

Sport Psychology and Performance Enhancement for College Athletes

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 What is this?

Sport psychology is often thought of as a field requiring extensive specialized training, but with consultation and/or relatively minimal training, more counseling center counselors could provide sport psychology and performance enhancement interventions. Counselors tend to employ a holistic view of the individual and take into account the influence of social and external forces on the individual, so their work with athletes and performing artists can be viewed as a natural extension of the counselor's training.

This article will serve as an introduction to the field of sport psychology, which has also been coined mental training or performance enhancement. These latter terms may cause students or individuals to feel more comfortable when seeking services if they possess negative personal or cultural beliefs about seeking "psychological" counseling. The purpose of this article is to briefly define sport psychology, explain some common problems faced by collegiate athletes and performing artists, and present some common intervention tools in the field.

Definition:

Sport psychology is concerned with the mental factors that affect how one performs and how to enhance these factors. As a discipline, it is comprised of its research-oriented arena, which then affects the applied aspect. Applied sport psychology involves techniques and interventions developed from research, and the focus of these techniques and interventions is to enhance the "performance and personal growth of athletes and physical activity participants" (Williams & Straub, 2001, p.1). Thus, the goals of applied sport psychology are 1) to help an individual consistently perform at his or her potential, and 2) to help an individual stay motivated to become healthy and adhere consistently to exercise.

Applicable Populations:

Due to its name and main focus of research, sport psychology has mostly been applied to athletes of every age and level (youth, novice, recreational, collegiate, elite, masters) and to consultation work with coaches of athletes. However, in the last 5-10 years, the field has branched into the performing arts, namely musicians, singers, dancers, and actors. Artists also require a mental focus to perform at their potential while possibly being evaluated by others.

Common Problems for Athletes and Performing Artists in College:

The college athlete and performing artist is forced to juggle many hats during their college years, including academic achievement, continual formation of self, and the negotiation of the time commitments of their sport or craft.

Problems that these individuals may experience, which are similar to other college students include:

- Depression or anxiety during this life transition (e.g., homesickness, fears about future career goals)
- Difficulties in adjusting to college classes (e.g., time management, study skills)
- Using unhealthy coping behaviors (e.g., binge drinking, drug use, unprotected sex)
- Self formation (e.g., clash of values or beliefs, formation of new beliefs)
- Involvement in relationships (e.g., making friends, commitment, deciding on future of relationship)

In addition to these above-mentioned issues, collegiate athletes and performing artists may experience other issues due to the time commitments of their sport/craft and the impact of their sport/craft on interpersonal relationships.

Problems that may be unique to student athletes and performing artists include:

- Performance difficulties (e.g., choking, under performing)
- Concentration difficulties (e.g., lapses, miscues, making mistakes)
- Conflicts with coaches or major professors
- Conflicts with teammates or fellow performers
- Decrease in self-esteem if college performance is worse than high school performance
- Pressure to perform to a certain level due to being on scholarship
- Pressure from parents to perform to a certain degree
- Number of hours required for practice, competition, and other requirements by the department (i.e., study hall, workshops, presentations)
- Pressure or evaluation from fans or the media
- Burnout or loss of desire towards sport or craft
- Questions regarding possibility of transferring to another program
- Loss of confidence in abilities
- Pressure to maintain one's rank or position
- Difficulties in self-identification when the self is defined by achievement or performance

One can see how these above pressures and difficulties could result in mental health concerns in the individual, especially depression and anxiety.

Examples of Common Sport Psychology Interventions:

Given the specific problems college athletes encounter, the following list of mental training skills and interventions may be helpful to employ with collegiate athletes and performing artists.

- **Goal setting** – This intervention involves assisting the individual in learning how to set specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic short and long term goals.
- **Mental imagery training** – This technique allows the individual to learn how to use imagery effectively by focusing on the sensations, creating a vivid picture, and emphasizing a positive or successful performance. Imagery training can be employed for specific performances or when learning a new skill.
- **Building confidence** – This intervention involves helping the individual become aware of his/her self-talk, how to reframe negative messages, and how to use helpful and positive self-talk.
- **Pre-performance routines** – This technique involves assisting the individual in creating a routine, including physical cues and mental messages or affirmations, that is unique to the person, helps him/her achieve an emotional state that is personally effective (i.e., somewhat relaxed versus being pumped up), and that allows the person to feel confident.
- **Motivation** – This intervention involves assisting individuals in learning what excites them about their activity or performance and how to maintain this enthusiasm over time. An analysis of motivation will also look at the source of the individual's motivation (i.e., internal or external) and how this affects his/her ability to stay motivated.

- **Relaxation training** – This skill assists the individual in learning how to effectively relax and manage anxiety by focusing on different deep breathing exercises. The use of relaxation techniques can help athletes and performing artists regulate their physical responses to their performance to achieve their optimal arousal level.
- **Group cohesion** – This intervention focuses on helping teams or groups build trust and respect for each other, work toward common goals, and learn how to communicate effectively.

A college counselor could incorporate sport psychology in his/her work by providing consultation to coaches, athletic directors, academic advising staff, and major professors of performing artists. Another point of intervention to tailor the skills to the individual would be individual counseling, which incorporated the sport psychology interventions. Finally, in addition to performing individual counseling with athletes and performing artists, counselors could even create workshops that run throughout a semester that focus on specific sport psychology interventions (e.g., guided imagery and/or goal setting) and offer a non-threatening venue for individuals to learn more information about mental training.

Sport psychology can provide athletes and performing artists with interventions and information that can lead to increases in performance, self-esteem, and self-confidence. By framing these interventions as mental training or performance enhancement, more college athletes and performers may feel comfortable in seeking assistance from professionals and attain assistance in excelling during a confusing and important life transition.

References

- Williams, J. M., & Straub, W. F. (2001). Sport psychology: Past, present, future. In J. M. Williams (ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance, 4th ed.* Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company.



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