A psychological skills training programme for Aran

Introduction

Psychological skills training (PST) as defined by Weinberg and Gould (2015) is the consistent and methodical practicing of psychological and mental skills with a view to improving performance, increasing self-satisfaction from sport and exercise and achieving greater enjoyment. Unlike clinical psychologists, educational psychologists work with people who can benefit from improving their mental and psychological skills and do not have a mental disorder. Research discovered that when competing against athletes of a similar ability many coaches believe sport to be between 50 and 90 per cent mental (Weinberg and Gould, 2015).

Swimming is highly competitive; Aran is an elite international-level distance swimmer and aspires to being in the GB team. He is a high achieving law student who is normally very successful. Aran suffered an overuse shoulder injury which has healed, he describes it as almost better than before. However, since returning to training his coach has noticed apprehension before competitions, an increase in negative self-talk and nervousness which suggests a higher level of anxiety. Aran has been underperforming, this is easily quantifiable as swimming is a timed sport, and pre-race stress is leaving him feeling sick, nervous and shaky. However, he is performing well in training and only seems affected by competitions and timed swims, this would suggest an underlying psychological issue rather than something physiological or biomechanical. Aran talks of being unable to focus with negative thoughts of being beaten, reinjury, messing up and not qualifying taking his attention. He is happy to see a sports psychologist as he admits sometimes thinking about quitting swimming.

Aran completed Butler and Hardy's (1992) performance profile which shows that he requires psychological help with his confidence, controlling his pre-race anxiety, and his ability to concentrate to produce his optimal performance. This corresponds with Martens, Vealey and Burton's (1990) Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-II) which Aran completed prior to his last competition which shows he has a high-level of cognitive state and somatic state anxiety along with low self-confidence.

State anxiety describes feelings of anxiety which are experienced in a certain situation, unlike trait anxiety which is part of an individual's personality. Cognitive anxiety is the mental aspect of anxiety covering decreased self-esteem, a fear of being unsuccessful or being negatively judged by others. Somatic anxiety covers the physical aspect of anxiety which manifest as symptoms such as increased heart rate, increased muscle tension and accelerated breathing (Rea, 2017). Weinberg and Gould (2015) define self-confidence as one's own belief that you will succeed when performing an intended function. State self-confidence can be transient and therefore unstable; Aran's self-confidence was measured prior to his latest competition so indicates his loss of confidence when competing compared to training. Self-doubt can erode the ability to perform (Weinberg and Gould, 2015) as it causes anxiety, decreases focus and causes athletes to become indecisive. People lacking confidence often concentrate on their faults instead of their strengths which decreases their concentration. This correlates with Aran's behaviour.

Choking is the name given to poor performance in increased pressure situations especially in high-level competitions due to negative thoughts relating to poor performance at a critical moment with a progressive deterioration which does not improve due to a loss of control over performance (Weinberg and Gould, 2015). Aran appears to be choking when competing, the fact that he is competing at an international level adds to the pressure. He has high expectations and is worried about meeting other people's expectations leading to overload. Aran acknowledges the physical changes associated with choking in his CSAI-II including sweaty palms, an increased heart rate, increased breathing rate along with attentional changes such as muscle tension, internal focus leading to his impaired performance due to muscle tightness and inability to focus along with being highly self-critical and having a loss of self-confidence. Aran requires psychological assistance to reduce his anxiety levels and increase his self-confidence otherwise his performance is unlikely to improve, and he will not make the GB team.

Psychological intervention programme

PST Model

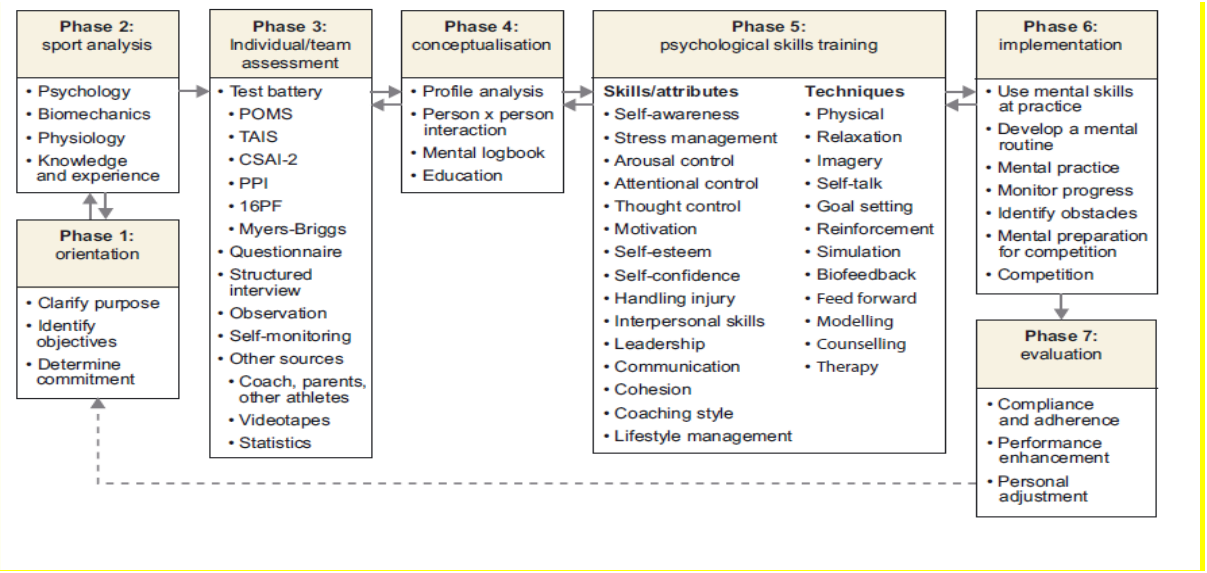

Figure 1 Thomas's seven-phase model of the PST process (Source: Thomas, 1991, shown in Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss, 2017, p. 234, Figure 18.1)

Sports psychologists use models as a framework to develop effective and thoughtful sport psychology programmes when working with athletes. Thomas (1991), cited in Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss (2017), developed a model with seven stages to show the PST process. The first phase is orientation, covering purpose, objectives and commitment to the programme. This includes the initial contact with the athlete, some may be apprehensive of sport and exercise psychology and may require encouragement. When Aran's coach suggests talking to a sport psychologist Aran says that it is a good idea this shows a level of commitment. It will have been ascertained that Aran is a swimmer and is not performing well in competitions.

The second phase is sport analysis. To develop a programme that is effective the sport psychologist needs to understand distance swimming so they would educate themselves in the sport to have credibility.

The third phase is assessment. This uses a range of tools to produce a clear picture of Aran and the issues he is facing. Poor performance is not purely psychological so it is important to get input from Aran's swimming coach as the problem could be biomechanical (Weinberg and Gould, 2015). Aran completed a performance profile

(Butler and Hardy, 1992) and a Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-II). Aran's performance profile (Butler and Hardy, 1992) shows 12 skills and characteristics which he identified as being important to an elite swimmer. He was helped by his coach and included both physical and mental skills. Aran rated each characteristic on a scale 0 to 10; firstly, on his perception of its importance to a distance swimmer and secondly on his perception of his own current performance. The discrepancy value showed Aran perceives his main weaknesses are confidence, control of pre-race anxiety and concentration. Weston, Greenlees and Thelwell (2011), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), examined the benefits of performance profiling and discovered for the athlete it offers a greater self-awareness, it helps them prioritise areas to work on, encourages them to take responsibility for their own improvement and development, aids them to set goals, assess and evaluate their own performance. While helping the sports psychologist to identify mental strengths and weaknesses, greater awareness of the athlete, aids conversation and communication, helps them assess and evaluate Aran's performance, and provides a foundation for setting goals.

However, Beckham and Kellmann (2003), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), advised sports psychologists to be aware of reliability and validity along with honesty when evaluating questionnaires and other assessments such as Aran's performance profile. CSAI-II is a well-respected tool however it is still a self-reported questionnaire. Orlick (2000), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), recommends using semi-structured interviews as they allow general questions to initiate a conversation; so that Aran talks about himself and becomes comfortable and personally involved in the process. Hopefully it will help to foster a good working relationship between the psychologist and Aran, as for PST to work effectively there needs to be a connection between them to build a professional relationship as Aran needs to feel that his needs are being met. Simons (2013), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), believes that sports psychologists should only ask who, what, where, when, how questions and never why questions as this may cause confusion, embarrassment, emotional conflict. This will hinder a strong athlete psychologist relationship and may also lead to their withdrawal.

The fourth phase is conceptualisation. All the information collected is analysed and the sport psychologist will decide which skills and techniques will be of most benefit

to Aran. The data from the performance profile shows Aran needs psychological assistance with pre-race anxiety, loss of focus and low self-confidence. This correlates with the cognitive and somatic symptoms which Aran discusses with his coach and his CSAI-II which shows a high-level of cognitive and somatic state anxiety and low self-confidence.

The fifth phase is the creation of an individual PST programme for Aran. Vealey (1988), cited in Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss (2019), describe psychological skills as outcomes and qualities that can be gained such as reduced anxiety levels and increased self-confidence, while psychological techniques are the methods used to obtain these qualities such as goal setting and relaxation. Aran needs to address his lack of self-confidence, anxiety levels and lack of concentration. There are many psychological techniques that could be used to do this, but this PST programme will focus on self-talk and imagery because it is Aran's negative thoughts, lack of self-confidence and loss of focus which is hindering his performance. Confidence is everything and self-efficacy refers to the confidence a person feels in a certain situation. Bandura (1997), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), described self-regulatory efficacy as an individual's belief that they can perform in a manner that will produce the expected result. This is Aran's main issue the inability to believe he can produce his optimal performance. Self-talk and imagery both work via verbal and visual persuasion which has increases self-efficacy (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Goltsios and Theodorakis, 2008, cited in Weinberg and Gould, 2015). Jorgensen, an Olympic silver medallist swimmer said "You have to believe it's going to happen. You can't doubt your abilities" (Ripol, 1993, cited in Weinberg and Gould, 2015, p. 338).

The sixth phase is the implementation of the PST programme. A PST programme is made up of three specific phases: the educational phase, the acquisition phase and the practice phase (Weinberg and Gould, 2015). This would involve teaching Aran psychological skills and techniques and him practising them at home, then in training and finally in a competitive situation.

The final phase is the evaluation which would including evaluating the effectiveness of the PST programme. This would involve a meeting with Aran and his coach to see if the interventions are helping, reviewing the effects and outcomes of the

techniques, making any necessary modifications and repeating the process if needed.

PST Programme Interventions

Self-Talk

Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma and Kazakas (2000), cited in Hardy (2006), describe self-talk as the things individual's say to themselves whether inside their own heads or out loud. Aran talks about not being able to concentrate on swimming due to negative thoughts such as getting beaten, reinjuring his shoulder, messing up and not qualifying. The CSAI-II highlights cognitive anxiety prior to competing due to self-doubt, a range of concerns regarding his performance and his inability to concentrate. Bunker, Williams and Zinsser (1993), cited in Hardy (2006), recognised that thoughts and self-talk are critical to an individual's cognitive functioning. Aran's negative thoughts and internal self-talk is causing him to choke when it gets to competing. Aran's negative self-talk is stopping him from reaching his goals as it is critical and self-deprecating.

When educating Aran about changing his negative self-talk into positive self-talk; ask Aran to keep a log of his self-talk/inner thoughts (Open University, 2019a). Hardy, Roberts, and Hardy (2009), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), discovered athletes who monitor their own self-talk became more conscious of the negative consequences. Self-talk can also be motivational and instructional. When Aran becomes aware of the negative self-talk; he can move on to acquiring positive self-talk. For every negative statement Aran would be required to alter it to a positive statement (Open University, 2019b). So instead of negative thoughts of getting beaten he can use motivational self-talk of "I can win", "I will qualify" and instructional self-talk of "Focus" and "Relax" (Weinberg and Gould, 2015).

Aran's motivation self-talk for negative thoughts practice

Halt the negative thought with the word "Stop".

Take a deep breath.

Exhale and relax while saying "I can win", "I will qualify".

Aran's instructional self-talk for increasing focus practice

Halt the anxiety with the word "Stop".

Take a deep breath.

Exhale and relax while saying "Relax", "Focus".

This technique would initially be implemented at home, then in training and when competent in the process in competition. Research by Ming and Martin (1996), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), found that figure skaters were still using positive self-talk a year after the study and believed it improved their competitive performance.

However, athletes can produce beliefs about self-efficacy or the lack of it by visualising themselves in situations in the future (Weinberg and Gould, 2015). Therefore, imagery would also be beneficial for Aran.

Imagery

Imagery as defined by Weinberg and Gould (2015), is the imitation of a process or situation in the mind, which like a real sensory event can involve seeing, smelling, hearing and feeling. A study of Murphy, Jowdy and Durtschi (1990), cited by Weinberg and Gould (2015), found that 97 per cent of Olympic athletes who used imagery believed that it enhanced their performance. Imagery can be used to initially build confidence alongside the self-talk to strengthen Aran's self-belief. Visualising the competition beforehand including the smells and sounds can help Aran practice under stress, using his self-talk to relax and stay focused and therefore gain more comfortable when under pressure to avoid choking. Michael Phelps said that he using imagery helped him prior to the Olympic trials to comprehend what it would feel like being there (Weinberg and Gould, 2015).

Cumming and Ramsey (2009), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), found that when interventions were tailored to the specific needs and abilities of an athlete then they were not only easier to perform and more enjoyable but had greater impact.

The key to effective imagery is the vividness of the images and the athlete's ability to control them. Karageorgphis and Terry (2011), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), suggest increasing the vividness by using all the senses. While an Olympic diver

explained how it took around a year of daily practice for them to imagine performing the perfect dive at the Olympics (Orlick and Partington, 1988, cited in Weinberg and Gould, 2015).

Aran's imagery practice

Ask the coach to film Aran in training when he is performing his best, use this footage for Aran to watch himself swimming without any anxiety. After Aran has watched the footage several times, get Aran to recall the swim from an external viewpoint without getting anxious. Repeatedly watch the film until Aran can imagine his best performance in real time accurately anxiety-free. Aran will need to practice reliving this optimal performance first in the relaxing environment of his own home, then in training, when he can confidently visualise performing his best with no anxiety use this technique prior to a timed swim. When Aran can perform a timed swim anxiety-free he is finally ready to use imagery in competitions to produce his optimum performance without anxiety.

Aran's goal is to swim in the British team. Show Aran pictures on the current GB team swimming kit. Ask Aran to imagine himself wearing the kit. Ask him to imagine putting on the branded trunks and GB swimming hat with the Union Jack and his surname on it. Ask him to imagine walking out wearing the GB tracksuit and taking it off beside his block ready to compete. Ask him to visualise his optimum performance that he has been practicing, hearing the start and feeling the water. Ask him to imagine touching the wall first and hearing the crowd cheer with British flags being waved. Ask him to visualise standing on the top of the podium wearing his GB team tracksuit and feeling the medal being placed around his neck. This visualisation can be used to motivate Aran towards his goal and combined with positive self-talk such as "I am on the GB team", "'I am good enough" and "I am a winner" should help to boost his self-confidence, reduce his negativity towards not being good enough or not being able to perform his best.

However, imagery is dependent on the individual's ability to imagine. Robin et al. (2007), cited in Weinberg and Gould (2015), found that imagery worked significantly better for tennis players who had higher ability to imagine.

Professional boundaries

PST programme development and implementation requires detailed and specific knowledge and training so should be produced and implemented by a sport or exercise psychologist. However, coaches and exercise instructors may be able to offer advice on psychological skills if they understand sport and exercise psychology and are often best placed to support athletes with their PST (Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss, 2017). Professional boundaries, the responsibilities and limitations of individuals in certain occupations and environments which is generally decided by their role, qualifications and experience, are crucial in this matter as acting beyond your capabilities is unethical.

In the UK the two organisations which accredit sport and exercise psychologists are the British Psychological Society – Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology (BPS) and the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES). Since 2009, all practicing psychologists, including anyone using the title ‘sport and exercise psychologist’ are required to register with the Health and Care Professions Council (Open University, 2019c). To obtain BASES accreditation you require a relevant undergraduate degree and a postgraduate degree in sport and exercise psychology along with supervised practice under qualified supervision for approximately three years (BASES, n.d.). While to be a BPS Chartered Sport and Exercise Psychologist you need to obtain graduate basis for membership which requires an accredited psychology degree or have undertaken a postgraduate conversion diploma along with a relevant BPS-recognised postgraduate degree followed by supervised practice for two years (BPS, n.d.).

If a PST programme is being delivered by anyone other than a sport or exercise psychologist, then they must make it clear that they have not completed this training and work under the supervision of a fully qualified psychologist (Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss, 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, PST is often neglected due to misconceptions about psychological skills, a lack of time or knowledge. There are a range of techniques including self-talk, goal setting, arousal regulation, imagery, concentration skills and mental

preparation. PST requires persistent practice, often daily, but the benefits are enhanced performance, increased self-satisfaction and enjoyment. This can equal the difference between winning and losing which is tremendous for elite athletes. Sport psychology is an important part of training but is not instead of physical practice and the two should ideally go hand in hand. Sport and exercise psychologists undertake extensive training and supervised practice to become qualified but the rewards of helping people achieve their dreams are massive. They use a range of tools including performance profiles, questionnaires, and interviews to assess the psychological issues, they do not work with mental disorders, and produce tailor-made PST programmes for individuals using research-based models. They look at psychological skills such as motivation, self-esteem and arousal control and implement psychological techniques such as relaxation, imagery and self-talk.

Distance swimming is psychologically difficult as they train for long hours on their own with little interaction with others. However, if this PST programme was adhered to hopefully Aran's performance would return to that of prior to his shoulder injury and ideally better than previously. This should be evaluated, the seventh phase of Thomas's model (1991), cited by Heaney and Lingam-Willgoss (2017), by asking Aran and his coach if the psychological techniques were being effective. This could be verified by reassessing Aran by asking him to complete another CSAI-II and performance profile to see if there were any notable changes. If there any aspects that have not been effective, then these can be revised as necessary and another PST programme implemented. The anticipated impact and desired effect of the PST programme would be if Aran's confidence had increased and he was no longer reporting signs and symptoms of cognitive and somatic state anxiety prior to competing. Hopefully this would lead to him fulfilling his dream of representing Great Britain.

(3283 words)

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