BARÇA
INNOVATION HUB
Universitas

PSYCHOLOGICAL PREVENTION TECHNIQUES

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION PLAN

1.1 Detecting Psychological Needs

Introduction

Over the years, the main goal of psychological intervention when it comes to athletes has been to understand the personality traits of subjects in order to improve their performance. For many years the sports realm lacked psychological research specific to the field, and as a result it drew from studies based on the clinical field, albeit without any evidence of practical application to its own discipline.

Authors such as Gardner and Moore (2006) have researched how the psychological intervention proposal has been evolving within the world of sports.

1.1.1 Psychological Interventions and Athletic Performance

In this case it has been shown that when psychological interventions are not carried out using a direct approach with the athletes, they tend not to generate significant results in terms of athletic performance.

The type of intervention that achieved the best results in terms of athletic performance was the *multicomponent intervention,* which is a combination of several different techniques: arousal control + imagination + objectives or self-talk + imagination + concentration + relaxation. That being said, however, these techniques do not have enough empirical support to be able to consider them as scientific evidence.

Traditional intervention

Techniques used in traditional psychology were often mistakenly considered to be specific to sports psychology. These types of techniques were based on positive thinking, arousal control, engaging in self-talk and forming habits prior to competitions. The objective was focused on gaining control over one's emotions.

Implementing some proposals by different authors who focused on perceived self-efficacy, behavior modification or emotionally-based

disorders, for example, enraged those that follow the cognitive-social school of thought.

Even with time, the traditional techniques that have been used for over forty years have not been surpassed. By contrast, the resources mentioned previously are still being used.

From a theoretical standpoint, cognitive-behavioral therapy focuses on the control of internal processes as its main type of intervention, taking into consideration that these processes tend to coincide with behavior that negatively affects performance. Consequently, traditional techniques such as self-talk, positive thinking or arousal control end up contradicting metacognitive training based on external stimuli.

1.1.2 Practical Implications Applied to Sports

- Theoretical knowledge used in different psychological specialties is incorporated and adapted to the sports context.
- Interventions are adapted to suit the individual characteristics of each athlete.
- Relevant evaluations are carried out and after a contextual analysis the types of intervention which are most suitable are identified.

These demonstrate the results of intervention techniques and their contributions to the improvement of athletic performance.

When psychologists design their interventions, they should keep the individual characteristics of each athlete in mind, and should also consider each stage of the athlete's sports career from the beginning until their withdrawal from sport. In other words, an intervention should cater to each requirement as determined by the needs of the subject.

Using sports psychology as a means to improve performance.

When incorporating psychology into the world of sports training, seven main contributions can be identified:

- Planning training
- Achieving athlete permanence
- Learning relevant abilities and behaviors
- Applying skills
- Training in competitive conditions

- Preparing for said competitions
- Evaluating training

Psychological strategies can and should be applied to every area related to sports training in order to facilitate the work done with the athletes. Some of the aforementioned strategies should be implemented by the trainer and others by the athletes themselves. Evidently, the most complex strategies should be implemented by sport psychologists.

The psychologists are responsible for carrying out the appropriate evaluations and organizing the implementation schedule for interventions. But the coach and the psychologist play complementary roles.

To summarize, applying psychological sciences to sports can be critical.

1.1.3 An Intervention Model

In this case, the intention is to discuss the key details to be able to implement appropriate psychological work. Most of the points that will be outlined are not generally included in standard academic psychology training. These are learned with years of experience.

Up until now, no one has taken the time to specifically analyze this subject matter, but that does not mean that it is any less important when it comes time to present to a club a project to address and work on psychological aspects with subject-athletes. In fact, there are many very well-structured projects designed by qualified professionals who have not been able to achieve their desired results because they downplayed the importance of the points previously mentioned.

When incorporating a psychologist into a sports institution, the coach or the managers themselves may be responsible for the hiring process. In cases such as these, the psychologist offers their services as a health professional, and thus the athletes become their patients.

When dealing with sports institutions, the psychologist may be contracted by the coach (who asks the managers to contact a psychologist) or by the managers directly. For example, either the coach or the manager could be considered as the client. If a coach decides to contract the services of a sports psychologist to help better manage the group then, the coach is the client since they are the one who is

contracting the professional services. At the same time, the coach may form a work team with the psychologist, although this is not always the case. On the other hand, if the president or sports director of a small club is interested in the psychologist's services, then they would also be considered as the client. However, depending on the work that the psychologist will be carrying out for this organization, the objective may be to train the coaches in certain skills, work with one specific player and/or provide training to the parents.

One of the reasons it is important to differentiate between these two concepts (patient – client) is because certain situations may arise where the client has a specific objective in mind, as well as an expectation about the type of work that the psychologist should do, while those with whom the psychologist works (coaches, for example) have different objectives. This often leads to subsequent problems.

Below is a specific example where you can see how different people have completely different objectives. For example, a psychologist who has been contracted for his expertise halfway through the season in order to help train a group of swimmers competing at the national level. The client is the head coach of the swimming club, and he makes it clear that the psychologist should focus on improving the psychological competencies of the 4 swimmers who will continue competing at the club next season. Despite this, when the psychologist goes to the facility each day he talks with the coach about the elite group of 4 swimmers that he will be working with, as well as 2 other swimmers who will not be continuing on with the swim club next season. With the championship only a few weeks away, the coach wants his swimmers to achieve the best possible results. Therefore he suggests that the psychologist dedicate part of his time to the 4 swimmers that will compete in the national championships (2 are part of the team of 4 that will continue next season, and the other 2 are swimmers who are only staying with the club until the end of this season).

In this example, the head coach contracted the sports psychologist with a specific mid-term objective in mind – to improve the psychological competencies of one particular group of swimmers. Meanwhile, the coach is worried about the possible results of the upcoming competition, so he asks the psychologist to dedicate some time to two of the swimmers that will not be part of the club next season. Here we see an example of a problem that frequently arises within sports institutions, where the athletic coaches or coordinators have interests or objectives

that differ from those of the specific trainers regarding what they want from, in this case, a sports psychologist.

Intervention

The importance of the **observation period** is outlined below. This period comes into play from the moment the sports psychologist starts working the team or club where he will work throughout the season or length of time for which he has been contracted. In this phase or stage, his objective is to gather as much information as possible to be able to help him get to know the organization where he will both work and implement his intervention strategies in detail. This will assist him to design and implement his action plan effectively.

Most people have their own personal insecurities when they are first contracted and they want confirmation that their work is useful and to feel accepted by others. This desire experienced by newly-contracted professionals creates a rush that may cause them to minimize the importance of this observation and information-gathering stage, and to hastily start the intervention stage without certain information that could prove to be very valuable.

In this first phase or information-gathering stage, it is recommended that the psychologist meet with different agents within the sporting venue in order to gain a more precise idea about exactly what type of organization he has joined, and how it works from the inside.

In the first few days, it is recommended to begin by observing the various training styles, physical trainers, representatives, physiotherapists, managers, maintenance staff, parents, etc. The more information that a psychologist is able to collect about those who take part in the day-to-day operations of the institution that he will be a part of, the better his context will be for future interventions.

As an example, samples from the observational data sheets used by the psychology department at FC Barcelona are provided.

Psychological skills to watch for in athletes:

In order to better understand the context, a few questions have been prepared that will help to provide more clarity. On such occasions, openness and sincerity are required. These questions have been designed exclusively for personal-professional development.

1) Have you ever worked with a sports psychologist?
2) What expectations do you have about the work that we might do?
3) Outline your abilities as well as the skills you believe you should develop further.
4) Do you think that you compete in the same way as you train? Or do you think that you train better than you compete? (If there are any differences, do you know why?).
5) At the psychological level, what abilities do you think an athlete needs to have in order to be well-rounded?
6) After contemplating your strengths and weaknesses, what areas would you like to improve on?

The same procedure is used to discover the subject-athlete's opinions about their trainers and managers.

1) What skills does your coach have, and what skills do you think he is lacking?
2) At the psychological level, what abilities do you think a coach needs to have in order to be well-rounded?

In terms of interviews with the coaches, you could ask the following questions:

1) What skills do you think the team has, and what skills to you think it is lacking?
2) Do you think that your team competes in the same way that it trains? Or do you think that your team trains better than it competes? (If there are any differences, do you know why?).
3) At the psychological level, what abilities do you think an athlete needs to have in order to be well-rounded?
4) What virtues do you think you have that relate to team management? (List at least 3)
5) After contemplating your strengths and weaknesses, what areas would you like to improve on?

Characteristics of an Interview as a Work Tool

Interviews are essential as a research tool. It is via this method that one gains access to the subject's thoughts but, above all, it is a door that leads to the discovery of their day-to-day life and their relational dynamics. The

basis of an interview should always be linked to an issue at hand, as well as a strategy that can be used to address that issue.

Interviews allow the researcher to piece together the reality of a specific group, where the main source of information about that group comes from the interviewees. An interview with someone should take place face to face, and should be conducted in private. Generally the interviewee will comment based on their experiences, and the researchers decipher their attitude and behavioral signs, as well as their expectations and perceptions.

> "A dyadic relationship channeled by discourse, independent of the day-to-day, under meeting conditions guided by rules that mark out appropriate boundaries within interpersonal relationships in every circumstance. This allows access into the actor's world of meanings, with reference to the past or present actions of themselves or others, creating a social relationship that supports existing differences within the cognitive and symbolic universe of the interviewer and the interviewee (Guerrero, n.d.: 2)".

Listed below are the types of interview that could be used as approaches for learning about the work environment. The purpose of this unit is not to elaborate on this subject matter in-depth, but rather to discuss possible tools that could be used to carry out first-time approaches.

Types of interview:

1) Clinical interview (psychoanalysis, psychotherapy)
2) In-depth interview
3) Free-response interview
4) Targeted interview
5) Open-ended question interview.
6) Closed-ended question interview.

Another tool that a psychologist should ask for once he begins his work in a sporting institution is an **organizational chart**. This is a very useful element that can ease the integration into a new work environment since it contains a large amount of information, as well as instructions regarding the various members of the workplace.

In this respect, it should not be assumed that every organization will have a chart, and those who do may not necessarily have one that is up-to-date. Even so, this tool is very useful when it comes time to integrate into the organizational structure of the club and become familiar with the different departments, hierarchies and competencies of each. In fact, if the institution that the professional is joining does not have a chart, it is suggested that, according to the information that is acquired during this first observation phase, their own chart of the company be drawn up since familiarity with the members of the organization will be helpful while initially getting settled.

Drawing up the chart based on one's own observations is a very useful tool that could possibly even be presented to upper management if they do not already have one available. This is helpful when it comes to the organization and distribution of roles.

Once all possible information has been collected based on the observations, with times according to the type of work required by the collected data, there will be a lot of information that will need to be processed. All of this data will have been contributed by each of the people spoken to, and will include all of their individual contributions based on their professional judgment.

In terms of ideals, it would be excellent if all of the conversations that took place within that setting were geared towards one single work objective, but this is rarely the case. More often than not, every person that a psychologist converses with will have a different objective in mind than the others, or even a different expectation about the purpose of the work that the psychologist has undertaken. As previously mentioned, a manager may not always have the same objectives as the team's coach, and this may end up with the objectives of the institution being skewed. This is another advantage to using powerful tools such as dialogue and observation while carrying out research. A record of all of these events will likely be one of the psychologist's most important resources when he first begins working in a sports institution.

To what extent should a sports psychologist intervene?

It is important to **differentiate between what is within the realm of a sports psychologist's expertise and what is not**. One of the most frequent errors that psychologists make is that they try to make an impact in more areas than they are really capable of intervening in. The desire to have their work make an obvious and direct impact can cause

them to venture into more areas than they can realistically hope to influence. This occurs especially among professionals who have very limited practice and experience. It is vital to start out with clear, specific and attainable objectives.

There are many issues that result from an inability to differentiate between what is within the realm of one's expertise and what is not. One of the biggest issues is:

- not clearly defining the subject of the intervention, and not including them in the objectives in the initial stage.
- creating false expectations regarding group improvements. When it comes to seeing results, any excitement about possible achievements should never lead to a promise of improvement because if there is no change, the team will evaluate themselves based on failure rather than success.

It should be stressed that in this type of work, sports failures tend to hold more weight than successes. Thousands of positive results may be achieved, but if real expectations are not correctly measured, the opportunities for failure increase.

Throughout the entire process, whether the first day of contact with the organization, meetings with the personnel who work there, interactions with parents, dealing with the subject-athletes, etc., each interaction should be marked by humility and wisdom on the part of the psychologist; an understanding of subject, environmental and personal limitations will create a better chance of his approach being successful.

1.1.4 Research Models

Below are **a few models that stem from scientific research and from many years of experience working with high-level athletes.**

The objective is to present three models that provide a general overview regarding the details that could be worked on with the athletes or the other members of a sports institution.

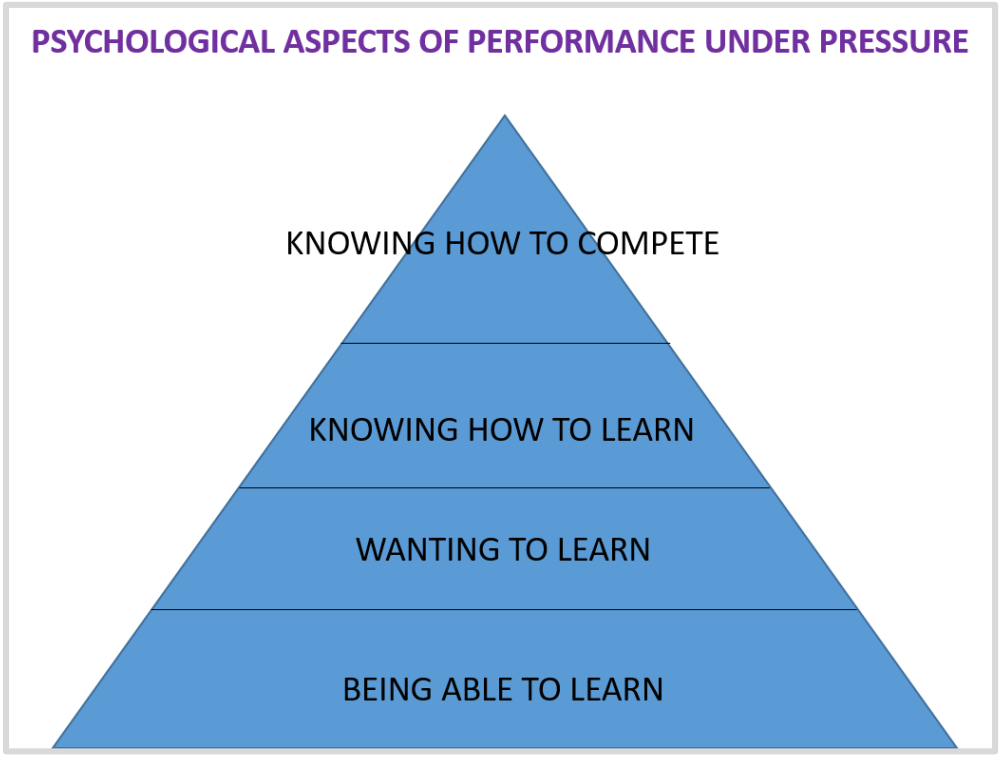
The first model is the **Pep Mari pyramid** as presented in his book *Aprender de los Campeones* [Learning from Champions] (2011).

- In the first tier of the pyramid, the author focuses on the athlete's personality, environment and the habits he has formed. In this first stage, the author raises issues regarding whether or not the athlete ***is able to learn.***
- A specific example referring to one of the aforementioned variables, types of habit, is detailed below: A 17-year-old soccer player competes at the highest junior category at the national level. It has been observed that this athlete has a hard time completing the training sessions during the week, and the trainer attributes this to a lack of motivation and commitment. When the athlete's lifestyle is examined more closely, however, it is noted that he does not go to school and spends all day helping his father in the family business. This has affected his ability to eat properly at lunch time, eating only a sandwich at 1:30 PM and then not eating anything else until 8 PM when he is supposed to be at practice. While it is true that the athlete's motivation and commitment could be analyzed more closely, a calorie intake issue has been discovered which could be preventing him from reaching the level that his training requires of him. The athlete's interview regarding his habits outside of the institution reveals important information needed for appropriate decision-making.

- The second tier refers to the areas where the athlete ***wants to learn***. It refers to, for example, the objectives that an athlete wants to achieve, and whether or not he is aware and truly willing to put in the effort required to be able to meet his goal.
- A specific example in this case would be an athlete who is training in a high-performance club but is not performing as he should due to an obvious lack of commitment. In this case, it needs to be identified whether or not the subject is actually aware of the objectives he has for training every day and secondly, identify whether or not those objectives actually motivate him in any way. In this case it has been noted that the subject-athlete competes and trains in the high-performance club to follow family tradition and that he is not actually very interested in putting in the effort that would be required to meet his goal. His objectives were related to keeping up with family tradition and not improving his athletic performance; he wants to achieve something that is not related to athletic learning and as a result, he will not learn. This case is a clear example of a disinterested subject.

- The third tier of the pyramid refers to ***knowing how to learn,*** because not everyone has actually learned how to learn.
- A possible example of this stage would be an athlete who is unable to see their own errors. All athletes have room for improvement to become the best possible version of themselves. In this regard, some people are able to recognize their mistakes and focus on why they happened and how to fix them in the future. However, there are others who are not capable of this. In these cases it could be said that they have not learned how to learn.
- Topping off the pyramid, the last step has do to with ***demonstrating what has been learned.*** In this case it could refer to an athlete who has good habits and a healthy environment (step 1 of the pyramid), he is motivated and committed to the goals established (step 2), he is able to learn in the sense that he is able to recognize and rectify errors (step 3), but despite all this, when it comes time to compete and demonstrate what he has learned, he is unable to perform under pressure.

Figure 1: Sports Pyramid



Source: Pep Mari (2011).

With regards to the author's proposal, everything related to the athlete's life outside of the institution should be recorded together with the athlete. With so much time spent outside of the institution, there is a high possibility that some details will be overlooked. In this case, communication with the parents is the backbone that holds up the athlete's career, especially during times when they are not very communicative, as often happens during adolescence. If they are making mistakes outside of the sports institution the coaches may be unaware of this, and it is unlikely that they would communicate a poor calorie intake, for example.

A second research trend focuses on the subject and the relationship he has with his environment and the people around him. In this case, we will discuss the ecological theory.

The most emblematic author within ecological theory is Bronfenbrenner, who bases his model on the characterization that the ecology of human development is the study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, developing human being and the changing characteristics of the immediate surroundings in which they live. This adaptation impacts the relationships that develop within these environments, as well as the greater contexts of which those environments are a part (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

People are growing and dynamic entities that are continuously in relationship with the environment in which they are developing. This is a two-way reciprocal relationship and is not limited to the immediate environment, but also extends in order to link those environments together with the external influences that emanate from these broader environments. What this means is that the influence will not only come from the athlete's visible surroundings (family, school, club), but these relationships will also come into play within broader systems as well (political, social, cultural and contextual).

One of the details that is most relevant to this model is that of keeping human development "in context". In other words, thinking about relationships and how they influence the subjects within their own environments (as opposed to research taking place within a controlled lab environment).

When it comes to development and behavioral expression, one must keep in mind how the subject *perceives his environment* rather than how he expresses *objective reality*. If perception depends on amount of

experience, then the ways in which people behave will vary. We can assume that a 5-year-old boy has a background and a way of perceiving and interpreting that is different than that of an adolescent boy, and likewise each of their methods will be different than those of an adult. Therefore, when they are found in the same situation, the way in which each behaves will vary, given the existence of as many realities as there are human beings (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner's basic hypothesis is that natural environments are the main source of influence when it comes to human behavior, and thus laboratory or clinical research situations give us very little insight into human reality. What should be taken from this study is an understanding that the athlete will adapt to the surrounding environments that make up his everyday life (family, friends, the club/school, work) and vice versa (surrounding environments will also evolve according to new circumstances in the subject's life as he becomes more committed to sports). It is also important to remember that these connections are not the only ones that will influence the subject, since he will be influenced by broader contexts as well (ideology, culture, social/sports-related policies, etc.).

The third **research model** refers to ***Wylleman & Lavallee'***s proposal (2004), in which they advocate for a holistic approach to the athlete. According to this approach there are three additional environments that will interact collectively alongside the ***sports environment*** in which the subject is developing, which should be kept in mind: ***the psychological, the psychosocial and the academic/vocational environments.***

The sports environment is divided into four stages, of which three are related to when the athlete is active (initiation, development and mastery), and the last one is related to their withdrawal from sports.

On the other hand, in the realm of psychology there are different stages of maturity that the subject will go through, from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

The psychosocial sphere includes the social factors that gain more importance over the course of the athlete's life, while keeping in mind that these changes happen gradually. In the initial stages parents, siblings and teammates are the ones that hold the most importance, while the importance of coaches and significant others emerges later on. As the athlete gets older, the influence of some of these agents, such as teammates, will begin to diminish.

Finally, the fourth environment reflects changes that may happen within the academic/vocational sphere, beginning with compulsory primary education and secondary education, and continuing on through higher education or entry into the workforce, provided that the subject-athlete chooses to continue on.