

Cognitive stress management techniques

PE REVIEW examines cognitive techniques to manage stress



Thought stopping

When negative and irrational thoughts occur, the sportsperson uses a learned action or cue to remove them. For example, a tennis player whose first serve is letting them down initially thinks, 'I cannot hit one in', but replaces this thought with, 'I can and I will hit the next one in.'

Mental rehearsal

The process of going over the movements of a task in the mind before the action takes place is particularly useful for athletes about to perform a sequence of skills such as a floor routine in gymnastics. The required movements are rehearsed in order and in a spatial sequence so the performer is less likely to forget the order of the moves or the required actions, reducing stress. Mental rehearsal is best done in a calm situation prior to the event.

Positive self-talk

Replacing negative thoughts with positive ones can improve confidence and performance. For example, a squash player who is struggling to retrieve an opponent's shot may think, 'I can get to the ball if I just move a little sooner and get on my toes.'

Visualisation

When a player performs a skill successfully in training, they lock in the mental image of it and can visualise it in a future competitive situation to remind themselves of this success. It can be internal, for example, visualising a successful shot and how it feels kinaesthetically. It can alternatively be external, for example, visualising your success as if by a spectator on TV.

Imagery

Recreating an image of the action from a past performance during competition when the skill was performed successfully allows the player to recall the feel of the movements in the mind. Imagery can also involve the emotions associated with a successful action, for example, a basketball player who scores a free throw to win a close match would imagine the satisfaction and elation associated with that winning shot and use those emotions to build confidence for the current situation.

