions and self-esteem. If coaches, teachers and health professionals are to get the best out of people in terms of their achievement and psychological well-being, it is critical that they understand the whole person and how experiences they help to create affect an individual's self-perceptions and self-esteem. This chapter presents examples from exercise participation and sport performance settings to help leaders develop effective strategies for fostering positive self-perceptions and self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Think of times when you were growing up or even more recently as an adult when you might have felt embarrassed, incompetent, unwanted, downhearted, or a hopeless failure. These experiences can seriously challenge your self-esteem. It may not have knocked all the stuffing out of you but it certainly made you feel low for a while. Several knocks like this in succession
could have a more permanent effect on your feelings and subsequent decisions. The most common response, and the one that seems very sensible at the time, is to avoid from that point on the situation that caused the bad feeling. At school, if you felt useless in sport or physical education, because you could not run fast, throw or kick a ball, or jump as high as others, then it is understandable that you don’t look forward to PE lessons. You are likely to drop them as soon as you are allowed, especially if you are made to feel inadequate by an unsympathetic teacher or teasing friends. Similarly, if you feel unattractive or overweight, particularly if you have been told so by people who are important to you, then it might not be surprising that you lack confidence in front of others and tend to shy away from participation. Of course there can be a very positive side to playing sports and exercise. Performing well, being recognized as a good player, being part of a team, improving your fitness or losing weight through hard work can make you feel great and want more and more. These are examples from sport and exercise of how experiences in aspects of our lives can determine our self-perceptions, and how these in turn shape our choices, persistence and performances in different behaviors. These can have both short- and long-term consequences for our self-esteem.

What we think about our physical selves, or our bodies in terms of what they look like and how well they work to perform skills and activities, seems to be particularly important. Psychologists have suggested that the physical self functions as the public self. Our body is what we display and what people see. It provides the way we present ourselves to others in terms of our prowess, status, personality and sexuality. This has a powerful effect on how one is viewed by others as a person, particularly in the early phases of acquaintance. This in turn can have an important influence on our lives and reflect how we see and value ourselves.

Compared to some behaviors and pastimes such as reading or playing computer games, sport and exercise inherently draw attention to the physical self. They usually take place in the presence of several other people whether they are co-participants or spectators. Our appearance and physical performance are therefore open to public evaluation, making the experience even more salient. Doing well and looking good can make us feel elated and confident, while a poor showing makes us feel incompetent or inadequate in the eyes of others. It is therefore very important for effective sport and exercise leadership to have a good understanding of the way participants react in terms of self-perceptions to their sport and exercise experiences. As sport and exercise professionals, we are usually in a position of power and are often well-regarded so we have a particular responsibility to help our clients develop positive views of their abilities and self-esteem. This in turn will stimulate their motivation, they will try harder, and it will help them to perform and participate to their full potential. This chapter is written to help sport and exercises coaches and teachers achieve this.

**OBJECTIVES**

The overall aim of this chapter therefore is to help future sport coaches, physical education teachers, and exercise specialists to understand more about the psychology of self so that their practice can be more effective. Specifically by the end of the chapter you should be better equipped to:

1. Understand the meaning of self-esteem and how it is shaped by our feelings about ourselves in different aspects of our lives.
2. Understand how self-esteem affects our attitudes, choices, persistence and performances in sport and exercise.
3 Understand how coaching and teaching decisions can have positive or negative influences on self-esteem and self-perceptions.

4 Develop a style of coaching that promotes involvement in sports and exercise, improves performance and develops self-esteem.

UNDERSTANDING THE SELF

In addition to social and developmental psychology, the self has been the subject of research and debate in disciplines as diverse as sociology, philosophy, theology and even politics. As a result, there are volumes of literature and many different terms are used when discussing this topic, making its study seem complex and confusing.

What is self-concept? If asked to describe yourself, you are likely to mention the roles you hold in life such as being a daughter, student, or athlete, or personal characteristics such as the way you look and how you do things. This self description is often termed self-concept and does not necessarily carry any judgment about self. It is just a way of explaining what you see about yourself in terms of your characteristics and who you are.

What is self-esteem? Self-esteem is more critical in that it carries a value judgment. It is interpreted as overall (global) feelings of worth, respect and value for self, and summarized by the degree to which an individual feels they are a good or an ‘OK’ person. It is a fairly stable construct but powerful and consistent experiences can change self-esteem over time. It is important because it affects our emotions in a deep way helping us feel pride, satisfaction, and optimism when it is high, or sadness, shame and hopelessness when it is low. Each individual to some extent is free to use whatever criteria he/she wishes to determine the degree of ‘OK-ness’ so the sources vary according to what he or she values. However, the society or culture in which we live and the way we were brought up also set these values for us. Criteria will also vary across the lifespan as our expectations change, with older adults thinking somewhat differently to teenagers about how they would like to see themselves. Looking slim, fit and attractive and being a high achiever in work or a pursuit such as sport are very powerful and pervasive criteria that hold high status in western societies. Being well brought up suggests that virtues such as honesty, empathy, being unselfish, or a good team player might be important. However, it is also possible that less virtuous characteristics might provide esteem in some subcultures. For example, being the most violent leader in a youth gang or the dirtiest player in the team can also bring esteem in circles that value those characteristics. In that sense, feeling good about the self does not necessarily mean moral goodness. It is derived from what is valued by the person and his/her subculture. Therefore to understand how self-perceptions drive an individual’s motivation, we also have to establish what they consider important to them, or their value systems.

What are self-perceptions? This is a general term that usually refers to descriptions or appraisals in specific roles or life settings. Sometimes they reflect identities such as “I am an exerciser” and often provide assessments of competence such as “I am really good at sport”, “I am one of the worst spellers in class”, or “I am no good with girls because I feel shy”. As we develop through childhood and adolescence we become more complex and sophisticated in our self-knowledge, and the life domains where we are able to make self-judgments become more numerous and differentiated. For example, by mid-adolescence we might have unique perceptions of our performance in each school subject and our social competence with same-sex as well as opposite-sex friends. Our views of ourselves in the physical domain includes perceptions of sport
competence, physical strength, fitness, and appearance and each of these will be split into perceptions of performance in different kinds of sports, or even different skills in single sports, or different aspects of appearance.

These ratings of competence or adequacy are often gathered to formulate estimates of self-esteem. It appears that these can be organized in a hierarchical way so that very specific competence ratings that are frequently repeated and consistent feed up to more general levels of perceptions and eventually may influence self-esteem (see Figure 3.1). Very specific self-perceptions such as “I can run a mile in less than seven minutes” tie in with Bandura’s (1986) self-efficacy theory and so are often termed “efficacy statements” or “expectancies”. Repeated success at this level is thought to improve higher, more global levels of self-perceptions. For example, consistent improvements with performance in the football team or success with a weight loss and exercise plan might improve feelings about the physical self and eventually generalize to higher self-esteem.

OTHER IMPORTANT SELF CONSTRUCTS

The hierarchical organization of the self depicted in Figure 3.1 provides a useful framework for viewing the diverse elements of the self complex. Over the years, many important elements have received special attention by researchers. For example, because of Western
society's emphasis on “looking good”, body image – and its influence on mental health and behaviours such as eating and exercise – has been widely investigated. Body image has been defined as the internal representation (picture) of our outer appearance (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), or one's body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviour (Cash, 2004). Another concept closely related to body image and the physical self is social physique anxiety, which has been described as “a subtype of social anxiety that occurs as a result of the prospect or interpersonal evaluation involving one's physique” (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989, p. 96). Individuals with high social physique anxiety are more likely to avoid situations in which they are forced to reveal their body (for example, at the gym, on beaches, or in swimming facilities) to others and face a potential evaluation of others.

SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Establishing and maintaining self-esteem is a complex process. The self is nurtured by an innate drive to explore and develop while simultaneously establishing a coherent base from which to operate. Thus, stability across time and consistency across situations in patterns of behaviour and emotional reactions provide the sense of identity and predictability that ties the self together. This is important in order to make lasting relationships and rational decisions because consistency allows people to understand us or get to know us and thus relate to us more effectively. This consistency of identity in turn nurtures the necessary roots for individuals to seek out challenges that facilitate personal learning and growth. The self is left with a delicate balancing act of establishing a solid and recognizable core or identity while retaining sufficient flexibility to accept the challenges of individual development and not stifle opportunities for personal improvement. If I know who I am and I am reasonably happy with myself, then I have the confidence to take on challenges and I am receptive to changing aspects of myself. Those people who have not developed their core fully tend to be defensive of their selves and more conservative in their behavioural choices. They cannot afford to allow themselves to be challenged, as they are more fearful of failure. These processes become transparent during major transitional periods across the lifespan such as adolescence and retirement. They are all too evident in sport where players who lack confidence can be too conservative in their play and avoid taking risks because of a fear of failure. “Let someone else shoot” might be the order of the day. Coaches can help by learning whether this lack of confidence is an issue of low-perceived competence at performing the skill or a more generalized lack of esteem. The former requires specific practices while the latter needs some empathy and sensitivity and perhaps some coaching about how to deal with failure and disassociate it from worth as a person. Behaviours that reflect low self-esteem are feature in Table 3.1.

Human nature is designed for survival and this includes looking after psychological well-being. There is good evidence to show that we are programmed to think positively in order to make the best of what happens in our lives. This function can be conceived as a self-director who may operate both consciously and subconsciously to manage behaviours and mentally process what happens to the self in a way that maximizes good feelings. The self-director, which is analogous to a company director, determines where to invest time and energy in serving this mission. This involves making choices, commitment and persistence in relevant tasks to produce positive balance sheets, and deployment of public relation strategies to present the company in the best possible light. There is evidence of several strategies that are used with regard to self-esteem and the physical self. Examples are:
Table 3.1 Recognizing low self-esteem and confidence in sport

Although there are some obvious signs of low confidence such as shyness and slowness to step up to the line, there are also some more hidden signs:

- There is a need for a great deal of positive and consistent praise and feedback, especially following a failure or a negative comment.
- There may be a tendency to criticize the performance of other players in order to boost their own standing.
- There is a tendency to be fearful of taking risks but some will also choose high-risk strategies because the expectation is that failure is inevitable and not their fault.
- There may be a tendency for some to accept the blame for all failure and feel depressed. However, others may always try to place blame elsewhere because they are not strong enough to take responsibility for failure.
- They may find it difficult to feel part of the team because they do not feel they are worthy contributors.
- They may avoid putting in maximum effort. The classic phrase “don’t let them see me sweat” comes into play here and arises because it is only possible to judge a player’s true potential when he/she is stretched to full capacity. These players give the impression they don’t really care but in reality are hiding a lack of confidence.

- Customizing the self complex by attaching importance to those aspects or domains of life that yield success and minimizing the importance of those which provide feelings of inadequacy or low competence. This latter process has been termed discounting (Harter, 1999). Many adolescent girls, for example, discount the importance of feeling that they are not very good at sports and are apathetic about taking part. However, some areas that carry a high cultural currency may be too overpowering to allow an individual to discount it. Attractiveness is one such area that is troublesome to discount for females, and increasingly for young males.

- Using self-presentation strategies to convince others that the self is doing well (Leary, 1995). Such external relations strategies could include accentuating the positive dimensions of the self while concealing the troublesome aspects that leave the self vulnerable to negative evaluation. This extends to choices of behaviors. For example, people will tend to gravitate to settings where they feel they will look good and perform well. This might explain why health clubs tend to attract people who are already reasonably fit and slim.

- Self-serving bias is evident in the interpretation of incoming information. Negative information is more likely to be ignored and forgotten while successes are embellished. The self is more likely to ascribe failure to external sources such as luck or an opponent who was too tough while success is attributed to personal ability and effort. Individuals therefore tend to view themselves in a rather optimistic light. They tend to believe they have greater control over events in their environment than they actually have, they tend to accept more than their fare share of successes and sometimes do not fully accept their part in failures, and they tend to view the future in a “rosier” light than might be justified.

Intuitively it might be seen that having these positive illusions might be bad for the individual. However, what is interesting is that positive illusions seem to be related to positive health, both mentally and physically (Taylor et al., 2003). On the whole, they are therefore seen as healthy mental strategies and should be expected and encouraged rather than stifled. Of course there is potential for the self to overplay these self-serving cards. Excessive reliance produces delusions of grandeur,
over-confidence, boastfulness and a loss of touch with reality that can result in impairment to further learning and social relationships. Not understanding or accepting the true reasons for success and failure will impair learning for the future. Moreover, discounting certain behaviours such as physical activity that are integrally linked with physical health will impair motivation which is counterproductive to health promotion. In summary, self-serving strategies promote optimism, motivation, confidence and well-being but in excess are dangerous because they can impede learning and progress.

DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-PERCEPTIONS

The concepts described so far apply to maturing adolescents and adults. Children are different because they have not fully developed the cognitive capacity to accurately assess the self and understand how it functions in performance and social interactions (Harter, 1999). Very young children aged between six and around nine years old have very simple views of their self and are quite unrealistic and optimistic in their views of how they rank in comparison to others in school work and physical skills. They have naturally positive views on life and believe that strong performances are simply a result of trying hard. “Jimmy won the race because he tried hardest”. They rarely have the capacity to understand abstractions such as health or to be stimulated by distant rewards such as improving fitness. They are highly motivated by the “here and now” so that activity, for example, has to be seen as fun. As children develop, they begin to understand the concept of ability and that it contributes – alongside effort – to level of performance. They realize that other children do not have to try quite so hard to win because they have natural ability. This is important because around ages 10 to 12 years, children become more accurate in their assessment of their own ability levels. If they start to believe that they have low competence, even when they try as hard as they can, and it does not yield success, then they start to look for alternative activities. In severe cases “learned helplessness” can set in where engagement is completely withdrawn. Table 3.2 illustrates this concept in the setting of a fitness test in physical education. Strategies to help such children stay involved are presented later.

Table 3.2 An example of learned helplessness in fitness testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learned helplessness: No matter how hard I try it does not seem to make a difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antony is an overweight 12 year old asked to perform the aerobic fitness shuttle run test in physical education class with all his class mates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Scores low even though he tries hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Highly public exposure of his poor performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Makes him feel that he could never be like the others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Convinces him that exercise is to be avoided at all costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Starts to use defensive strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Never show effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Attach low importance – what’s the point in it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Avoids similar activities for the rest of his life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Also, children tend to differ in how they view and evaluate things like intelligence and achievement (Dweck, 2000). For example, some view achievement in sport as a fixed thing that you either have or you don’t have. Others, instead, view sport achievement as something more dynamic and malleable, something that can be changed and worked on, primarily through effort and commitment. These two different mindsets will also have a large impact on how children and youths behave in the context of sport and exercise. For example, it will influence how they interpret success and failure, and how they are motivated to improve or try out new tasks. A person with the fixed mindset will more often choose the easy way, rather than going for challenging tasks, and making sure of success and avoidance of failure in order to maintain a positive self-esteem. To the contrary, a person with the malleable mindset is more likely to seek out and enjoy challenges as this will probably increase their learning, which is one of the key motivational aspects for them, rather than to constantly win and beat others. In other words, they are less likely to be afraid of failing.

HOW TO HELP PEOPLE EXPERIENCE POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-PERCEPTIONS

Psychologists have also been drawing upon self-determination theory (SDT) as a framework for building strategies for promoting self-esteem (see Chapter 5). According to this theory, the individual (the self-director) is constantly engaged in a process of integrating appropriate input from the environment into identity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). In order for the self to develop, flourish and function well, it helps if the individual feels that three fundamental psychological needs are satisfied. These are competence, autonomy or self-determination, and relatedness (for more information on these needs, see Chapter 5). Settings and experiences in sport and exercise can either promote the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs, or hinder and thwart them. Therefore, for coaches and teachers in sport and exercise, an important step in the promotion of positive self-esteem and self-perceptions is to establish relationships, communications style, and challenges that help the individual experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This sounds simple enough, but how is it achieved?

BUILDING COMPETENCE

Building perceptions of competence in all people can be difficult as in reality there is a whole spectrum of ability levels for each particular skill. Those interested in helping a whole range of people become active have to work particularly hard as often those least competent are in most need of assistance. It is also not so straightforward for elite performers. Even true objective achievements such as winning a competition may not be enough to make some of them feel competent. The sport and exercise world is full of individuals who, according to league tables and outcomes from competitions, should be viewed as very competent, but who may not see themselves that way. There may be several reasons for this, but often it is caused by over-reliance on social comparison with others. This is fraught with dangers. For example, the young player who is seen as a brilliant young talent at local level is likely to eventually be selected into a group of elite players, all of whom may be more proficient. A high competence rating when compared to local players becomes a low competence rating in the newly acquired group. This “big fish, little pond” phenomena (Marsh and Parker, 1984) is well documented and often happens when
youngsters move from junior to senior school. Similarly, if Sue has lost ten kilos over six months through great efforts in the gym but resets her aspirations for becoming similarly slimmer and fitter like those around her, she may not experience the enhanced sense of competence that should come from her obvious success. Social comparisons cause particular problems for the physical educator who is faced with a class of children with a wide range of physical abilities. The challenge becomes how to keep all these children equally challenged, interested and feeling positive about the physical abilities? Clearly, not all children can be excellent in terms of sports skills by its very definition.

The world of sport and exercise is full of opportunity to make comparisons with others in terms of appearance and skill level. It is difficult to avoid and we have a natural tendency to seek out how we rank against others in a whole range of personal attributes. However, it is dangerous to rely on this as the main source of competence information. This is because the ability of others is beyond our control. The strongest strategy for the coach or teacher is therefore to encourage people from an early age to focus on personal progress and improvement (see Table 3.3). This self-referencing approach, which is often called a mastery or task orientation, has been widely studied in sport under the framework of achievement orientation theory (see Chapter 4). Ego orientation features a reliance on favourable comparisons against others as the main source of competence. Task orientation, on the other hand, focuses on skill or fitness improvement and task mastery and is the only means by which all people, regardless of actual ability level can experience success. However, it also provides a critical back-up strategy and realistic marker for elite sport performers to interpret win and loss in competition. Feeling that you have played really well but have lost is probably more valuable for self-esteem than winning when playing poorly. An important job for coaches therefore is to create activities and tasks that challenge the individuals skills and abilities in an optimal way while at the same time downplaying the natural tendency to worry about comparisons, rankings and league tables. See Table 3.3 and the case studies in Table 3.4 for some ideas. Working with goal-setting, the coach can help the individual to identify realistic goals. At this point, setting up a plan for how to reach these goals is critical. A general recommendation is to start off gently, in particular with beginners, and make steady progress at each stage or level of difficulty so that individuals have a chance to gradually build confidence in their own ability to succeed. Success breeds further motivation and success.

**BUILDING AUTONOMY**

If individuals feel controlled, or that they do not have a part to play in their own progress, or that someone else is the master of their actions, the chances that they will feel autonomous are slim. As coaches and teachers, our own sense of reward often comes from seeing the success of those we work with. There is a danger that we will start to believe and operate in a way that convinces our athletes that we are the reason for their success. In order to avoid depriving them of a sense of self-determination or autonomy it is important that they are engaged in decisions and choices about their training and progress and that they are allowed to take full credit for successes and failures. In this sense, the coach is best advised to adopt a position of a facilitator and take more of an advisory rather than dictatorial or prescriptive role. Sometimes coaches have to work hard to convince athletes of their full role in outcomes as they may be accustomed to many years of being told what to do. Something like: “You were successful because YOU put in all that effort to training last month. YOU did it. I just advised you on what I thought would lead to that success but YOU did it”, might reflect the kind of response needed. This situation can also apply to physical education. PE teachers should consider the percentage of time that they
adopt the role of “instructor” and whether or not dominant role of their communication is command style. Although, the practicalities of managing a class of 30 youngsters will always require respect for the teacher as leader, there may be opportunities for youngsters to provide input into choice of activities, designs of exercise circuits, ways of scoring games, and goal setting. For the coach and teacher to provide an environment that fosters autonomy, it is therefore important to express selflessness, respect and empathy in their daily interactions with those they are working with. As a result, there should be a greater chance for growth, improvement, motivation, and commitment.

Table 3.3 Strategies for helping build confidence and self-esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is essential to recognize when low self-esteem players need help. Leaders will be more effective if they understand and empathize with their players. Sometimes this does not come naturally to coaches but the following might help:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● For low self-esteem players, provide three times more positive feedback than you think they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Make sure any critique is aimed at their performance and not at them as individuals and always offer a feasible strategy for them to improve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Avoid personal stable descriptors such as “You always get that wrong” and provide strategies that lead to solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Convince them that failures are inevitable, they happen to everyone, and are a vital part of learning. Encourage them to expect failure as a source of important information about how to improve. Rebranding failure as a “good guy” can reduce anxieties and provide licence to take more risks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Help build a sense of patience so that improvement is steady but consistent through small incremental goal-setting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 Examples in practice

**CASE STUDY 1: MOTIVATING YOUNG KIDS**

Billy loves his football. His brother, who is four years older, was selected as a youth player for the town’s professional club so Billy was excited when his friend Kyle suggested they join up with a local Saturday morning under 11s squad. For the first three games, although Kyle got to play as a striker, Billy sat on the bench as sub. Although he was disappointed, his big chance came in the second half of a friendly game when his team were winning 2-0 and he was called on. Unfortunately, the other team quickly drew back to 2-2. Although Billy knew that one of the goals was probably his fault, he thought he had played fairly well for a first attempt, the coach decided he was at least partly at fault and decided to sub him back to the bench. Billy felt humiliated and useless and the action of the coach turned some of the other players against him as his team went on to lose 3-2. Billy felt he had let everyone down and that he was no longer liked by his friends. He never turned up for another football team again, even though he became much quicker and more skilful as he matured.

Lessons to the coach:

- Don’t sacrifice the self-esteem of young kids for the sake of winning the game
- Explain your actions to players so they develop understanding
- Give players help with how to improve and how to deal with failure

Lessons for Billy:

- Don’t give up because you are not the finished product – keep practicing
- Football is not the only important thing in your life
- Find a better coach
Table 3.4 (continued)

CASE STUDY 2: WORKING WITH AN ELITE ATHLETE FEARFUL OF FAILURE

Sara is 16 years old and a very talented tennis player. She is the highest ranked player of her age in her country and also ranked top three internationally. As far as she can remember, everybody around her, her parents and coaches, have told her that she has a natural talent for tennis and that she will go all the way to the top. She always won against kids of her own age, and never really had to put any effort to succeed when playing tennis. Come to think of it, she never really experienced any real failure, when playing tennis.

During the last year, however, her coach and parents have decided that it is time to let her take on some tougher opponents, some older girls. However, Sara starts to lose many of her matches. What’s more alarming though is the way she loses and her behaviour. She makes many unprovoked errors and plays way below her usual standards. Normally, she is intense and aggressive in her play, but now she looks either mentally absent or bored. To her coach, it actually looks like she doesn’t care. When confronted with this, Sara gets angry and replies that she doesn’t feel like trying. She has also mentioned a couple of times that she thinks about quitting tennis, and that it’s just not fun anymore.

Her coach discusses the issue with a colleague who is a sport psychologist and asks for her advice. They decide they will talk to Sara together. In the first conversations, about why she thinks she is not performing well, Sara is passive and doesn’t provide any real answers. However, when they ask her what she thinks about winning and losing, success and failure in general, what those words mean to her, she explains that “Winning is for winners, and I’ve always been a winner. I still could win if I really wanted to, but I don’t feel like it. I’m really good at tennis, I’ve always been, and if I don’t win, its not fun anymore.”

A clear pattern emerges. Sara builds a large proportion of her general self-esteem on her tennis performance. Also, for her, performing is winning, beating others, even when she does not play well, nothing else. Social comparison with others is the major driving force of her behaviour. She feels good in general when she wins, particularly when she is sure of winning and doesn’t have to try for it, when she feels superior. However, when she met opponents that were as good as her, a sudden fear of losing has entered her mind and this terrifies her. Her response is not to try at all, at least then she has an excuse if she is losing.

The sport psychologist and coach have several meetings with Sara, where they talk about how losing and failure are obstacles that all great athletes have to deal with. The sport psychologist suggests to Sara that failure is necessary for learning and improving rather than a statement of low ability. They also discuss the problem of constantly comparing against others and the value of comparing progress with yourself. Together, they set up a goal-setting plan for Sara, focusing primarily on details of her own game and specific behaviour on court that she has more control over, no matter who she plays. Also, one specific goal, that always is highlighted and evaluated is for Sara to always, in every game, try hard, no matter whether she is winning or losing.

After a bumpy start, Sara gradually gets more into focusing on herself, rather than the opponent. Her coach notices that she now really tries hard, even against better players. After having lost a tough game against a player four years older and with a higher ranking, she says to her coach: “Too bad I lost, good game though, I really enjoyed the challenge out there. After tight matches like this, I really feel that I improve as a tennis-player.”

She has managed to turn her debilitating fear of failure into an asset and advantage. More importantly, her self-esteem is not dependent on the result of the game but on a broader self-respect arising from her courage and convictions. Maybe this can be applied to other things outside of sport.

Lessons to the coach:
- Performance is not all about winning
- Emphasize effort and hard work, “Hard work beats talent when talent doesn’t work hard”
- Meeting challenges and failure (losing) are important steps in developing and building a healthy self-esteem
- Comparing with oneself is often more relevant than comparing with others
CASE STUDY 3: BUILDING EXERCISE CONFIDENCE IN OVERWEIGHT WOMEN

Overweight and obese women were signed up to a commercial slimming club. Many chose that particular organization because they wanted to avoid exercise as a way of losing weight. However, the slimming organization had been persuaded, largely because of government pressures, that they should be motivating their members to be more active. They hired a consultant to work with them to develop a programme that would be feasible and acceptable to their class leaders and members. The consultant recognized that the members would have very little recent exercise experience, that their past experiences were often unpleasant, that they knew little about how to exercise safely and effectively, they had very low confidence and perceived competence and negative attitudes. In addition, they had been taught and come to believe that exercise was not effective for weight loss and so had very low value or sense of importance for it. The consultant also realized that because of the burden of weight, more vigorous activity was best avoided. A gradual, softly-softly approach, based on existing behaviour theory and evidence, was required that would build confidence through the successful achievement of goals. These goals were behavioural in nature so the slimming organization set up a recognition system for reaching various targets based on achieving number of sessions per week for at least 15 minutes on each occasion. Intensity of exercise was not emphasized in the early stages. The programme was accompanied by materials aimed at persuading members of the important mental and physical health benefits of exercise. All of this was packaged by the organization in a style that appealed to their clientele.

Evaluations indicate that the class leaders are improving in their willingness and confidence in delivery of the exercise component, and believe that more and more members are taking the materials on board and becoming committed exercisers. Many members report that the exercise has done wonders for their confidence and esteem.

Lessons for the members and consultants:

- Sometimes those things you are most scared of can bring the most gain
- Be patient and make slow but steady progress
- Listen to the experts

Lessons for the organization:

- The customer is not always right – it is possible to change minds and behaviours with the right strategies and materials
- Experts can make successful partners

Lessons for the consultant:

- Commercial partners can access far greater numbers than can be achieved through academia
- Commercial organizations are the experts in marketing materials to their customers

BUILDING RELATEDNESS

A consistent finding in research is that a key reason for participation in physical activity is to experience social benefits. People enjoy playing and exercising with others and feeling part of a team or group. For children and young people, playing sport can be a very important way of developing friendships. Settings that foster feelings of social acceptance, being valued and feeling significant in some way to others may assist in promoting self-esteem. Therefore, an important challenge for coaches and teachers is to create fertile ground for such feelings. From a broader perspective, creating opportunities for individuals to make meaningful connections with others, thereby feeling that they are part of something bigger than
themselves, that they belong to a movement or group, is beneficial for feelings of relatedness. This may include the use of small-group activities where the value of cooperation is naturally built into the reward structure. Working together to solve common problems, and learning to depend on others, helps individuals connect to others and build foundations for development of relatedness. A key prerequisite for the development of feelings of relatedness is that the individual experiences trust and respect towards their coach, teacher or parent, and their team-mates. Therefore, regular meetings, one to one, where the coach uses an active listening or discussion approach to understand the athlete’s/student’s perspective, provides an effective base for the long-term development of social relatedness.

CONCLUSION

We believe that understanding how experiences in sport and exercise affect how children, athletes, adult exercisers see themselves, particularly their physical self is crucial to effective coaching, teaching and leadership. It provides real insight into how each individual feels so that coaches can be more empathetic. This in turn will help build fruitful relationships on the basis of mutual respect. It will also help the leader to understand the decision making and motivation of those they work with, which in turn can maximize motivation and performance. Self-esteem and self-perception theory are at the heart of many motivational theories that you will read about in this book. We encourage you to read more and explore how you can design your coaching and teaching for best effect.

LEARNING AIDS

1. Define the terms self-concept, self-esteem and self-perceptions.

   Self-concept is the individual as known to the individual. It is a self-description using whatever characteristics seem important to the person and might refer to abilities, aspects of appearance, behavioural habits, personality traits or values.

   Self-esteem is an overall rating of self-worth. It is important because it carries emotions so that high ratings result in pride and self-confidence whereas low ratings bring shame and feelings of hopelessness.

   Self-perceptions are any thoughts that you have about aspects of yourself as a person.

2. Provide an example of how self-esteem can be influenced by evaluation in different domains in life, such as sport.

   An 11 year old wants to play football for the team and tries really hard at practices. However, she does not get picked to play in the team. Her coach tells her that she will never be good enough but is welcome to carry on practicing. This reinforces to the young girl that she has little ability and no matter how hard she works at it she will never be good enough. Her perceived competence in football is low and if she considers her success at football to be important enough, it may negatively affect her overall self-esteem.
Provide examples of how the way coaches and teachers communicate can have positive or negative influences on self-esteem and self-perceptions.

[Examples should arise out of personal experiences or those of a friend.] For instance, when a coach merely shows disappointment or anger at a poor performance such as a missed shot or tackle, the end result is likely to be a loss of confidence and raised anxiety in the player. If, alternatively, the coach emphasizes how to learn from the mistake, it provides a basis for improvement. The player can see that it was something that can be corrected and is not a statement of permanently poor ability or uselessness. There is hope and there is a way. Self-perceptions will bounce back.

Describe the strategies that coaches can use to help individuals experience positive self-esteem and self-perceptions.

[Examples feature in Table 3.3 but try to produce two or three of your own.]

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are self-concept, self-esteem and self-perceptions?
2. What are body image and social physique anxiety?
3. How is ability or competence related to self-esteem and self-perceptions?
4. What kind of behaviours reflect low self-esteem?
5. What kind of strategies are used to maintain a positive self-concept?
6. What is learned helplessness and how does it play out in a physical education context?
7. What roles do competence, autonomy, and relatedness play for the development of a positive self-esteem?

EXERCISE

Read the three cases provided in Table 3.4. In groups of four, discuss your past experiences in sport or exercise. Provide examples of how a coach or teacher has created a situation that has had a) a positive effect, and b) a negative effect on self-perceptions and self-esteem that might have had a long-term effect on your motivation or behaviour. Write these up as two extra case studies to add to the class resource.

ADDITIONAL READING


REFERENCES
