

SELF-TALK: CHATS THAT ATHLETES HAVE WITH THEMSELVES

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



KAI-NING

AGE: 8



MARIA

AGE: 12

Talking to ourselves is a unique human characteristic, and it makes a big difference to our performance, especially in sports. Sports psychology researchers have examined self-talk and found that athletes often use it to express what they are experiencing mentally and emotionally. This brings athletes' attention to anything negative that they are thinking or feeling. Once they are aware of these things, athletes can try to talk themselves out of negative thinking to improve their performance. Because this is quite difficult, sports psychologists have developed training for athletes, to help them talk to themselves more effectively. Moreover, sport psychologists have developed techniques in which athletes repeat cue words that help them learn faster, control their emotions, or increase their motivation. Overall, research has shown that self-talk is important for self-control, that it can be improved, and, in the form of cue words, self-talk can enhance attention, motivation, and performance.

SELF-TALK

Words or sentences addressed to the self, said either aloud or silently.

SPONTANEOUS SELF-TALK

Self-talk that occurs unintentionally and through which we express thoughts and emotions such as hopes ("I hope I win!") or fears ("Am I going to make a fool of myself?").

GOAL-DIRECTED SELF-TALK

Self-talk used as a tool to problem-solve ("Stop looking at the fans and you will calm down.") or improve performance ("Move quickly to get into position to hit the ball!").

SELF-CUEING

A process of developing cue words to enhance motivation ("You can do it!") or provide instruction ("Focus on the ball!").

SELF-CONTROL

Is the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behavior in the face of temptations and impulses.

SELF-TALK MAKES US HUMAN

One behavior that makes certain athletes better than others is also a behavior that is uniquely human. While there are several things that make humans different from other animals, one is that we talk to ourselves! We call this **self-talk**, and it has been studied very intensively in sports psychology because it is essential for helping athletes perform at their best. Sports psychologists define self-talk as words or sentences said to yourself, either aloud or in a voice that can only be heard in your head [1].

Self-talk can be classified into several types [2]. **Spontaneous self-talk** is an echo of who we are and how we feel. Sometimes we just happen to say things to ourselves like, "Why am I so forgetful?" or "I am so angry!" to reflect aspects of our personalities or the emotions we feel. In contrast, **goal-directed self-talk** is not spontaneous—it is a mental tool we can use to solve problems and improve our performance. We quite consciously say things like "breathe calmly" to be less nervous in difficult situations. All this self-talk is natural, and everyone does it! Sports psychologists sometimes also ask athletes to repeat cue words or phrases, like "Knees bent" or "I can do it," to improve the athletes' performance. This **self-cueing** is not a reflection of our thoughts, like spontaneous or goal-directed self-talk are, but it has been shown to influence both our thinking and our motivation.

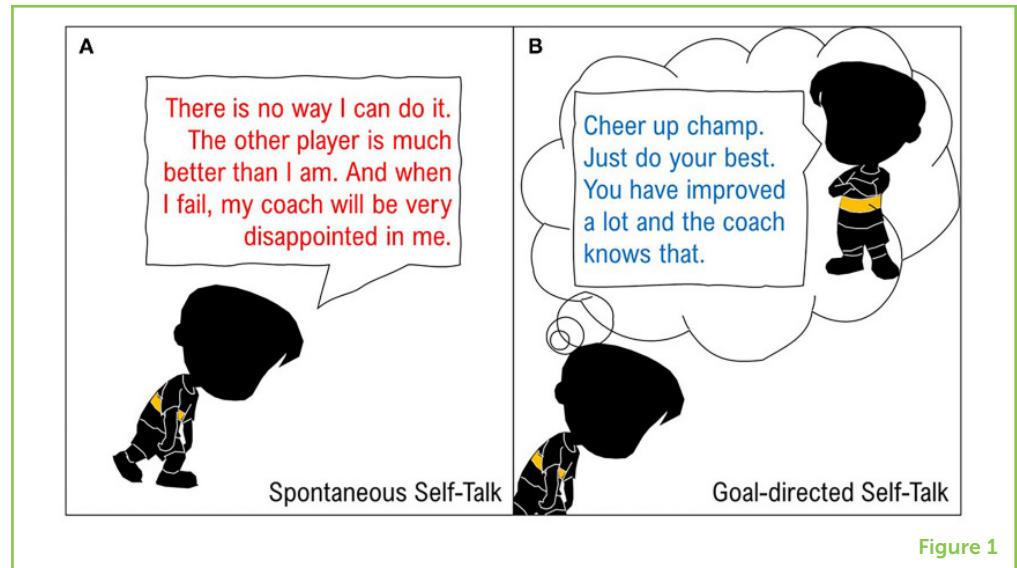
SPONTANEOUS SELF-TALK: IF YOU SAY SO, THEN YOU KNOW SO

Through self-talk, we get to know who we are, what we think, and how we feel. If I ask you why you like or dislike sailing, it is very unlikely that you could form an opinion without talking. You may talk to others to form your opinion, but you may also talk to yourself. Athletes often talk to themselves when they are alone while practicing their sports or because they do not want to share their thoughts and feelings with others. This natural self-talk usually describes the athlete's physical or mental state ("I am so tired.") or their thoughts and feelings about things ("I prefer playing in the evenings rather than mornings.") (Figure 1A).

Although athletes do not use spontaneous self-talk purposefully, it can be helpful because it allows them to become aware of who they are and how they feel. Once they are aware, they can identify mental challenges and attempt to solve them. For example, a young athlete might feel too tired to go to practice after school. This feeling grows within the athlete until it bursts out in the form of a self-statement such as, "I really do not feel like training today!" Self-talk like this makes us aware of our mental challenges, and it can help athletes to increase their motivation through a process called **self-control**.

Figure 1

(A) Spontaneous self-talk reflects our current thoughts and feelings. Jordan feels a little down, and his spontaneous self-talk acts like a mirror, to reflect his feelings and thoughts. (B) Goal-directed self-talk is like our “inner coach.” Jordan’s goal-directed self-talk aims to strengthen his self-confidence and reduce his self-doubts.

**Figure 1**

GOAL-DIRECTED SELF-TALK: THE TEAM WITHIN

Sometimes we also talk to ourselves to change how we feel or to help us improve our performance. This goal-directed self-talk is intentional and purposeful, so it is different from the spontaneous self-talk that describes who we are and how we feel (Figure 1B). In a way, we all have our own inner team: one part of the mind is a psychologist, helping us cope with emotions, while another part is a coach or teacher, helping us learn new things. The voices of our inner psychologists, teachers, or coaches try to motivate us, calm our nerves, cheer us up, show us where we went wrong, and help us find better solutions for the future.

However, it is important that we give ourselves good advice and guidance—our inner voices are not always correct. Sometimes we do not listen to our spontaneous self-talk or we incorrectly identify the underlying problem. The inner voice can also give bad advice, like when an athlete tells herself that she “has to win.” It would be much wiser to say that she should “try her hardest.” At times, the inner voice keeps trying to instruct and guide even though it would be better if it just kept quiet for a while. Therefore, many athletes need to learn how to talk to themselves properly using goal-directed self-talk, so that they can use this skill when advice from coaches or others is not available.

LEARNING TO TALK WITH YOURSELF

Over the course of our lives, we learn how to talk to others. We do not talk to our friends the same way we talk to our teachers, and we change our way of talking when others are happy or sad. However, most of us are not specifically taught how to talk to ourselves [3]. Therefore, sports psychologists have designed educational self-talk techniques

Figure 2

An example of a self-talk technique for teaching athletes to talk to themselves in healthier ways. **(A)** Mike, an athlete, meets with Ann, a sports psychologist, to discuss his self-talk. They decide to talk about Mike's anger. **(B)** Ann asks Mike whether he uses goal-directed self-talk to control his anger. **(C)** Mike realizes that his self-talk is not really helping him. **(D)** Ann coaches Mike to try an alternative style of self-talk to deal with his anger.

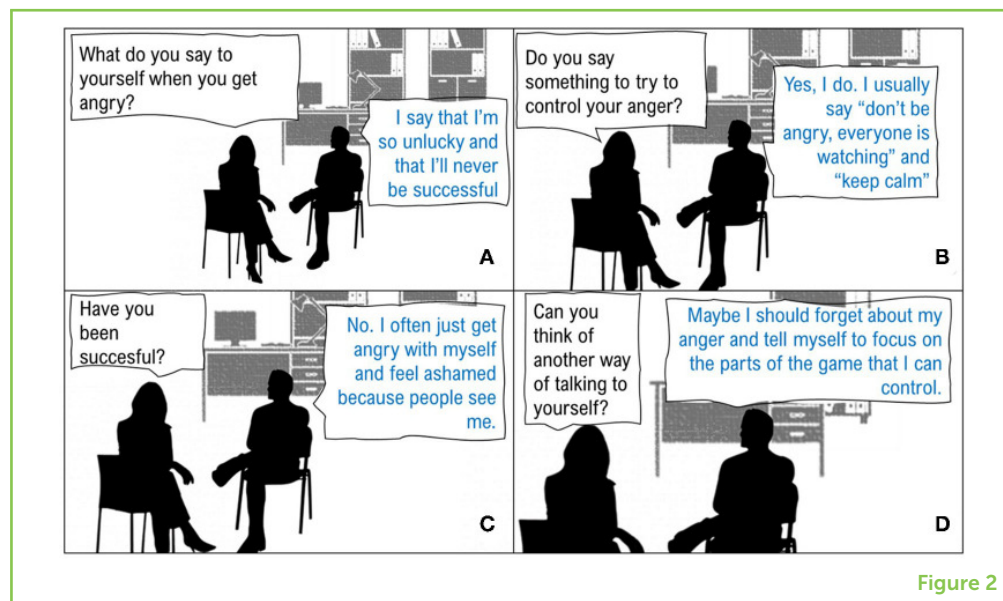


Figure 2

to show athletes how to communicate effectively with themselves [4]. In these techniques, athletes first learn to listen to their spontaneous self-talk. Listening to ourselves reveals how we are doing and what our specific mental or emotional challenges are in that moment. Second, athletes learn *when* they should talk to themselves, *how* they should talk to themselves, and *what* they should say to themselves.

Sports psychologists ask athletes to remember what they have told themselves in the past to overcome a challenge. For instance, a professional footballer recognized that he got angry when he performed poorly. He told himself, "Great players always win and they never get angry." Once athletes remember what they used to tell themselves, they are asked to explore other ways to talk to themselves. The footballer was asked what he would say to his little sister if she had the same problem. He said that he would tell his sister, "You cannot always win, and it is normal to be angry sometimes." Then the sports psychologist advised him to use this approach on himself. He eventually stopped asking himself to always be perfect and he accepted his anger as a part of his ambition. This self-acceptance helped him to overcome his anger and he became an even greater player. Techniques like these can help athletes change their self-talk and become better psychologists, teachers, and coaches for themselves (Figure 2).

SELF-CUEING, A WAY TO LEARN AND GET PSYCHED

Although the self-talk techniques described in the previous section can have a great long-lasting impact on athletes, they have one shortcoming: they need time to work. Sometimes, athletes face urgent problems that need immediate solutions, and there is another self-talk technique that can help. Athletes can use short self-talk cues as they

Figure 3

An example of a self-cueing technique in which cue words are chosen and practiced to help learning and improve performance. (A,B) John, a basketball player, and Jane, a sports psychologist, use a self-cueing technique during training. They first analyze what John needs to accomplish and what he can do to achieve his goal. (C,D) John chooses some cue words, decides which one works best, and practices it for a long time.

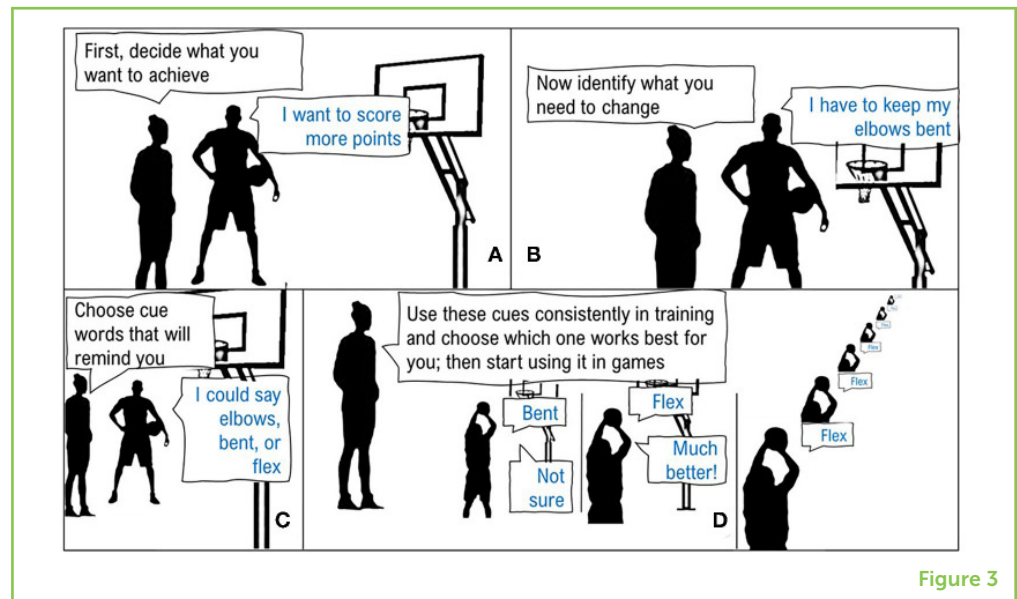


Figure 3

try to improve their performance [5]. Imagine you wish to learn the forehand stroke in tennis. Because it is important to always look at the ball and hit it from below, a self-talk script could instruct you to say "ball" when the ball leaves your coach's racquet and "up" when you hit the ball with your racquet. Science has proven that learning happens faster with this kind of instructional self-cueing.

Another self-cueing technique focuses on self-talk scripts designed to enhance motivation, deal with emotions, and boost confidence. Imagine you must execute a critical basketball free-throw in front of the entire school; imagine being nervous and feeling lots of pressure. A self-talk script could instruct you to say, "You are the best!" while you step up to the line and, "Relax!" moments before you take the shot. Such motivational self-talk scripts can improve performance in stressful situations. All self-cueing techniques may have immediate effects, although it is wise to practice with cue words in training before using them in competitive settings. You might get cue words wrong at first, but with practice, self-talk scripts can help you achieve your sports goals (Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

Elite athletes rely on their natural self-talk to understand themselves and to handle their mental and emotional challenges. That is why many sports psychologists and coaches educate athletes to talk to themselves in healthier ways. In addition, athletes use self-cueing to enhance their performance. However, self-talk is not something that only athletes do—all humans do it. Who we are is shaped by our self-talk. Self-talk helps us to get to know ourselves and to reshape ourselves to become the people we want to be. Learning about healthy

self-talk can help us achieve excellent performance in many different aspects of our lives, including school, work, and of course sports!

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



KAI-NING, AGE: 8

I recently finished lower elementary and will be starting grade 4 this fall (2021). I enjoy learning new things and like to take on different challenges. My favorite subject is math and I also like spelling, especially some of the tricky words! In my free time, I love reading, particularly about mysteries. Inventing different toys or tools that have practical uses is another hobby of mine. Even though I live in Canada, I visit my grandparents and extended family in Taiwan whenever I can!



MARIA, AGE: 12

Hi my name is Maria. I am 12 year old, and I love neuroscience. My favorite subject is Science. In my free time I love to read do research and dance. I want to learn more about the brain so I can become a neurologist and help people when I grow up.

AUTHORS



ALEXANDER T. LATINJAK

I am an associate professor at the University of Suffolk in England. I played tennis as a kid, which led me to move from Germany, where I grew up, to Spain. I studied psychology and did my doctorate at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. After working at EUSES School of Health and Sports Sciences in Catalonia for seven years, I moved to Ipswich to teach sports psychology, do self-talk research, and practice sports psychology with athletes from many different sports. What I love most about sports psychology is that we study how people can use their brains to their advantage. *a.latinjak@uos.ac.uk



ANTONIS HATZIGEORGIAIDIS

I am a professor at the University of Thessaly in Greece. I became interested in sports psychology because of my own problems in sports and in self-talk in particular: I missed a penalty kick in the semi-finals of the national school championship, and it haunted me for a long time! I studied for a few years in the UK and then moved back to Greece to pursue a career at the University of Thessaly because I love research and want to help young people to develop.