



3 PSYCHOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Have you ever... Coached a performer who did well in practice but struggled under pressure? Struggled with a learner who never seemed to believe that they could succeed? Known a really talented paddler who just gave up after training intensively for years? Worked with a learner whose expectations were so high that they could never fulfil them?

If you were frustrated by the underachievement of any of these learners then this chapter is for you...

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 we were introduced to the ‘components of paddling performance model’ and the concept that overall performance is dependent on the relationship and interaction between technical skill, tactical accuracy, physiological and psychological components. We were also introduced to the idea that paddling performance, in any particular paddler, could be limited by deficiencies within any one of the four performance components. In order to develop paddlers effectively one of our key roles is to identify areas for improvement that will result in the greatest gains in terms of overall performance. This skill is one of the key elements in effective paddlesport coaching.

Often a paddler will suffer from a problem where the solution can clearly be found within the same component of the paddling performance model. For instance a white water paddler may be prone to capsizing in rapids as a result of not developing effective

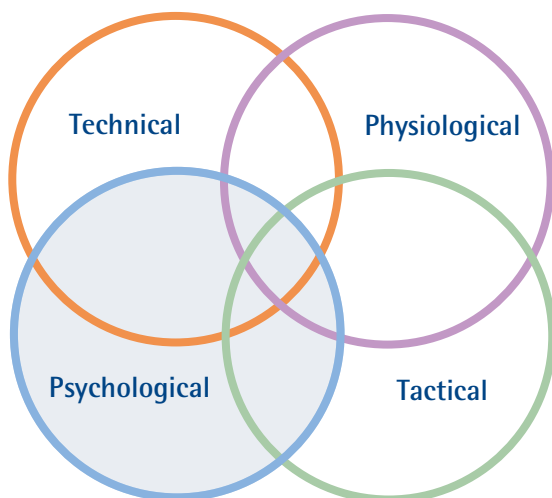


Fig. 1 The Relationship between the Components of Paddling Performance.



Photo 1 Capsize... tension or technique?

bracing strokes. The (technical) problem of capsizing would be best tackled by improving the paddler's skill in bracing and recovery strokes (technical). More challenging and possibly more intriguing for the coach are those problems that present themselves in one component when the root cause lies within another. Another white water paddler may not be capsizing due to a lack of technical skill but because they 'tense-up' (psychological) and become stiff on rapids. In this scenario it would not make sense to work on bracing strokes; instead equipping our paddler with relaxation skills may be more effective. In fact a problem in any one of the performance components can be caused by deficiencies in any other. Within the psychological component of performance this will often be the case.

Psychological factors can impact on performance in three different ways during the acquisition and performance of paddlesport:

- Psychological factors play a part in a paddler's attitude to training and skill acquisition and therefore impact on technical, physiological and tactical preparation.
- Psychological factors can facilitate or retard skill acquisition during practice.
- Psychological factors can enable or hinder the efficient, appropriate execution of learned skills during performance.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Psychological factors will impact on paddling performance through preparation, skill acquisition and ability to cope during performance.

This means that as coaches we are already working with the psychological component of paddling per-

formance. Every time we give praise or reinforcement, every time we offer feedback and every time we plan a coaching session we are having a psychological impact on our paddlers and considering psychological factors in our decision making. Some coaches feel slightly uncomfortable with the idea that they might become involved with a specialist body of knowledge complete with its own language but this is really not the case. Psychology can be involving enough for a lifetime's study but at its most basic it is just making the most of 'good old fashioned' coaching.

Sports psychology and mental skills training is often viewed as being the last piece in the jigsaw of top level performance to be 'bolted on' when technical, tactical and physical training are close to their natural limits. If there were to be a single message of this chapter it would be that this view is a mistake. Arousal control, attentional style, maintaining motivation and the other topics in this chapter can enhance the paddlesport experience at any level of learning or performance. Therefore coaches at all levels of participation should find a basic understanding of these topics useful.

The other problem with the 'adding psychological skills last' approach is that, like any other learned skill, strong psychological skills require practice. If we try and add a new technical component just before a performance we would not be surprised to see our paddlers fail to get it right, this is also true with mental skills. Developing psychological skills should go hand in hand with all other sporting development if we want paddlers to have robust psychological skills when they need them most.

Physical conditioning can be thought of in terms of two objectives:

- Staying healthy
- Increasing fitness for our activity

As paddlesport coaches, increasing our knowledge of the way mental processes can affect learning and practice in canoesport can enable us to get the best out of our paddlers. It can also allow us to help our paddlers get the most out of their sport in terms of enjoyment and satisfaction. Sport psychology is often viewed simply as a way to increase performance for high level athletes but this view is both narrow and restrictive. Sport psychology is also about enhancing enjoyment, learning and remaining mentally fresh and healthy as paddlers and coaches involved in any level of activity.

Symptom of problem	Component	Root cause of problem (Psychological Component)	Possible Solution
Paddler shows poor levels of control in basic paddling.	Technical	Paddler believes that paddling skill is down to 'natural ability' that he or she doesn't possess, and therefore doesn't practise basic skills.	Work on allowing paddler to see technical element of performance as controllable.
Paddler is too tired to paddle effectively towards the end of a day.	Physiological	Anxiety causes the paddler to 'try too hard' during early part of day, consequently depleting energy reserves.	Coach paddler in methods of coping with anxiety.
Paddler consistently fails to follow the correct line on rapids.	Tactical	Attention of paddler fixed on hazards rather than the route through the rapids.	Train paddler to view a rapid's most important feature as the route to be paddled.

Table 1 The Psychological Root of Deficiencies Displayed in other Paddling Performance Components.

A deeper understanding of the link between our coaching behaviours and our own mental functioning can also enable us to structure our coaching activities in such a way as to enhance our own enjoyment of the coaching experience.

This chapter will look at issues that we, as coaches, need to be aware of in order to maintain our learners' full involvement in paddlesport and help push performance forward. It aims to provide coaches with a greater knowledge of how our behaviour and the sessions we plan can impact on learners' development, learning and performance. This information is intended to help coaches plan sessions and programmes that will maintain and build on motivation, improve self-confidence and result in performance improvements for their paddlers.

The chapter also provides an overview of some common psychological sporting problems and issues, and provides solutions that coaches can use in a practical setting. Whilst not exhaustive the intention is to give the coach a flavour of the kind of approaches and solutions that can be used to target specific problems.

Finally it contains information on using psychological skills to boost performance in a paddlesport setting. This provides an insight for the coach or paddler who wants an edge in competitive or pressurised situations. Techniques like arousal control and imagery are basic psychological skills that, once learned, any paddler can use to enhance their learning and performance over a lifetime of paddling.

▶ GOAL SETTING

Goal setting is probably the most common psychological tool in sport. In fact goal setting is so common that often we can forget that goal setting is really a psychological component of performance and development. Even those coaches among us who would claim to have little knowledge of psychological skills training will accept the value of clear appropriate goals. Engaging in sporting development without goals is a bit like getting into a car with no steering wheel. You might cover a lot of ground but you can't be sure you will have moved in an appropriate direction.

Despite the widespread use of goal setting among coaches not all approaches have been shown to be equally effective. Goals can be thought of as objectives that a paddler will work towards, the nature of these objectives can be quite different and these will result in us setting different kinds of goals. One of our jobs as coaches is to help our paddlers set the right kind of goals.

SHORT-TERM VS LONG-TERM GOALS

Goals can differ in terms of the time period that they refer to. Some goals can be targets years in the future, others can be short-term or even immediate in nature.



Fig. 2 Staircase model - Goals are there to assist our progress.

► Long-Term Goals

Long-term goals are like a mission statement; they will often refer to events or outcomes quite far into the future. Long-term goals are good for painting a picture of where a paddler would like to be but the large number of factors that will need to be achieved to reach that goal means that we will need more detailed directions on how to get there. This is where medium and short-term goals come in. These goals outline highly specific phases of development and act as “stepping-stones” on the way to achieving the long-term goal. Within a single coaching session we might set immediate goals related to a particular skill, exercise or drill. Long-term, medium-term and some short-term goals may be formally recorded and others, including some immediate goals, may never even be spoken aloud.

► Short-Term Goals

Short-term goals should be structured in a way to lead the paddler to eventual success in their long-term goal. A long-term goal can be too daunting or remote to elicit an appropriate response in the paddler and valuable time can slowly leak away until it is too late. Day to day, session by session, the focus should generally be on the short-term goals that underpin the long-term plan.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Goals can be related to physical preparation, skill development, mental training or any other aspect of preparation that might lead to the final performance.

OBJECTIVES

Goals can differ in terms of the kind of objectives they display. These objectives can be outcome focused, performance focused or process focused. This results in three different kinds of goals.

► Outcome Goals

An outcome goal is directed towards the end result of an event or competition – completing a first descent or circumnavigation, winning a polo competition or coming first in a race. The problem with outcome goals is that there can be many factors impacting on the realisation of that goal. Since many of these factors may be outside the control of the paddler, a large element of luck comes into play. The performance of opponents is an obvious uncontrollable factor in competition but there are many uncontrollable factors in expedition paddling – genuinely unforeseen events, bad weather, illness or injury for instance. A young white water paddler may be paddling better than they

ever have before and yet the group may be unable to paddle the complete section of river they had hoped to. If their only goal was to paddle the section then they will fail to achieve it.

► Performance Goals

Performance goals are focused on achieving a set standard of performance independent from others in the group or fluctuating environmental challenges. These will often be set by referring to previous performances and long-term goals. Working to improve your high brace from two star to three star standard would be an example of a performance goal, so would aiming to set a new personal best time in a downriver race. Rolling successfully 60% of the time during a pool session would be a performance goal. Performance goals should relate to factors within the control of the paddler. This makes performance goals a far more reasonable measure of a paddler's personal achievement and progress.

► Process Goals

Process goals focus on controllable factors within a paddler's performance that will result in improvement. Maintaining bent elbows during high bracing practice would be a process goal. Optimising the trim of an open canoe before each change of technique on an open canoe journey would be another. Process goals emphasise particular factors or coaching points that a paddler specifically needs to work on to improve their performance.

Athletes who focus mainly on performance and process goals have been shown to be more confident, less anxious and better able to concentrate. This is not to say that paddlers should not set outcome goals, simply that most goals for paddlers in any discipline and level of skill development should be of the performance or process variety. As coaches we need to make sure that our paddlers understand that only performance and process goals are related directly to their efforts and that these are the important goals to measure their successes and achievements.

MOTIVATION AND DIRECTION

Goals can provide motivation and direction for paddlers. They also provide a framework for reviewing and appraising development, performance or a training session.

► Specific

For goals to be useful to us as paddlers and coaches they need to be specific. "Improve my rolling" is not

specific "learn to reverse screw roll on both sides" is more specific, adding a context; pool, open water or moving water will improve this goal further.

► Deadlines

Goals with deadlines are more likely to motivate positive behaviour. "Attend six training sessions by the end of October" or "complete 3 star by the start of August" gives the paddler a time frame to work to. Goals like this can allow a paddler to review their commitment and assess whether they are really prepared to stick to the programme that will lead to their long-term goal.

► Challenging But Achievable

The best goals are challenging but achievable. Little will be gained from a series of goals that are too easily achieved. Likewise unachievable goals will only serve to demotivate our paddlers. A paddler who gives up or one who is not really trying will not end up fulfilling their potential. As coaches we need to ensure that the goals our paddlers set give them the biggest possible chance of success. This means setting goals that are realistic in terms of commitment and difficulty, identify strategies to achieve success and provide the opportunity to evaluate progress.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

As a quick guide we can do well if we remember to set SMART goals:

- Specific – goals should state exactly what is going to be accomplished.
- Measurable – we need to know precisely when we have achieved a goal and when we haven't.
- Action Orientated – they should indicate actions necessary for their achievement.
- Realistic – goals should be sensible and able to be carried out.
- Timely – goals should be tied to a reasonable time frame for accomplishment.

► MOTIVATION

Understanding what people gain from paddlesport is very useful to the coach interested in working with paddlers over any period of time but especially those involved in longer-term development. Motivation can be thought of as the psychological and social factors that impel a paddler to act in a certain way and engage in particular activities.



2

Photo 2 Motivated paddler!

As coaches we often discuss motivation as if it was a single measurable variable within a paddler; we might describe a paddler as being highly motivated or poorly motivated. In fact motivation is not as simple as this. Human beings, even canoeists, are actually motivationally complex creatures and our overall motivation is actually a result of interactions between different kinds of specific motivations. We may take part in activities because we enjoy them, because we receive some other kind of reward or even to avoid some other less agreeable activity. The exact composition of the specific motivational factors is different for all of us and, as coaches, we need to remember this whenever we work with paddlers.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- A paddler's motivation can come from many different factors and even paddlers displaying the same behaviours may hold different motivations.

Some coaches view increased motivation as the answer to many problems – lack of fitness, absence from sessions or a lack of concentration or effort during practice or performance. Efforts by these coaches to increase motivation using 'pep talks' or demands for 'positive thinking' can often lead to frustration rather than success. Equally the commonly held assumption that motivation is innate and unal-

terable can be unhelpful as this is simply not true. It is quite possible to increase or decrease motivation or even change the type of motivation responsible for a paddler's participation.

INTRINSIC / EXTRINSIC

Motivation in paddlesport can be divided into two types:

- **Intrinsic Motivation** - Intrinsic motivation springs from direct participation in the activity. Natural curiosity, feelings of pleasure or satisfaction related directly to the experienced activity and the enjoyment of movement fall into this category. Intrinsic motivation increases when we feel that we have competence in an activity and control over our participation.
- **Extrinsic Motivation** - Extrinsic motivation can relate to financial or material reward, peer pressure or social contact, approval of others or competitive success. Extrinsic motives can be very powerful and rewarding for both paddlers and coaches and can even be very important in allowing paddlers to continue their participation in paddlesport.

► Demotivating

So, imagine a coach who runs a pool session once a week. They decide to increase motivation by keeping score over the number of sessions youngsters attend during the winter. They announce that there will be prizes for those who attend three out of four sessions each month.

By adding an extrinsic motivator (payment for attendance) to an activity that youngsters attend for fun (intrinsic motivator) the coach will have increased overall motivation, right? - Maybe not.

Perhaps surprisingly it has been found that increasing levels of extrinsic motivation can actually reduce intrinsic motivation for a sports performer. Unfortunately some forms of extrinsic motivator can be interpreted as disempowering or even coercive by the paddler. Parents of young performers have been known to link 'pocket money' or other rewards to sporting participation. Whilst this may be viewed as 'motivating', the paddler can start to view material rewards as the primary reason for participation and can feel compelled to take part. Eventually the paddler can feel they have no say in their continued participation. In this case the extrinsic motivator has undermined



Fig. 3 *Extrinsic motivation!*

the original intrinsic motivation for participation. This undermining of intrinsic motivation by extrinsic motivators can also occur to coaches who become dependant on financial or material rewards and begin to feel they have no choice but to continue coaching.

► The Role Of The Coach

Whilst extrinsically motivated activity is not necessarily bad the possible reduction of intrinsic motivation should be a concern to coaches. Extrinsic rewards are often more fickle and less reliable than intrinsic rewards and focus the paddler on outcomes rather than the performance. This can undermine positive work done in goal setting. As paddlesport coaches we need to be careful not to over-emphasize extrinsic rewards when working with paddlers. Ultimately we need to build a culture that values factors responsible for intrinsic motivation.

A paddler's motivation will result from the interaction between their own personality and situational factors. As coaches we contribute significantly to the situational factors and have a very real impact on the motivation of our paddlers. Coaches can often unknowingly give off subtle but powerful messages that influence their performers. Clubs and squads can also develop cultures that display a particular set of values and expectations, which add to the mix of situational factors affecting motivation in individual paddlers. Sometimes these team cultures can be helpful but sometimes they are not; the astute coach will need

to be aware of this and may need to monitor developing or existing team or club culture. As coaches we should always be looking to build and maintain intrinsic motivation regardless of the level of performer we are working with.

Intrinsic motivation can be enhanced if we adhere to some principles when coaching:

- Paddlesport coaches should structure activities so that learners experience a certain amount of success. Paddlers should not be successful in everything every time they do it, as this is not realistic in sport or any other worthwhile activity.
- Paddlers should be allowed a significant role in their own goal setting and decision making. This will result in a greater sense of control and the assumption of responsibility.
- Coaches should ensure that all their performers receive realistic praise (positive reinforcement) for their successes.
- Paddlers should have realistic goals that can feed their feelings of competence. This will mean goals that involve building on past skill levels or positive behaviours, not just competitive results.
- Coaches need to avoid boredom by varying the content and sequence of practice sessions. Participation should be fun at any level in sport and practices do not need to be overly repetitive.

► SELF-CONFIDENCE

As paddlesport coaches we are often engaged in activities that we hope can result in increased self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-confidence is a measure of our beliefs about our abilities. Self-confidence is ‘contextual’ which means that it can be different in different areas of a person’s life. We can be self-confident in relation to communication but lack confidence in examinations. Likewise we may be high in self-confidence as open canoeists but low in self-confidence as polo players (or vice-versa).

There is a clear relationship between self-confidence and success. Generally, successful performers are also self-confident, and self-confident performers are successful (Fig. 4).

This means that as coaches we are going to be concerned with self-confidence, whether our primary aim is sporting development or personal and social education.

Confident performers tend to:

- Show perseverance, even when things aren’t going well.
- Attempt challenging tasks and set realistic goals.
- Display a positive approach.
- Share responsibility for their performance.
- Show enthusiasm.

A confident paddler is far more likely to be able to remain calm and collected under pressure. High self-confidence has been shown to act as a ‘buffer’ against the negative effects of anxiety.



Fig. 4 Reciprocal Relationship between Self-confidence and Performance

► The Continuum

It is important to realise that self-confidence has different levels running along a continuum, at one end is self confidence about a very specific paddling skill in a particular situation (sometimes referred to as self-efficacy). At the other end is a kind of self-confidence that a paddler takes with them throughout all aspects of their lives, a personality wide level. Somewhere between these two extremes is self-confidence in a particular paddlesport discipline.



Photo 3 A confident performance!

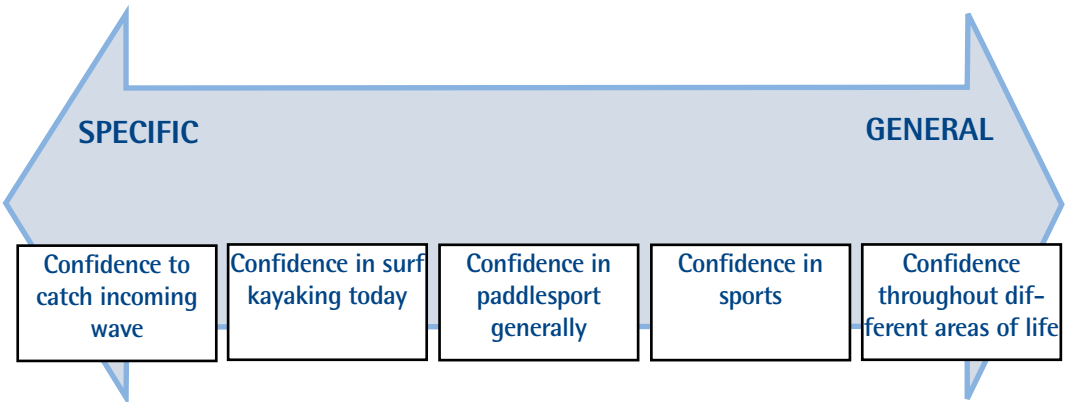


Fig. 5 Spectrum of levels of self-confidence for a paddler.

Increases in a paddler's self-confidence at any level can move along the spectrum. Repeated success in one skill will eventually result in increased confidence in that skill. As confidence in that particular skill improves then this will begin to be reflected in confidence in that area of paddlesport; eventually increasing self-confidence can reach the general sporting levels and personality level. Likewise increased self-confidence from other life experiences can filter down into the paddlesport levels. As coaches we also need to understand that this will be a slow process.

► The Coach's Role

Our everyday behaviour as coaches is likely to have a strong effect on the self-confidence of our paddlers. We should be sure that the message we give out is that all our paddlers can improve and succeed. We also need to show that we value all of our students no matter where they are in terms of skill development.

Specific sports psychology techniques can be used to increase self-confidence in paddlesport performers:

- Goal setting can help a paddler develop self-confidence. The coach should ensure that a paddler's goal setting allows them to achieve success on a regular basis. Goals should still remain challenging, as paddlers will be quick to pick up on goals that are designed to make success too easy and will take no credit for achieving them.
- Imagery (mental rehearsal) can allow paddlers to develop self-confidence by enabling a paddler to repeatedly 'experience' a successful past performance.
- Self-talk can be used to increase self-confidence by replacing negative or neutral self-talk with positive self-talk.

These topics are discussed elsewhere in the chapter.



4

Photo 4 Coach showing that he values the performance

► ATTRIBUTIONS

Think back to a recent paddling performance: -

- Was it successful or unsuccessful?
- Did you achieve your goal or did your performance fall short of your expectations?
- What caused you to be successful or unsuccessful, to succeed or fail?

Perhaps a new piece of equipment, your level of physical fitness, or the amount of practice you managed to fit in prior to the performance influenced the outcome. Whenever we perform as paddlers we tend to find ourselves searching for explanations for our success or failure. Psychologists refer to these explanations as attributions; we attribute success or failure to certain causes.

Long-term paddler development is essentially about us as coaches facilitating a process of change in our paddlers. We want our paddlers to make changes or improvements in order to arrive at a new state of physical, mental and technical preparation. One of the biggest barriers for learners can be their own belief about their ability to make these changes.

Attributions are the explanations a paddler will use to account for outcomes in their sport. Coaches need to realise that attributions are not always the actual cause of the outcome but are the things that our paddlers believe explain their performances. Attributions are linked to the paddler's beliefs about paddlesport and can either be helpful or unhelpful in the process of change and long-term development.

Imagine a slalom paddler who does poorly in an event. The paddler could believe that their poor performance is a result of several different factors and their response will vary accordingly:

- The paddler attributes this to poor fitness and starts a physical training programme to improve their performance.
- The paddler attributes the poor performance to poor accuracy of line and they may engage in a skill-based programme.
- The paddler attributes this result to lack of natural ability in paddlesport and decides to give up slalom altogether.
- The paddler attributes the outcome to bad luck and decides to do nothing at all.

	Stable	Unstable
Internal	Example - Natural Ability	Example - Effort
External	Example - Task Difficulty	Example - Luck

Table 2 Model of Attributions (Weiner, 1972)

Clearly two of these attributions might result in positive behaviour – though they may not necessarily be the correct response. Two of the attributions result in either no response or a negative response.

► Attributional Types

Attributions can be categorised into four types using a two-dimensional model (Table 2). Attributions can either be stable or unstable. If a performance is given an attribution that is stable then the performance will be viewed as relatively unchangeable, alternatively an unstable attribution will mean the paddler views the performance as being very changeable. A paddler may also view the cause of a particular outcome as being external or internal. In an internal attribution the paddler views the cause of a particular outcome as lying within him or herself. If the paddler views the outcome as resulting from the performance of fellow paddlers, the coach, the environment or the opposition then the attribution is said to be external.

► Attributional Style

Paddlers often have a tendency to attribute performances in particular ways despite the actual cause of the outcome. This is referred to as attribution style. For instance one paddler may tend to attribute success to external /unstable factors such as good luck, poor performances by opponents or a favourable judgement by an official or judge. Understanding how a learner tends to attribute success or failure can allow a coach to understand why a paddler might experience a learning plateau or period of very slow development. It can also help to explain poor motivation in some performers.

A paddler who attributes most of their successes to external /unstable factors (luck) cannot expect to maintain or improve their performance through training since no matter what they do luck will remain the deciding factor next time. Also a learner who attributes failure to low natural ability will not expect to improve or succeed irrespective of the task difficulty since this is an internal/stable factor and therefore unchangeable. From a coaching perspective both these attributions are dysfunctional in that they effectively demotivate the learner.

Perhaps a simpler way of looking at attribution is to consider the controllability of the attribution as the important factor. A paddler who perceives that the outcome of their performance is within their control will be more likely to be motivated to engage in positive behaviours. This should result in changes that improve performance. Attributions with a high degree of learner controllability are therefore functional for the coaching and development of paddlers.

As we have heard, many paddlers will have a tendency to explain the outcome of performances in relatively consistent ways. This style or disposition can have a large impact on (intrinsic) motivation. As paddlers if we believe that the outcome is related to factors controllable by us (i.e. effort) we will be more likely to continue in paddlesport and train than a paddler who feels that success and failure is outside of their control. In order to feel pride or satisfaction in a performance we need to feel that the result was due to our own actions.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Learners must believe that they can control the outcome of a performance in order to be motivated to make changes to techniques or strategies or even practice.

► Attributional Retraining

It is important for us to understand as coaches that attributional style is not rigidly fixed and can be affected by coach behaviours, peers, parents or psychologists. Studies have shown that the way instructions are delivered to performers can influence the attributions they are likely to make. As coaches we should be sure to emphasize the controllable nature of factors contributing to our paddler’s outcomes when giving instructions and reviewing a performance. We should emphasize that improvements and success are a result of application, dedication and practice and avoid implying that natural ability or lack of ability is a strong factor in success or failure.

Attributional retraining is the process of actively redirecting an individual’s awareness so that they begin to make attributions that we would see as help-

ful or functional. For instance the coach may make a concerted effort to get a paddler to see that they were responsible for their own success and that future success is therefore a controllable factor. Changing the attributional style of a paddler can be a long process that may well need to be implemented alongside goal setting. The good news is that improvements in attributions have been measured after very short interventions, where athletes were given feedback promoting the belief in a high degree of control over the outcome of sporting tasks.

Coaches hoping to encourage learners to view their performances as controllable should:

- Emphasise that the main difference in performance will come from effort and practice.
- Avoid suggesting that some learners will naturally do better than others.
- Concentrate on the areas that a paddler can change when examining outcomes.
- Be realistic about what a paddler can't change.
- Avoid consoling learners by suggesting their abilities lie elsewhere.

► BURN-OUT

Burn-out occurs when either a paddler or coach withdraws from an activity due to excessive stress or dissatisfaction over a longer period of time. The desire to improve or maintain performance can be a tremendous source of pressure on those involved in paddlesport. Often a burned-out athlete or coach does not physically drop out of sport since social or financial pressure may ensure that they remain involved. Psychological withdrawal can occur accompanied by emotional and psychological exhaustion, negative responses to others, low self-confidence and depression.

The view that more and more training is necessary for success can lead a highly committed paddler to overdo it. Eventually this can lead to overtraining or burn-out. Overtraining is mainly a physiological problem that occurs when an athlete is exposed to an excessive training load for a relatively short period of time resulting in decreased performance. Burn-out occurs as a result of a longer process of psychological stress.

Coaches are unlikely to suffer from overtraining but can certainly suffer from burn-out. Generally this

occurs due to accumulated stresses in and outside of sport coupled with an apparent lack of success or recognition for our effort and hard work.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Coaches or paddlers can become burned out if they feel that they are not equipped to cope with the demands on them or are not recognised for their efforts.

► Avoiding Burn-Out

How can we, as coaches, avoid burn-out in our paddlers or ourselves?



We need to accept that we all have limits on the levels of physical and psychological stress that we can endure. All of us have different individual limits. Conditions that one paddler can cope with will result in burn-out in another.



We need to be aware that stresses that we can cope with for short periods of time may be unsustainable for long-term development or involvement in paddlesport.



5
Photo 5 Keep a sense of humour!

Coaches and paddlers can best avoid burn-out if they ensure that they remember to retain a balanced lifestyle:

- Always remain aware that no one is immune to burn-out. Males and females, performers and coaches at all levels, 'winners' and 'losers' are all potential victims if stress gets out of control.
- Adopting a lifestyle that maintains physical health at an optimal level can provide some inoculation effect. Coaches and paddlers who are healthy are more likely to feel good and radiate enthusiasm to others.
- Maintain social support systems by having associations with others who understand the importance of your sporting situation. Coaches and paddlers can release tension by venting frustrations in the presence of others who understand.
- Keep a sense of humour.

► AROUSAL

Arousal is best thought of as our physical state of activation, or excitement. This can range from deep sleep to extreme excitement. Arousal is characterised by increased heart rate and respiration, sweating and butterflies in the stomach. Arousal is emotionally neutral and is the mind and body's natural preparation for action.

Several models of arousal attempt to explain the relationship between the intensity, or amount, of arousal and performance. Essentially these models all share the concept of an ideal, or optimal intensity of arousal for performance. An under or over-aroused paddler would fail to do well. An over-aroused paddler may be too jumpy and an under-aroused paddler might not be able to display their full physical potential. As coaches we should realise that optimal levels of arousal will be different in different sports and different tasks within sport and for different individuals. A paddler in a situation that requires high levels of physical work but low levels of motor control and decision making can be more aroused than one who needs delicate control or to choose between different possible responses. The different requirements of different activities would be illustrated by the difference between snooker and power-lifting. The snooker player would want a low level of arousal but a power-lifter may want a very high level. Different paddlers

can also need different levels of arousal to perform at their best so a coach needs to know the individual nuances of their own performers or learners.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- We all have different responses to arousal and coaches need to be aware of how their own individual paddlers tend to perform best in order to help them reach or maintain that state.

► The Catastrophe Model

The catastrophe model (Hardy, 1990) shows that the relationship between arousal and performance is generally a smooth curve with a peak or optimal zone (Figure 6). However, beyond a critical point the performance of an over-aroused paddler will not slowly decline but instead will crash. Recovery from such a crash is difficult and the paddler may need to be removed from the stressful situation, only re-engaging in the activity after returning to almost resting levels of arousal if there is to be any hope of a reasonable performance. Whilst the actual point of catastrophe cannot be measured by a coach in the field, the real lesson here is that coaches need to be vigilant and prepared to respond to the signs of over-arousal and decreasing performance in their paddlers before the catastrophe threshold is reached. Once a paddler has 'gone over the top' the session is effectively over and the coach will spend the rest of their time picking up the pieces. Knowing the individual differences and responses of your paddlers is your best chance of avoiding catastrophic levels of arousal.



Photo 6 *Anxious or excited?*

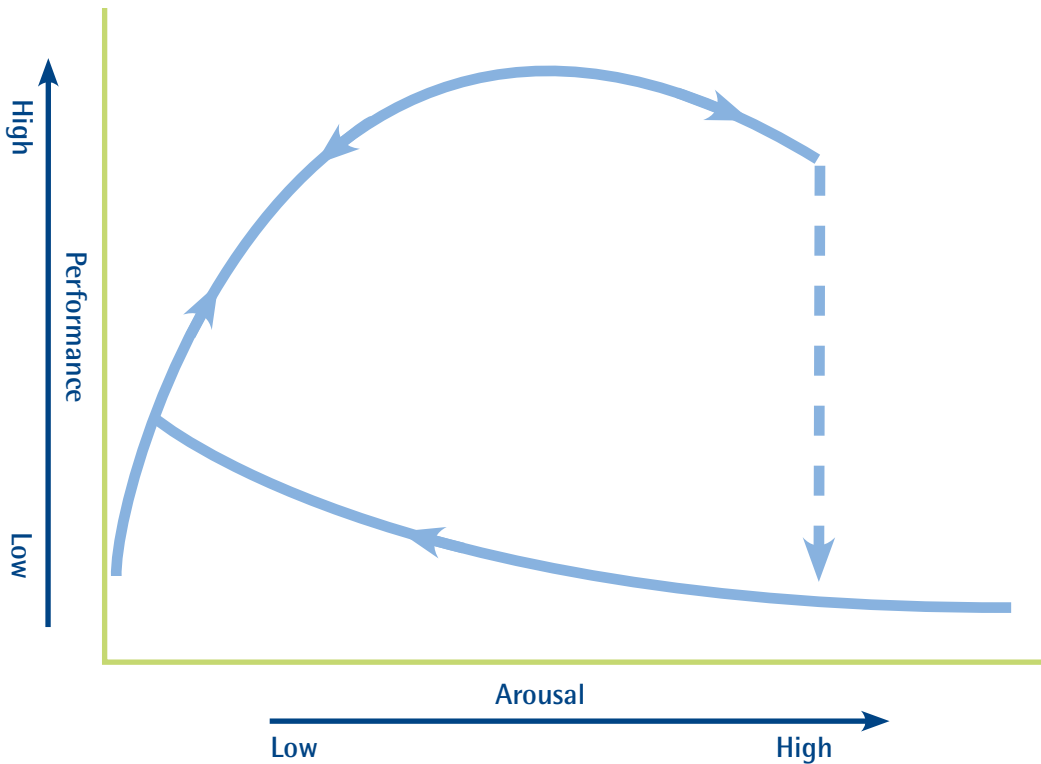


Fig. 6 Catastrophe Model of Arousal / Performance Relationship

► ANXIETY

Anxiety is often blamed for poor performances when an athlete or player fails to display the level of skill that coaches or observers know they are capable of. With the extra environmental factors that can add stress to canoesport it is hardly surprising that many coaches have an interest in anxiety. As coaches many of us are aware that a relationship between anxiety and performance exists. Unfortunately, whilst in our everyday lives we would all claim to know what we mean by anxiety, our everyday understanding can be limiting when trying to unlock the components of sporting performance.

Anxiety is an emotional state characterised by negative thoughts, nervousness and worry. Anxiety can be broken down into two sub-components; cognitive (mental) anxiety and somatic (physical) anxiety. Somatic or physical anxiety is simply the paddler's awareness of their own arousal. As the paddler becomes more aware of their shallow breathing and racing heart their somatic anxiety increases. Cognitive or mental anxiety is the presence of negative self-talk and feelings of dread or apprehension. The paddler

may become preoccupied with the consequences of failure instead of concentrating on the task at hand.

► Reversal Theory

If arousal is seen as being the body's natural preparation for action then anxiety can be viewed as one possible emotional impact of high arousal. Reversal theory (Kerr) suggests that high arousal can be experienced as either positive or negative, depending on the motivational state of the paddler. At any time we will be in either an arousal-seeking state or an arousal-avoiding state. In an arousal-avoiding (telic) state then we will interpret high arousal as anxiety. Alternatively if we are in an arousal-seeking (paratelic) state then we will interpret the same high arousal as excitement.

Reversal theory suggests performers can move from non-facilitative (unpleasant) to facilitative (pleasant) states by reinterpreting their own experience as desired or undesired. Studies of slalom paddlers have shown that switching from arousal avoiding to arousal seeking states can take place during canoesport.

Imagine a white water paddler who feels their heart rate increase and starts to get butterflies in the stomach while inspecting a rapid that is actually within the

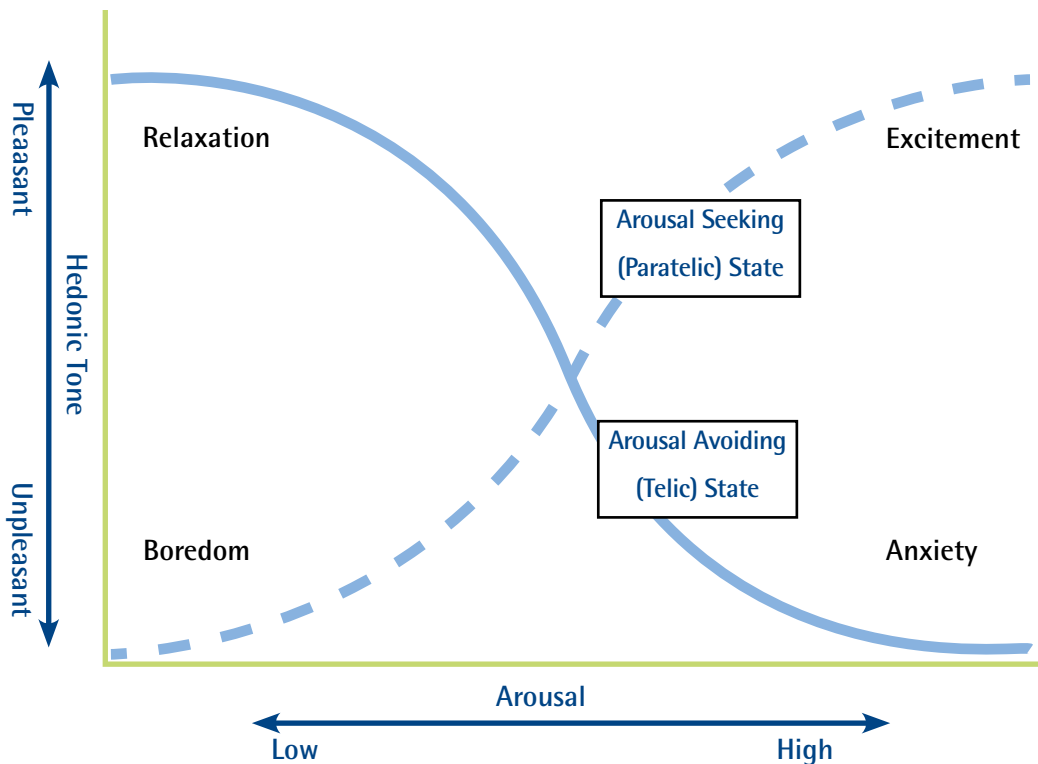


Fig. 7 Kerr (1987) Reversal Theory

limits of their ability. If they interpret this as negative (unpleasant) they will become anxious and may find themselves either paddling poorly or even deciding to walk the rapid. However, if they can become convinced that their arousal symptoms are positive and desired they will interpret their condition as excitement.

Successful performers often view the symptoms of high arousal (elevated heart rate, sweating, increased respiration and butterflies in the stomach) as positive indicators of their readiness. Many describe the sensation as 'a buzz' and look forward to it. We as coaches can help by encouraging paddlers to view high arousal as positive rather than negative, use the term 'excited' rather than 'nervous'. We know that hearing accounts from successful, experienced athletes of their experiences of viewing arousal symptoms as positive can actually facilitate younger, less experienced performers in their attempts to reappraise their symptoms as both positive and desired. As coaches we can encourage this process of reappraisal of arousal symptoms either by intervening ourselves or by encouraging other paddlers to help less experienced and younger performers. It is quite possible to learn to associate paddling and high arousal with excitement so that this becomes the normal response.

► Other Strategies

Other strategies for dealing with high levels of anxiety tend to concentrate on lowering arousal. Instead of switching to an arousal-seeking state we move back along the curved line of Figure 7 to reach relaxation. Techniques for this can include relaxation training or stress inoculation. Both are longer-term solutions and will need a paddler to participate in a progressive training programme.

Relaxation techniques rely on the link between the body and the mind. If a paddler's body is relaxed it is very difficult for them to remain anxious. Progressive relaxation is a technique that paddlers can learn in order to induce a state of relaxation. A paddler will practise deliberately tensing a muscle group and then relaxing it. These exercises raise awareness of the feelings of contrast between the tense state and the relaxed state. Often for paddlers, tension will be held in the shoulders and gripping muscles and so it would make a lot of sense to practise tensing and relaxing these areas. A paddler could even practise whilst holding a paddle deliberately over-gripping and tensing the shoulders, holding the tension and then releasing it, paying attention to the contrast in sensation. Like any learning this will require practice before it can be used



7

Photo 7 Using breathing exercises to lower arousal levels.

with any effect in a stressful situation but eventually it is possible for the technique to become an automatic response to anxiety.

Breathing exercises are another popular relaxation technique for lowering arousal and dealing with high anxiety. By concentrating on deep, diaphragmatic breathing it is possible to lower physical tension and trigger a relaxation response. Conversely when we are anxious we often either hold our breath or take shallow, rapid breaths from the upper chest. If a paddler can deliberately control their breathing they can avoid becoming over-anxious or effectively lower anxiety. Yoga classes are a good way to learn and practise the correct breathing technique.

As coaches involved in a group of sports with high potential for stressful situations we are very likely to find ourselves from time to time dealing with over-anxious paddlers.

We can help our performers to enjoy their paddling, learn effectively and perform at their best if we can:

- Identify the signs of increased arousal and anxiety in our paddlers.
- Monitor our paddlers over time and learn to identify the optimal level of arousal and emotional state for optimal performance.
- Recognise that anxiety is a result of situational and personal factors.
- Tailor our practice to our individual paddlers.
- Develop confidence in our performers so that they can cope with stress and anxiety.
- Increase our knowledge of effective techniques for coping with anxiety.

CONCENTRATION

Concentration, or lack of concentration, is a term that is often used to explain differences in sporting performance. Concentration is often a poorly understood phenomenon. Many coaches will assume that a paddler is concentrating if they are succeeding and not concentrating if they are performing below par. We might even instruct a performer to concentrate harder, pay attention or 'focus'. It might be easier if we think of concentration as being the same as attention. As coaches it is not enough to ask a performer to concentrate, we need to let our paddlers know what we want their attention on.

Some paddlers may seem to be very easily distracted; their attention flitting to irrelevant events or elements in the environment. As a coach we may know that optimal performance is about not attending to unhelpful elements in the environment as much as attending to the helpful ones. However, asking a paddler not to concentrate on something is a bit like asking someone not to think of a blue bear with large ears. Are you not thinking of it? Instead we need to think about what we do want our paddlers to attend to and direct them to concentrate on those things instead.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- We are always concentrating on something, the question really is... are we concentrating on the right things in the right way?

As coaches we should also realise that our style of concentration or attention is not always the same. The width, or amount of things we can attend to can change and so can the type of thing we attend to (Figure 8). Some situations require us to attend to a lot of information from different sources. For example a canoe polo player engaged in play will need to monitor their own position in the pool, that of the ball, their team-mates, their opponents and spaces that allow for movement to take place. This requires a broad focus of attention. A sprint paddler waiting for the start may be attending to nothing but the sound of the starter. They might not even be aware of their opponents at all. This would be a very narrow focus of attention, however, in this situation it may be totally appropriate.

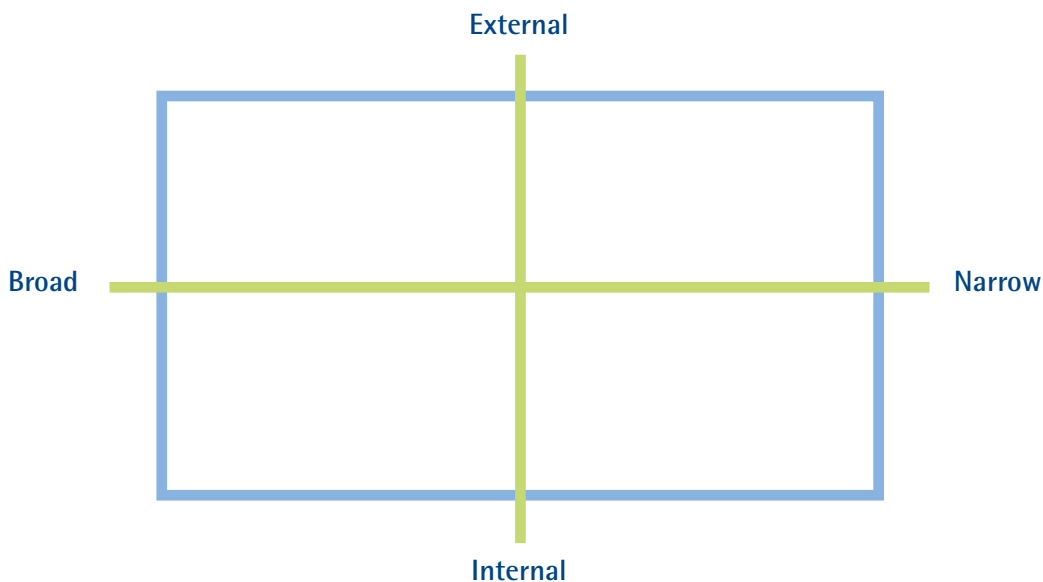


Fig. 8 Dimensions of Attention

► Direction

Concentration or attention can also have direction and be said to be either internal or external. If we have an internal focus then we are concentrating on some aspect of our own performance, our thoughts, feelings or movements. If we are concentrating on the environment, other paddlers or even our equipment, then we have an external focus.

We are likely to already have an attentional style, which means that we will often drop into one attentional width and direction, for example narrow / internal. This is also true of our paddlers although their natural style may be different from ours. What is important is that the type of attention or concentration we find ourselves using is matched to the needs of the activity. If it is not matched then we need to change our focus of attention.

► Attention Control Training

Attention control training is about learning to switch between different types of concentration, moving between an internal focus and an external focus or moving from broad to narrow width of attention. Paddlers should practise activities that empathise one particular style of attention and practise moving from one style to another. For instance scouting a rapid will generally require a broad/external focus of atten-

tion. Assessing a particular hazard might then require a narrow/external focus. Controlling the pitch of the paddle blade during a sculling draw might require a narrow/internal focus, then controlling the direction of the boat's movement might require a narrow/external focus. Avoiding other paddlers during a game of tag would then require a broad/external focus.

Many paddlers believe that concentration is only really important in competition or for top level performance. The problem with this thinking is that they have actually missed the opportunity to practise the very skills they find themselves needing. Concentration or attentional skills need to be practised alongside technical skills and physical training.

One of the difficulties concerning concentration during stress or competition is that increased arousal tends to narrow attentional focus. To a point this can be good for certain activities making it easier for a paddler to ignore distractions. Unfortunately, if this process continues the focus can become too narrow for the activity and relevant, useful information can be ignored. This is one explanation for the decline in performance with over-high levels of arousal shown in catastrophe theory (Figure 6).



Photos 8a-c Differing paddling activities requiring different levels of focus.

As coaches and paddlers it is a good idea to remember a few basic principles related to concentration:

- Concentration needs to be focused on relevant factors in a paddling performance; these need to be identified if the term concentration is to be meaningful.
- Different paddling tasks need different attentional styles; we may need to work out what these are.
- Different paddlers will be stronger in different attentional styles.
- Paddlers can learn to adopt more appropriate attentional styles but this will require practice.
- Under stress our attention may become narrow if we allow ourselves to become too highly aroused; relaxation techniques may help to counter this.

► IMAGERY

Imagery, also referred to as visualisation or mental practice, is one of the most well known and commonly used mental skills. Reports of successful athletes and sports people using mental practice are common across all avenues of sport including golf, athletics, tennis and rugby. The popularity of imagery as a performance enhancement tool is a result of two factors. Firstly imagery has a vast array of possible uses once the basic technique has been developed and secondly it builds on mental processes that we already use daily.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Imagery is a skill we use every day; mental skills training simply aims to make us better and more effective at it.

Imagery has been used successfully to increase and maintain motivation, build confidence, regulate arousal, practise physical skills, learn new skills and rehearse strategies. This versatility and adaptability means that if you are interested in adopting mental skills training that could provide both an edge now and be used throughout a sporting career, imagery would come second only to goal setting.

Imagery has been described as “going to the movies”. It has also been described as having your own virtual

reality system. Think of a recent sporting performance of your own, picking a successful one will make this more fun. Now close your eyes and try to recreate the event in your imagination. Try to see the performance as it actually happened. Can you imagine the event in colour? What about the things you could hear? If this was easy to do try adding information from your other senses, try and feel the paddle in your hands and the footrest pushing against your feet. This is imagery, all of us can do it but some people are better than others. However, we can all train to be better at it and those well practised in imagery have often learned to be exceptional at it. There are Olympic level sportsmen and women who can ‘image’ a whole future event. They can see the path they will take through the course, feel the resistance against the paddle and the boat sliding over the water, hear the splash of the boat and paddle and the noise of the crowd. The length of time taken to complete the imagery run is within fractions of a second of the actual time they will get.

► Uses Of Imagery

Whilst this level of skill in imaging is uncommon, imagery is not only an obtainable skill for all paddlers but also a highly useful one. Imagery can be incorporated into the inspection of rapids, warm up for a polo match or race. It can be used to practise free-style manoeuvres on days when getting to the water is impossible or for fault finding in a three star skill. Imagery can be used to enhance the learning and performance of any level of paddler in any paddling situation. It can be used to improve reviewing or to prepare for a future performance. Imagery can involve recreating a past event or experiencing an event that has not yet taken place.

► Training To Use Imagery

Having accepted that we are already able to use imagery without any training or practice it is important to realise that there are far more effective ways to go about imagery if we are prepared to put some time and thought into how we go about it. Holmes and Collins (2001) have developed the PETTLEP model based on the assumption that what we do in imagery should fit as accurately as possible to what we do in the real world:



Physical - Try and mimic the physical condition you would be in during the performance, this is likely to be alert and active rather than relaxed or lying down. Imagine being out of breath, perhaps even hold your paddle during imagery.

- Environment - Imagine as much of the environment you will perform in as you can, sounds, smell, and colour. Use photographs or videos to recreate environmental features if necessary.
- Task - Imagine very specific tasks and concentrate on the things that you would want to concentrate on during physical performances.
- Timing - Try and imagine the performance in 'real time', no slow motion. Leave that for videos!
- Learning - As you improve your physical performance you need to make sure you review your imagery and are not imaging 'old' techniques.
- Emotion - Include appropriate emotional content to your imagery. If you feel exhilaration or worry during a real performance then you should include these in your imagery.
- Perspective - Imagery can be internal where you imagine the view you get during the performance or external where you observe your performance from outside. Internal perspectives are normally better for warm-ups and preparation, external perspectives may be better for building confidence or for an aesthetic assessment such as an analysis of a freestyle move.

► SELF-TALK

As human beings we spend huge amounts of time talking to ourselves. Any time we actively think about something we are in effect talking to ourselves. We may be evaluating what we have done, "I think that went pretty well", what we are doing or our chances of succeeding in what we are doing. We often talk to ourselves about the consequences of failure, "If I don't make this last eddy I'm going to end up swimming the next rapid". Sometimes we talk to ourselves about other people's performance, either team-mates or opponents, "That was a nice move" or "I thought they were supposed to be good!".

In fact no matter what we do and how we perform as paddlers we will continue to talk to ourselves sometimes during a performance but certainly before and after performances, perhaps when maintaining or selecting equipment, in the car afterwards or talking to friends before getting on the water. Remember that when we are talking to others we are actually also talking to ourselves (since we are listening). Not



Photo 9 Slalom paddler imaging her run

only do we listen to ourselves when we are talking to others and ourselves but there is a lot of evidence to say that we actually take notice of what we say. The bad news is that often what we say isn't helping either our performance or our enjoyment.

► Negative Self-Talk

Negative self-talk includes labelling ourselves as "loser", or "poor under pressure" or "just not good in these situations". The problem with negative self-talk is twofold. Firstly negative self-talk is immensely powerful and has been shown to result in poorer performances. It can be highly disruptive during a performance but can also erode confidence and self-esteem between performances. Secondly negative self-talk can become habit forming. We probably all know people who have a habit of making negative remarks about their own abilities. Over time paddlers who continually label themselves as losers or not good under pressure expect to fail in those situations and when we expect to fail we normally manage to meet our expectations.

► Positive Self-Talk

Positive self-talk on the other hand has been shown to positively boost performance. A paddler who makes positive statements during self-talk, or in general discussion, can actually build up their expectations of success. Comments like, "I can do this", "I have the ability to learn this skill" or "I know I can succeed if I put the work in" are all positive outlooks for self-talk. Some psychologists will help athletes put together a series of positive self-talk statements that are often referred to as affirmations. Affirmations are a simple way of trying to control self-talk by ensuring that a paddler becomes used to self-talk of a positive and

helpful nature. Since it is only possible to be engaged in one form of self-talk at a time they can be used to prevent negative self-talk from creeping in by default.



KEY POINT SUMMARY

- Affirmations are a form of positive self-talk that can be used to boost confidence over a period of time or in stressful situations.

Anyone who might want to improve their performance through control of self-talk should think about creating key phrases using the following six rules (Mikes, 1987):

- Keep your phrases short and specific.
- Use the first person and present tense.
- Construct positive phrases.
- Say your phrases with meaning and attention.
- Speak kindly to yourself.
- Repeat phrases often.

Self-talk can also be targeted at improving concentration or attention control. It is easy to get caught up in the past during performances. If you are the sort of paddler who finds yourself reviewing your performance during your activity then you might want to try using self-talk to draw your attention back to the areas that will enable you to do well.

► MOVING ON FROM HERE...

The main aim of this chapter has been to encourage coaches to view sports psychology as a body of knowledge that can enable us to be more successful in our work with paddlers. Also to view psychological skills training as a natural part of sporting progression and development that should go hand in hand with technical, tactical and physiological training.

See also Chapter 18 Slalom for useful examples of discipline-specific mental skills training.

FURTHER READING

Weinburg, R.S. and Gould, D. (2003). *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. IL: Human Kinetics.

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Chris is fascinated by the areas of learning and performing in complex and challenging environments and how we can improve performance during environmentally induced stress. He has been involved in the coaching of paddlesport at every level of experience from total novices through to international competition. Chris is a BCU Level 5 Coach holding coaching qualifications in inland, sea, open canoe and surf and also a postgraduate degree in sport psychology.

