

FROM FEAR TO FIERCE: THE IMPACT OF SELECTED PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS TRAINING ON COMPETITIVE ANXIETY AND SELF-CONFIDENCE . A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to integrate selected psychological skills training into sport practice and to find the effect of this training on Competitive anxiety and self-confidence. A case study approach was used to help two athletes from two different sports who experienced competitive anxiety and low self-confidence going into competitions. The Competitive Anxiety and self-confidence was examined using Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2), which assesses somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety and self-confidence. A six-week selected psychological skills training program which included Imagery training, relaxation training and Self talk training was developed and administered to the two athletes. Both the athletes showed significant improvement after the six-week intervention and the obtained post test scores showed significant reduction competitive anxiety and improvement in self-confidence for both the athletes. Thus, the selected psychological skills training program showed positive results in both the athletes.

Keywords: *Psychological Skills Training, Self-Confidence, Competition Anxiety*

Introduction:

One of the prevalent issues faced by athletes in recent days is pre match anxiety. Pre competition anxiety is proven to have an impact on the performance of the athletes. Anxiety is a distressing psychological state that arises in response to perceived stress related to performing a task in a high-pressure situation (Cheng et al., 2009). Anxiety is multidimensional and its of different types, Trait anxiety refers to a personality characteristic which is inherited in an individual, while state anxiety is a reaction triggered by a specific situation. State anxiety is a temporary emotional condition marked by feelings of worry, fear, tension, and heightened physiological arousal. Cognitive anxiety involves the psychological side of anxiety, driven by negative thoughts, fears like being judged negatively, failing, or losing self-confidence. Somatic anxiety, on the other hand, is the physical experience of anxiety, characterized by noticeable bodily reactions such as an elevated heart rate, faster breathing, and muscle tightness (Cox, 2011). Anxiety fluctuates throughout the competition in different situations, For example, a cricketer's state anxiety changes from situation to situation in a match, he can feel a slightly elevated state anxiety before performing a skill in the initial phases of the match with anxiety symptoms such as being nervous, increased heart rate, slight negative thoughts and emotions etc. The anxiety reduces once he adapts to the pace of the match and it again rises in the finishing moments of the match with similar or higher symptoms of anxiety. For decades, sport and exercise psychologists have explored the connection between anxiety and

performance. Although they haven't reached clear conclusions, their research has shed light on key elements of the process, offering insights into how to help individuals boost performance rather than becoming overwhelmed and underperforming. Multidimensional anxiety theory suggests that cognitive state anxiety negatively impacts performance, meaning that higher levels of cognitive anxiety led to poor performance and the inverted U theory states that an optimal level of anxiety can have a positive effect on the performance but once the anxiety is above the optimal level the performance slumps and declines (Weinburg & Gould 2015). Individualized Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model had a alternative view to the inverted U model, it states that each athletes have a specific level or zone of optimal state anxiety in which they perform at their best and their performance tends to suffer when anxiety levels fall outside this optimal range of anxiety (Hanin, 1980, 1986, 1997). The catastrophe model suggests that when physiological arousal affects performance, it typically follows an inverted-U pattern, but only if the athlete has low cognitive state anxiety. Self-confidence has been proposed as a factor that can enhance resilience and shield against the negative impacts of anxiety (Hardy et al., 1996). Rises in cognitive symptoms combined with low self-confidence were viewed as beyond the performers' control and harmful to their performance. Conversely, when high self-confidence was present along with cognitive symptoms, it led to a perception of greater control and more positive, supportive interpretations (Mellalieu et al., 2006). Various researches have

been made on anxiety and its effect on sports performance (Hanton et al. 2011, Biddle, 1997; Jones, 1995a; Tenenbaum and Bar-Eli, 1995; Woodman and Hardy, 2001,2003) and anxiety is proven to have a debilitating effect on the athletic performance and to overcome the anxiety and build self-confidence various psychological interventions have been proven to be effective, once such intervention is mental imagery. Imagery can be described as the utilization of one's senses to construct or replicate an experience or visual representation in the mind, appearing as vivid and lifelike as actually witnessing the image with our physical eyes (Vealey & Greenleaf, 2010). The efficacy of mental imagery enables athletes to rehearse sports skills, strategies, and mental abilities without the necessity of physically being present in the training or competitive setting (Jean & Krane,2014). Imagery stands out as a widely explored aspect in applied sport psychology, offering valuable insights into its mechanisms, impact on sports performance, and optimal utilization. Among the various theories explaining the influence of imagery on athletes, Jeannerod's functional equivalence (1994) and Lang's bio-informational theory (Lang, 1977, 1979) have garnered significant attention. Studies indicate that imagery interventions based on these theories, as demonstrated by Callow, Roberts, & Fawkes (2006), Post, Wrisberg, & Mullins (2010), and Smith, Wright, Allsopp, & Westhead (2007), can enhance sport performance. Imagery can boost self-confidence (Callow, Hardy, & Hall, 2001; Mamassis & Doganis, 2004), enhance motivation (Beauchamp et al., 1996; Martin & Hall, 1995). Self-talk stands out as a highly influential mental practice and tool for athletes, capable of significantly influencing their performance. What athletes communicate to themselves, be it during non-sport moments, practice sessions, or both before and during competitions, has a profound impact on their thoughts, emotions, and overall performance. This internal dialogue can shape the quality of their training sessions and ultimately affect the outcomes of their competitions. In essence, the predominant nature of athletes' thoughts, whether positive or negative, plays a pivotal role in determining the trajectory of their sporting journey (Taylor,2019). Various researches have taken place on stating the relationship between self-talk and performance. Self-talk can be categorized based on its behavioral outcomes or effects. Thoughts inducing anxiety or hindering athletic performance are classified as negative, while self-talk promoting motivation and confidence is considered positive (Latinjak et al., 2014; Van Raalte et al., 2016). Relaxation is one of

the fundamental aspects of sports which plays a key role in sporting performance. the field. If an athlete is not calm and relaxed, he/she is prone to anxiety. Anxiety can lead to a decline in performance, creating a cycle where the worsening performance further intensifies anxiety, forming a stress spiral. The only escape from this cycle is to break it by alleviating anxiety and tension. Utilizing relaxation techniques can effectively decrease the stress and anxiety linked to sports (Cox,2011). Various relaxation techniques are used to reduce stress, anxiety, arousal and various other factors that affect sports performance. Meditation, breathing techniques, autogenic training, progressive muscular relaxation and various other relaxation techniques are used to make an athlete calm. The primary objective of any relaxation training program is to elicit the relaxation response effectively, serving as a countermeasure to stress in a particular situation (Cox,2011). Excelling in sports demands various mental skills to navigate match challenges. Athletes must cultivate psychological skills and coping techniques to reach their peak performance (Ramanujam & Kannadasan, 2023). Considerable research has been dedicated to exploring competitive anxiety in sports (Martens, Vealey & Burton, 1990) and the efficacy of relaxation techniques (Humara, 2001; Martens, Vealey & Burton, 1990; Richards, 2004). Studies have shown that successful athletes frequently employ relaxation techniques in contrast to their less successful counterparts (Gould, Eklund & Jackson, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1988).

Intervention:

To effectively cope with the Pre competition anxiety selected psychological skills training were given to the athletes for 6 weeks. The selected psychological skills training consists of Relaxation Training, Mental Imagery and Self Talk.

Week	Session-1	Session-2
1	Pre-test assessment	Psychoeducation
2	Relaxation & breathing techniques	Deep Muscular Relaxation
3	Mental Imagery	Mental Imagery
4	Positive self-talk	Reframing self-talk
5	Combining Relaxation, mental imagery and Self Talk	Combining Relaxation, mental imagery and Self Talk
6	Combining Relaxation, mental imagery and Self Talk	Post-Test Assessments

Case Study:

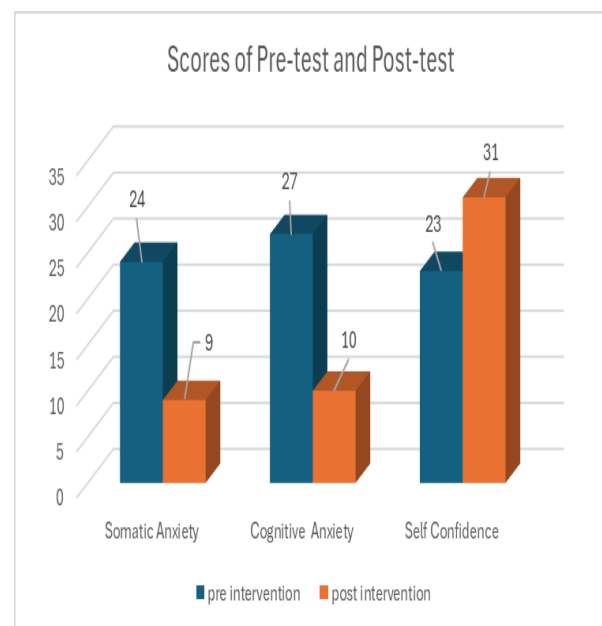
VP, a 16-year-old gymnast representing his state, has been practicing and competing for the past four years. He was referred to a sports psychologist by his head coach. The coach described VP as a very promising, hardworking, and talented gymnast but noted that his recent performance in competitions did not reflect his abilities demonstrated during practice. The coach suspected that VP's inability to perform at his best during competitions might be due to a mental blockage. During an initial conversation with the sports psychologist, VP revealed that he had been feeling anxious about competitions and had lost confidence in executing his skills. To assess VP's concerns, the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory-2 (CSAI-2) by Martens et al., 1990, was administered. The results indicated high levels of somatic anxiety (score: 24), high levels of cognitive anxiety (score: 29), and moderate self-confidence (score: 23).

To address VP's elevated anxiety levels and moderate self-confidence, a six-week Psychological Skills Training (PST) program was implemented. The program focused on reducing anxiety, improving confidence, and enhancing performance. During the initial session, VP was provided with a brief introduction to the psychological elements affecting performance and the objectives of the PST program. In the early sessions, VP was introduced to various relaxation techniques aimed at managing somatic anxiety. These techniques included Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), Box Breathing, Diaphragmatic Breathing, and other breathing exercises. VP was instructed to practice these techniques regularly, both before practice and competitions. The focus of the subsequent sessions was on imagery training to foster self-confidence and reduce cognitive anxiety. VP was introduced to techniques such as Visual Motor Behavioural Rehearsal (VMBR), Cognitive-Motivational Imagery, and Cognitive-Specific Imagery. He was encouraged to visualize successful execution of skills and positive outcomes before practice and competitions.

In the final sessions, VP learned self-talk strategies to enhance his mental resilience. These included reframing negative self-talk and using positive motivational self-talk. VP was guided to incorporate these strategies into his daily routine, especially during high-pressure situations. Towards the end of the program, VP was instructed to combine relaxation techniques, imagery training, and self-talk strategies during both practice sessions and competitions. By the end of the six-week intervention, VP demonstrated remarkable improvement. His coach provided positive feedback, highlighting a significant enhancement in

VP's competitive performance. To evaluate the effectiveness of the PST program, the CSAI-2 was re-administered. The post-intervention results showed low somatic anxiety (score: 9), low cognitive anxiety (score: 10), and high self-confidence (score: 31).

The six-week Psychological Skills Training program was effective in reducing VP's anxiety levels and enhancing his self-confidence. The combination of relaxation techniques, imagery training, and self-talk strategies contributed to VP's improved mental state and competitive performance, highlighting the value of psychological interventions in sports.



Conclusion

Athletes experiencing competition anxiety and losing self confidence has been a prevalent issue. Coping and overcoming those mental barriers are crucial for desired performance, Psychological Skills Training Programme are effective in helping athletes overcome various mental barriers in sports such as somatic anxiety, cognitive anxiety, low self-confidence and much more. This study has shown the effectiveness of psychological skills training programme on managing competitive anxiety (cognitive and somatic anxiety) and improving the self-confidence of the athletes. Various researches have proven the impact of Psychological Skills Training Programme and its interventions of performance enhancement (Callow, Roberts, & Fawkes; 2006, Post, Wrisberg, & Mullins, 2010; Smith, et al 2007; Gould, Eklund & Jackson, 1993; Orlick & Partington, 1988 Humara, 2001; Martens, Vealey & Burton, 1990; Richards, 2004).

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