

Much of this article is excerpted from Chapter 8 (Self-Talk) of Coach 'Traub's Book:
Finding Your Peak Performance with Mental Skills Training.

“Great self-talk: How elite athletes coach themselves”

by Aaron Weintraub

Changing your self image can change your life. Changing your self image
begins with changing your self-talk.

-Dr. Jim Will

Self-talk is the running dialogue that goes on inside a person's head. It is usually in the form of actual words, although self-talk sometimes takes the form of pictures or concepts. While athletes often are not aware of their own self-talk, they all have it. There is no on/off switch to the brain. Right now your self-talk is the words you are reading. If you pause from the text, you may think: “I wonder if reading all of Coach 'Traub's book would actually help me play better.” Or, “I know what self-talk is—maybe I should skip ahead.” Your self-talk may get distracted from reading: “I wonder what's on television.” What thoughts do athletes have right before they perform, and do they help or hinder performance? “This is going to be a great game.” “I'm ready. Let's do this.” “I love this game.” These particular three thoughts will almost always aid performance.

Self-talk impacts performance by directly affecting attitude, which then directly affects behavior. Behavior is what the athlete can control. Therefore, behavior defines a champion. The gap between good and great is wide; to make that leap, an athlete must do what is difficult. He must learn to have effective patterns of self-talk.

People are creatures of habit, and this includes their self-talk. To make a change, you must have awareness, motivation, and the discipline and courage to stick with it. Pete Rose maximized performance by working relentlessly on his weaknesses. “What's tough” he said, “is to go out and work hard on the things that you don't do very well.” Human nature leads the other way, which is for athletes to spend more time practicing the things at which they are already skilled. It is more comfortable this way. Easier. The greatness of humanity, however, is that people have the ability to do the unnatural. “Normal” can be a dangerous excuse that can keep us from doing what we know to be right. Fortunately, you can talk yourself into not only doing what's tough, but enjoying it, too. With effective self-talk, human nature can be overcome, replacing poor patterns of behavior with better ones. With consistency, the unnatural itself can become second nature, or routine.

Many people who understand these concepts still underestimate the effect that using self-talk to create positive emotions has on behavior. Recall your own attitude when you gave your greatest performances. Does this attitude differ from when you had your worst performances? Probably so. Think about the attitude of your role models.

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What do you think the self-talk of exceptionally successful people is like? There is a trend in great performers' attitudes; this trend can and should be copied.

Positivism

Learn to think like a winner.... Think positive and visualize your strengths.
-Vic Braden, Tennis Instructor

I dwell on what I want to happen, not what I don't want to happen.
-Anonymous

A positive attitude and positively worded self-talk affect behavior more than many people realize because of the nature of the mind-body connection. In athletic competition and out of it, many good things result from developing a habit of positive self-talk. Athletes can raise their enthusiasm and focus on the task at hand by thinking about what to do (not what to avoid).

Because the mind communicates with the body in this way, all thoughts by athletes about what not to do should be reframed or countered into positive statements before the performance is attempted. Change "don't walk this guy" into "throw strikes." Change "don't press" into "stay within yourself." Change "I can't finish my workout" into "I can finish my workout."

Immediately before you perform, your self-talk should be positive and functional, keeping it simple so that you may focus wholly on the task-at-hand. The list below provides some common poor self-talk. As you read the list, ask yourself if you have ever fallen into this trap. If so, what should you say to yourself instead?

Words to Avoid

We are all creatures of habit. If your patterns of thought or speech include these words or phrases in a particular situation, then you are not winning the mental side of the game as much as you could.

Can't

I can't do that.
Man can't run a mile in under 4:00.
We can't come that back from that far behind.

I'm not

I'm not big enough.
I'm not smart enough.
I'm not as good as I should be.

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Need/Have to	I need a hit right here. We need to win this game. We have to score.
Should/Supposed to	I should score that runner from third base. We should beat this team. I'm supposed to be better than this.
Failure	I failed when I messed up that play. We failed by losing that game.
Always/Never	I always play lousy at that place. We never do this play right.
I stink/suck	I can't believe I missed that. I suck. I stink when it's cold.
Hate	I hate running. I hate that umpire.
That's not fair.	I can't believe he did that to me. That's ridiculous. If the referee had done that... That's B.S.
That's discouraging.	**Disappointment is fine. Discouragement is not.

Excuses

You can either find a way or find an excuse. You can't do both.

Acceptance of responsibility for your own behavior is critical. As you increase your acceptance that you are completely responsible for and in control of your behavior, which directly impacts outcomes and is all that can be controlled, you will develop an intolerance of excuses.

The vast majority of excuse makers agree with the preceding paragraph. Yet they unwittingly continue to make excuses. These excuses sneak up on them in various forms, and often include the words or phrases in the list below. Is your ego requiring the protection of excuses? Stop limiting your own growth by recognizing this pattern, for with awareness, an adjustment is possible.