

## **SELF-TALK: A SELF MOTIVATIONAL TECHNIQUE OF PERFORMANCE BOOSTER**

**Dr. Ashutosh Bhandari**

**Associate Professor**

**Department of Physical Education**

**B.V.R.I. Bichpuri, Agra**

### **Abstract**

Self-talk can play a critical role in the adoption of a physically active lifestyle. Middle-aged individuals just beginning an exercise program after 2 decades of inactivity may experience self-defeating thoughts that ultimately may lead to their discontinuing participation. "I can't do this—I was never athletic anyway" may precipitate participant dropout. Self-talk may also affect participation in rehabilitation programs. For example, a gymnast rehabilitating a shoulder after rotator cuff surgery may be beset with self-doubts about whether he will be able to return to competition. Negative self-talk such as "This is a waste of time" may lead to less than full effort being expended during the performance of the rehabilitation exercises. As a professional, you need to recognize that such negative self-talk can have an adverse impact on achievements by participants in your programs. With training, physical educators, exercise scientists, and sport professionals can learn how to effectively modify self-talk to enhance the experiences of participants in their programs.

**Keywords:** self-talk, Motivational Techniques, Sports Performance

### **Introduction:**

What thoughts run through your head before an athletic performance? As you sit and wait to give a 10-minute speech in front of a class, what are you thinking? As you set out on your daily three-mile jog, what conversations do you have with yourself in your head? What did you say to yourself as you took a test for this course? Cognitive approaches in sport and exercise psychology focus on understanding the relationship between individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behavior or performance.

### **Nature of Self-Talk:**

What individuals say to themselves during performance can be positive or negative. These thoughts and associated feelings can influence self-confidence, which, in turn, impacts performance. Who would you rather have take a penalty kick in soccer—a soccer player

who steps up to take the shot and thinks, "I consistently make this shot in practice; I can do it" or a player who steps up to take the shot and thinks, "What if I miss?" Which player's self-talk is more conducive to successful performance? Understanding and modifying individuals' self-talk is one focus of cognitive sport and exercise psychology. According to Williams and Leffingwell, "Self-talk occurs whenever an individual thinks, whether making statements internally or externally."<sup>31</sup> Self-talk is thoughts that occupy individuals' mind or spoken words, and they can be positive or negative in nature. Positive self-talk does not guarantee an outstanding performance, but it does enhance factors associated with better performance, such as self-confidence and a task-relevant focus of attention. Sport and exercise psychologists use a variety of strategies to promote positive self-talk and to counteract the effects of negative self-talk.

### **Types of Self-Talk:**

There are several different types of self-talk. Task-relevant statements reinforce technique. For example, a volleyball setter may use the cue "diamond" to remind himself of the correct hand position. Positive self-statements refer to talk that encourages effort or persistence or reinforces feelings of confidence. A cross-country runner, facing an uphill stretch during the last kilometer, may say to herself, "I can do it," as a way of encouraging herself to push through to the finish. A third form of self-talk is mood words—words designed to elicit an increase in intensity or arousal. "Turn it on," a swimmer says to himself as he completes the last 50 yards of a 1,500-yard freestyle race.

### **Application of Self-Talk:**

There are several uses of self-talk. Self-talk can be effective in enhancing skill acquisition, focusing attention, modifying activation, and promoting self-confidence. Self-talk is not only for athletes, but is also useful for individuals engaging in a variety of physical activities. Self-talk can be useful when learning a new skill or modifying a previously learned skill or habit. Self-talk can range from rehearsing key words of the steps involved in a skill to the use of a cue word such as "step" to serve as a reminder of what to do. It is important that the self-talk focus on the desirable movement versus what not to do. For example, if a tennis player wants to toss the ball higher in preparation for the serve, appropriate self-talk would be "High toss," not "Don't toss the ball so low." Focusing attention is another effective use for self-talk. During practices or competition, athletes' attention may wander or be directed inappropriately. Cue words such as "focus" help athletes regain their concentration. Self-statements can also be used to help athletes focus on relevant task cues such as "mark up" or "adjust position relative to the ball." The right

intensity at the right time is critical in performance. Self-talk can be used by athletes to modify their intensity or level of arousal so that it is at an optimal level. Self-statements may be helpful in decreasing activation ("relax") or increasing it ("get psyched"). Promoting self-confidence is an effective use of self-talk. Self-confidence is influenced by a variety of factors, such as performance outcomes or skill ability. Self-confidence is also influenced by self-talk. Individuals' self-talk affects their self-confidence, either positively or negatively. Self-confidence is undermined with negative self-talk and feelings of doubt. Although self-criticism can provide an important source of feedback to improve later performances, it is important that it not be overgeneralized ("My shot went wide because of the direction of my follow-through" versus "I'm a terrible player"). Positive self-talk enhances feelings of competence. Self-statements prior to and during competition should be positive in nature and engender high levels of motivation and effort.

### **Modifying Self-Talk:**

Some individuals may not even be aware of their self-talk or its potential to impact performance. Sport and exercise psychologists work with individuals help them use self-talk effectively. For individual who have negative self-talk, steps can be taken help them make changes. Williams and Leffing identify several approaches to modifying self-thought-stopping, changing negative thoughts the positive thoughts, countering, and reframing. Thought-stopping uses a trigger or cue to immediately interrupt unwanted thoughts when they occur. An athlete who hears herself begin to say "I can't..." can interrupt this negative thought by saying to herself or out loud the word "Stop" or by visualizing a red traffic stop sign. Interrupting the negative thought before it leads to negative feelings and adversely influences behavior can have a beneficial effect on performance. With consistent use of thought-stopping, the frequency of unwanted negative self-talk can be decreased. Replacing negative thoughts with positive thoughts is another approach. With this approach, negative self-statements are immediately followed by positive self-statements. For example, a basketball player who misses a foul shot may make the negative statement "I never am good from the foul line." The player can replace that negative statement with "I made five of my eight shots tonight. With more practice, I can increase that percentage." Compared to thought-stopping, this approach encourages individuals to replace a negative thought with a positive one, rather than simply stopping the negative thought. Countering focuses on challenging individuals' beliefs that lead them to accept negative statements as being the truth. Countering uses facts, reason, and rational thinking to refute negative thoughts. Once these negative thoughts are re-futed, individuals

are more accepting of positive self-statements. For example, an athlete may perceive herself as someone who "chokes" under pressure. This belief can be countered by examining the athlete's past performances in pressure situations. When the evidence is reviewed, it shows that the athlete actually performs well under pressure, especially in critical games. Now the athlete is helped to replace the negative thought with "I know I can come through under pressure." The technique of reframing focuses on altering individuals' view of the world or changing their perspective. Through this approach, negative statements are changed to positive statements by interpreting the situation differently. An athlete who is nervous and perceives his pounding heart as reflecting his anxiety can reinterpret this as "I'm geared up and ready to go." Athletes fearful of competition and the associated stress of winning and losing can be helped to reinterpret competition as a challenge and the opportunity to test themselves while providing the additional benefit of identifying areas of improvement. Changing the self-talk of individuals presents a challenge to sport and exercise psychologists. First, individuals may not be aware of their negative self-talk. Before modifying self-talk, sport and exercise psychologists need to help individuals realize that self-talk can be self-defeating and adversely influence performance. Exploring the underlying beliefs that perpetuate negative self-talk, such as low self-esteem, is also an important part of the process. In some cases, dealing with the underlying cause of the negative self-talk will require additional interventions. Another challenge is that thought patterns are deeply ingrained and changing them, just like changing any other habit, requires motivation, learning new skills, practice, and patience. For greatest effectiveness in modifying negative self-talk, Williams and Leffingwell suggest using a combination of thought stoppage, changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts, reframing and countering. Self-talk is only one cognitive approach that can be used to enhance the performance of individuals as well as their personal development. The use of self-talk is not limited to the realm of athletics. Students in physical education classes can be taught to use cognitive strategies, such as self-talk, to enhance their feelings of competence as movers. When starting a new activity unit, some students might engage in self-talk such as "I'm no good at this." This negative statement and others like them result in loss of motivation and lack of effort. Instead, students can be helped to reframe their self-talk and to see that the new unit presents them with an opportunity to improve their skills or learn new ones.

**References:**

1. Dishman RK and Sallis JF: Determinants and interventions for physical activity and exercise. In C Brochard, RJ Shephard, and T Stephens, editors, Physical activity and health, fitness, and health: international proceedings and consensus statement, 214-238, Champaign, Ill., 1994, Human Kinetics.
2. Prochaska JO and Velicer WF: The transtheoretic model of health behavior change, *American Journal of Health Promotion* 12:38-48, 1997.
3. Samuelson M: Commentary: changing unhealthy lifestyle: who's ready . . . who's not?: an argument in support of the stages of change component of the transtheoretical model, *American Journal of Health Promotion* 12:13-14, 1997.
4. Duffy FD, with Schnirring L: How to counsel patients about exercise—An office-friendly approach, *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* 28(10):53-54, 2000.
5. Herrick AB, Stone WJ, and Mettler MM: Stages of change, decisional balance, and self-efficacy across four health behaviors in a worksite environment, *Journal of Health Promotion* 12:49-56, 1997.
6. Leffingwell TR, Rider SP, and Williams JM: Application of the transtheoretical model to psychological skills training, *The Sport Psychologist*, 15:168-187, 2001.
7. King AC, Blair SN, Bild DE, Dishman RK, Dubbert PK, Marcus BH, Oldridge NB, Paffenbarger RS, Jr., Powell KE, and Yaeger KK: Determinants of physical activity and intervention in adults, *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise Supplement* 24(6):S221–S236, 1992.
8. Nieman, DC: *Fitness and sports medicine: an introduction*, Palo Alto, Calif., 1990, Bull.
9. Fisher AC, Scriber KC, Matheny ML, Alderman MH, and Bitting LA: Enhancing athletic injury rehabilitation adherence, *Journal of Athletic Training* 28(4):312-318, 1993.
10. Bianco T and Eklund RC: Conceptual considerations for social support research and exercise settings: the case of sport injury, *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 23:85-107, 2001.