

The role of self-talk and language

Text: Monja Muller & Melissa Brokensha, psychologists at hpc

You often hear the phrase in golf “the way you train determines the way you will compete”. Perhaps we need to change that to “the way you talk to yourself determines the way you will compete”. Self-talk refers to the way you talk to yourself and the type of language you use. All golfers know that little inner voice, inner conversation or internal dialogue that is always present whether you like it or not. If we assume that this inner voice is always present why not make the most of it and start using it to your advantage.

Self-talk can assist with the following:

Self-talk can improve your concentration.

You can use positive self-talk to induce better concentration. Concentration includes focusing on the here and now. We can use self-statements to correct mistakes and encourage oneself not to dwell on past mistakes. Concentration for the next shot is hindered when we start thinking about our previous hole and the mistake we made. To do this during a round is wasted energy as you can't change it anyway. Self-statements can help bring us back into the present and encourage us to focus on the shot ahead. Positive self-talk can assist with changing mistakes and negativity into learning opportunities and encouraging challenges.

Enhance self-confidence

Your language has a direct impact on your golf game. Certain words undermine confidence whilst others improve it. Let's say you had a choice between two people who would spend every waking moment with you for a whole week. The difference between these two people is the way in which they talk to you. The first person has no confidence in you and believes that you are never going to make it. For example, “Morning Jim, so...you think that you are going to play a good round today? You have hardly trained the last two weeks, and your swing is an absolute laugh at the moment. I don't know where you got the idea from that you could be a pro-golfer.” “What an idiotic shot! You know this hole backwards yet still you seem to mess it up. You are such a loser.” “I don't even think you should finish this round, you should just walk to the club house and put your clubs up for sale.” “Can you imagine how embarrassed your dad is of you right now, after all the time and money that he put into you.” “You are such a disappointment.”

The second person has confidence in you and believes that you are going to make it. For example, “Morning Jim, what a day to play your best round of golf!! You are going to go out there and show them how your new swing is working for you. Let them get a taste of the pro-golfer you are on your way to become. Jim, you have arrived!” “Ok, so this hole has a few more tricks up its sleeve, just when you thought you knew it backwards, it whips another trick out the bag. At least you can add this to your knowledge of this whole, each time you get to know more and more of its tricks. Soon you will be tricking it!” “what a good round to learn more about you and golf, pick up those clubs and thank them that they have brought you this far. If your clubs could talk they would say your gripped them beautifully today, just the way they like it. They would be proud of you” “dad's going to be really chuffed that you go out there and are prepared to learn each time, and that you enjoy the experience too.”

So the question is, which person would you choose? How do you feel about yourself when person 1 is talking and when person 2 is talking?

Increase effort

Self-talk can help while you are training. Training in the gym or on the field can be excruciating at times. Positive self-talk can change the negative and toughest moments into positive challenges, and therefore, overcome it and train harder for longer. At the driving range when you have hit your 300 balls but know that you need to hit another 300, self talk can help you through the pain and endurance. Saying to your self, “every 600 balls I hit, is equal to one shot on the course. Have others got 600 balls behind every shot?”

Modify mood

Negative words have negative effects on you. If that is true then positive thoughts or words have to have a positive effect. Many athletes use negative statements when they do something wrong but few of them use positive statements when they do it right. By saying positive things to yourself you are not only encouraging yourself but also affecting your mood. For every good putt that you play, you could affirm it with a positive word. Saying it out loud also helps to confirm your belief in the shot, “Be Ee Ay You Tea Ful!” “what a winner”, “nice one Jim”, “Awesome”, “fantastic”, “Champion shot” “What a Tiger”.

on golfing performance

Use self-talk as self-reward

By using positive statements about your game and effort, you can reward yourself mentally. This can become an internal reward instead of an external reward such as a medal or even money.

Here are a couple of examples to illustrate how certain words can introduce doubt in your golf game.

The following two statements are examples of tentative language therefore giving yourself room for failure. If you do fail, it's not that bad because you did say that you hoped and that you tried. This is not good enough! "I hope I can sink this shot".
"I am going to try and sink this shot".

The word "but" negates whatever came before in a sentence. For example "I would really like to sink this putt but the green is too wet". This means that you are not going to sink that putt and you also gave yourself a legitimate excuse of a wet green because everybody knows it is difficult to put on a wet green. The first part of your statement "I would really like to sink" is made untrue by the word but. You actually know it is not going to happen because of the wet green.

Statements such as "I am going to improve my game" or "I am going to attempt this shot" are also tentative. Stop giving yourself instructions of what you want to do and do it! Confidence comes from doing!

Change from language of tentativeness and indecisiveness, to language of certainty and confidence. Here is an example "I am absolutely going to sink this putt. I am positive and I have worked hard. I will definitely drive this shot further than anything I have hit today."

There are three types of self-talk that you can use:

Self coaching

You talk to yourself in a manner as if you are your own coach. Examples are "watch the ball", "stay calm" or "be alert". "Focus on this hole". "Do your pre-shot routine". "You are not here to do maths calculations, (ie, I dropped a shot on the last hole, I am one over, therefore I have to make a birdie on this hole), you are here to play golf".

Positive self-statements

This is a form of self-encouragement or affirming your performance. These statements need to be short, positive and phrased in the present tense. Examples are "I am in control", "I love a challenge" or "I am a winner". "I am JIM" "I have the best swing."

Mood words.

Here you utilise cue words that create the appropriate mood for the desired performance. Examples are "slow", "control", "smash" or "go hard".

To conclude remember that practice makes perfect. You never go to a golf game without any training. That is why you also need to train yourself to use self-talk and to be aware of the language you use. If you do not teach yourself to use it during training, it won't be there in competition. It is the same as when you are not able to perform well because you have not trained for many months. If you use language that introduces confidence and certainty and believe positive things about yourself it will help you to feel prepared and enhance your performance 🌈

"Negative words have negative effects on you. If that is true then positive thoughts or words have to have a positive effect"