

Part 3: Performance Impairment

PUTTING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN CONTEXT

Text: Monja Human and Maurice Aronstam



Introduction

To thoughtfully and successfully implement an intervention in the context of sport psychology requires that the difficulties that an athlete experiences be identified and that the best intervention be used to assist the athlete. This often requires that the difficulties presented by an athlete seeking sport psychology services be categorised into the following four categories.

- I. Performance development
- II. Performance dysfunction
- III. Performance impairment
- IV. Performance termination

The interventions that will be best suited to the difficulties experienced by the athlete will differ according to the above categorisation. In part one performance development was addressed and in part two we addressed the performance dysfunction category. In part three we now look at performance impairment.

Part III: Performance impairment:

The performance impairment category is characterised by athletes that experience clinical difficulties, for example, a swimmer that is so conscious of her weight that she starts to develop dysfunctional eating patterns which results in an eating disorder.

The development of clinical symptoms often involves the interplay of biological, social and intrapersonal causes. The most common clinical disorders that you can look out for among athletes include depression, anxiety and stress disorders, eating disorders, anger and impulse control disorders and drug/alcohol abuse disorders.

Let's look at the following example of a performance impairment case:

The Story of Bruce

Here is an example of a rugby player to illustrate a typical performance impairment case:

The situation	The development of clinical symptoms
Bruce is an enthusiastic rugby player that wants nothing more than to play well for his team and coach. His coach has a soft spot for Bruce because he is always giving his all and going the extra mile for the team. Nothing makes Bruce happier than being part of this team.	So far Bruce is an athlete that every coach wants in his team. He has great qualities such as placing the teams' needs before his own and always putting in more than is expected.
Bruce's game on the field takes a bit of a dip and he is finding it tough to keep up to the other players in his team. He starts to think that he is not playing his part in the team and he starts to worry about what the other are thinking and saying about him. Bruce has always valued the opinion of his coach higher than anybody else's. He feels that he is letting down his coach despite his coach still showing confidence in him. He becomes preoccupied by this worry of letting the team and his coach down.	Bruce experiences a normal aspect of sport where an athlete loses confidence and goes through a bit of a dip. His thoughts become increasingly pessimistic, but he becomes preoccupied by these thoughts which result in a drastic increase in his worry and anxiety.
His parents have always been supportive and are always next to the field supporting him when he's playing. He has never questioned their support but for the first time he questions whether they want to watch him play. His parents don't want to say something that might further upset him so they avoid conversations that have a negative theme. This results in more quiet times when they are together. He now further questions whether they are now ashamed of him.	His anxiety and pessimism spreads to other areas of his life and starts to impact his belief of support from his parents.
Bruce becomes increasingly nervous before the matches. He is even getting nervous at practice. Because of the nerves he makes elementary mistakes at practice which just increases his worry and nerves. He has become so anxious that he now refuses to go to school because of his fear of what the others are thinking and saying about him.	Bruce's anxiety has had a major impact on his behaviour and he now goes to extremes to try to avoid situations that will increase his experience of anxiety.

In the example of Bruce, the effect of the experience with anxiety had a far reaching impact in a major area of his life. In this case it developed as a result of an interplay between his personal characteristic of wanting to prove himself to and please others, a biological predisposition, and the social context that promoted worry. The treatment of clinical disorders is often a combination of both a therapeutic as well as a medical intervention. If you are ever concerned about an athlete it will be in the best interest for the athlete to refer them to a professional for further investigation.

Summary

The performance impairment category is characterised by athletes that experience clinical difficulties. The effect of clinical difficulties is most often far reaching and will have a drastic impact in at least one major area of the athlete's life. In conclusion I leave you with the paradoxical effect that sport can have on a person; while sport is often used as a tool that can aid in the treatment of clinical symptoms, it can also form part of the cause for the experience of clinical symptoms 🏏