MODULE 2 - PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS

"It's better to look ahead and prepare than to look back and regret." -Jackie Joyner-Kersee

Performance is determined in part by conditioning, skill, and preparation. This includes developing athletic abilities, technical proficiency, tactical knowledge, and psychological skills. Thus, just as coaches will create specific and tailored physical training programs, so too can they approach mental skills training (MST) in a structured, consistent, and long-term manner.

One way in which coaches can ensure the requisite psychological skills are incorporated into their athletes' training is to introduce them to mental training tools – such as imagery and self- talk. These tools, and others we will discuss later in the workbook (e.g., goal setting, mindfulness, relaxation), form the building blocks for various psychological competencies like motivation, confidence, arousal and stress management, and resilience to be developed.



Introducing a mental skills training program into the sport environment can feel like a daunting task. However, it is something that most coaches can do on their own! The main idea is to keep things simple and to introduce information in small, well-integrated pieces that fit seamlessly into the other components of your plan. You do not need to be an expert on all things mental performance, but it is important to know the fundamentals.

Thus, the following module will focus on familiarizing coaches with the idea of an MST program and will introduce two foundational mental tools which can later be used to develop psychological competencies.



Accruing Awareness – Three Phases of Mental Skills Training

The process of developing mental skills is similar to teaching the physical, technical, and tactical abilities of your sport: You begin by building the fundamentals and then work to practice and apply them in competitive situations. Most commonly, the practice of creating a mental skills training program (MST) involves a three-phase process – education, acquisition, and implementation.



1. Education phase

- This is the initial phase where performers learn the importance of mental skills, how the skills uniquely impact performance, and the benefits of developing them. It is also the phase where the coaches can learn more about the performer so that training plans can be somewhat tailored and specific to each individual.
- A key goal of this phase is to gain a sense of the information that needs to be learned (for the athlete and the coach) and what needs to be taught (by the coach).
- During this phase it is important to emphasize that skills can be learned and developed over time (i.e., that these aren't innate and that they don't necessarily follow a "one size fits all" formula).
- One of the biggest mistakes that is made at this phase is failing to set a strong foundation by assuming that performers already understand and value mental skills training – and know what it's about!

The traffic light system

  - Green light = the performer is open and willing to adopt mental skills as part of their training and development. Proceed to learning about their psychological strengths and weaknesses and identifying which tools would benefit them most.
  - Yellow light = the performer is open to mental skills training but might not fully recognize how it could help them. They are doing it because "they have heard good things" but may still need to learn more about its benefits. Proceed with caution, asking questions and checking in along the way.
  - Red light = the performer is not receptive to mental skills training or is not ready...

yet. Forcing them to learn mental skills is going to be counterproductive. When incorporating mental skills training into your sport environment, offer an alternative to "red light" athletes (e.g., we are going to spend the next 30 seconds imagining X skill. But you can use this time to reset and relax instead) while continuing to educate them on why they specifically could benefit from these skills.

2. Acquisition phase

- In this second phase the performer tries out and tests the selected mental skills. It is through this practice of trial and error that skills are developed and acquired.
- A key goal of this phase is to familiarize the performer with how and when to use specific mental skills/techniques. It is also important for the coach to recognize which tools and skills work best for which of their athletes. The idea is to be comfortable with the specific set of mental skills that will comprise their individual training program.
- During this phase, provide clear and specific instructions (i.e., avoid phrases like "time to visualize," "practice staying positive," or "relax and focus." in favour of "we are going to do a mental walkthrough of our race plan" or "repeat your affirmation 5 times.").

    - Identify a specific purpose and intention for the use of a mental skill in this moment/situation.
    - Give the athletes a few options of mental skills exercises from which they can choose (or have a discussion where they identify which skill they will choose to practice in this situation... and why).
    - Walk through the steps of the selected skill in collaboration with the athlete.
    - Debrief the use of the mental skill. When possible, try to create an objective measurement/rating system on which the effectiveness of the skill can be tracked and the identification of its purpose can be logged. An example log format is provided below.

Situation	Mental skill	Purpose	Effectiveness	Comments

3. Implementation phase

- In this final phase, the performer should feel like using mental skills is automatic and natural. Mental skills should be so comfortable that they are implemented seamlessly into performance situations. The coach is also familiar with the skills their athletes will use in particular moments and situations and can discuss them easily with them.
- A key part of this phase is to practice using the designated mental skills in performance situations (including dress rehearsals, simulations, scrimmages, exhibition games, etc.).
- During this phase, the use of mental skills is monitored and discussed to assess its effectiveness. Necessary adjustments and revisions are made to improve the athlete's mental training plan and important details and notes are included in advance of meets, competitions, tournaments, and events.
- One of the most important parts of this phase is to recognize that the needs of athletes vary from person to person, but also that their needs will vary across the season. Being prepared to modify and accommodate an athlete's changing needs will be integral to the implementation of a successful mental training program.

    - Review the athlete's mental training plan with them ahead of the performance event. Letting them guide the discussion as much as possible and filling in any potential gaps through guiding questions rather than declarative statements.

Building Skill – Imagery

One of the foundational building blocks of MST programs is imagery, which involves using a combination of senses (i.e., sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing) to create or re-create an experience in your mind. Imagery can also include the emotions associated with the experience being created. In essence, it is about using pieces of information to construct a meaningful image that you can picture in your head anywhere and anytime.

Although there is a lot of research to support the positive relationship between imagery and performance, the benefits of imagery use are not automatic. Indeed, there are many factors that influence its effectiveness. The primary ones to consider are grouped in what is known as the PETTLEP model of imagery.

- Physical – practice your imagery in a similar state to the one you'll be in when you are performing (calm - e.g., aiming at an archery target; neutral - e.g., going through my

pre- race plan; energized - e.g., being powerful off the vault). Feel free to incorporate physical movement into your imagery (i.e., moving your hands to simulate how you will block a volleyball at the net) or to hold a piece of equipment that is relevant to the scene you are imagining (e.g., wearing your glove and lightly tossing a softball into it).

- Environment – imagine the physical space in which you will be performing. Make the images as detailed, vivid, and realistic as possible (e.g., picture your opponents in their jersey colours; find videos and/or pictures of the tournament venue, incorporate common distractions and sounds you could encounter, imagine the physiological sensations you would be feeling in the moment).
- Task – identify the cues and aspects of your performance that you will focus on (e.g., mechanics of a skill that is not yet automatic; the auditory cues from your coaches and teammates; your internal bodily sensations and personal thoughts; the tactical shifts and adjustments of your opponents).
- Timing – imagine yourself performing actions in real time. Avoid slowing events down or speeding them up in your imagery (e.g., imagine all 24 seconds of your 200m sprint).
- Learning – your images should change as your technical, tactical, or physical skills evolve and develop (e.g., changing from your usual 4-3-3 formation to trying a 3-4-2-1 with your soccer team). It is best to start with simple, high-quality images and then to progress to longer and more complex (but still high-quality) mental pictures.
- Emotion – your images should feel meaningful and individualized. Incorporate personal touches such as the emotions you will feel when you hear the crowd chanting; details such as the feeling of your lucky socks on your feet; or the sense of comfort and familiarity you get when you smell chlorine in the air. Remember to include imagery of both the situation (e.g., seeing your ball carrying team member get tackled before completing the game winning try) and the response (e.g., immediately running over and forming a ruck to retain possession of the ball) in your imagery script.
- Perspective – practice using imagery from the 1st person perspective (i.e., what you see looking through your own eyes) and the 3rd person perspective (i.e., what a spectator might see/what a video camera might capture). Understand that neither perspective is better than the other but try to be comfortable using both/switching between them.

One of the foundational pieces of imagery is sensory awareness. Start simple with general imagery exercises and that focus on the five senses (ex: lemon cutting exercise from the NCCP's Basic Mental Skills multi-sport module), then graduate to more sport

specific imagery exercises. When incorporating imagery into an MST program, understand that it is a versatile tool. So, think about its different purposes and be deliberate when integrating this psychological skill into an athlete's/team's MST. The five most common uses for imagery in sport are detailed below.

1. **Learning and mastering skills** – imagery can be used for rehearsing simple and well- learned skills (e.g., a golf putt, a free throw, a single leg takedown) or picturing yourself executing a skill you've never done before (e.g., a runback triple, or a Twist 3240°).
- Give time immediately after hearing instructions, observing an example, or after successful execution of a skill to use this type of imagery.
- Mentally rehearse after practice to review the key skills they worked on that day.

2. **Learning and mastering strategy** – imagery can be used to rehearse the strategic aspects of a sport (e.g., racers plotting out how to navigate difficult sections of the course), imagine the effective execution of a specific play, or to keep athletes engaged when they are waiting their turn in a drill/on the bench.
- Use imagery in conjunction with tactics boards, video analysis, and walk-throughs.
- Imagine how to respond to a certain style of play or use it to stay in the flow of a game.
- Create and build on scenarios as a team to supplement limited practice time/facilities.

3. **Achieving a goal** – imagery can be used to help with goal setting and goal striving. Start with what you'd like to accomplish (e.g., seeing your name listed on a national team roster). Then, imagine yourself accomplishing the steps required to achieve your goal.
- Give time to picture motivating images or to review "highlight reel moments."
- Before practice, invite athletes to picture goals, their steps, and their achievement.
- After practice, prompt athletes to plan out their future goals and how to attain them.

4. **Mastering physiological sensations** – imagery can be used for emotion and arousal regulation by recalling physiological states (e.g., calm, present, excited, angry, hopeful) from best and worst performances. Can also be used to tune out

distractions (e.g., shifting attention away from the loud crowd and toward a positive emotion).
- Give athletes "check in," "calmness," or "energizing" time and the freedom/ autonomy to practice this whenever they'd like (i.e., practice being present in a big moment, or mentally escaping to their happy place when feeling overwhelmed).
- Can be used in a timeout (picturing an image collectively at the beginning or end) to get the team on a cohesive page.

5. **Overcoming adversity** – imagery can be used to deal with potentially difficult situations (e.g., drawing the "pool of death," suboptimal weather, or bad officiating) and to build confidence – they have the tools and assets required to deal with the stressful situations.
- Recreate adverse or negative situations in training (noise, equipment malfunction, pressure). Give athletes time to imagine scenarios that cannot be simulated (arriving late to the venue, last minute illness) and discuss how to handle that event.
- Mentally "try again" in a situation that was improperly managed (e.g., shifting blame after a mistake). Practice making productive responses an automatic habit.



Building Skill – Self-Talk

A second foundational building block of MST programs is self-talk, which represents any of the thoughts, internal dialogue, or words we direct to ourselves. The words and phrases can be shared quietly or loudly, what makes them self-talk is that we are talking to our own self. Although the words or statements aren't inherently positive or negative, the value and valence we assign to them is what makes self-talk powerful.

During the education phase, it is important to develop awareness around what our typical thoughts are. Step 1 for this involves noticing/logging what are some of the thoughts (self-talk) that athletes experience in key parts of your sport in practice settings and competitive events.

- Allowing your athletes access to their phones during breaks in practice so that they

can record their thoughts in a notes app (voice or written) can be a good way to do this, because they are likely to forget their thoughts if time is not designated to complete the activity (and recording everyone's thoughts publicly may not yield honest answers).
- Encourage your athletes to record not just the thoughts or verbalized statements, but also what they notice about their own body language and posture when they are saying/thinking their self-talk.

For step 2, you can ask the athletes to sort the thoughts they have into a "positive" (productive/helpful) category, a "neutral" (no impact on performance) category, and a "negative" (unproductive/unhelpful) category. By acknowledging the thoughts that enhance their performance vs. the ones that hinder it, you can help your athletes create an MST program that is more tailored to their needs.

- Specify that the same thought can be positive, neutral, and negative and sometimes its valence depends on the situation in which the self-talk is used or the tone in which the message is being delivered.
- *Some athletes may want to include the context for their self-talk next to their thoughts/phrases.

Positive (Productive/Helpful)	**Neutral** (No impact on performance)	**Negative** (Unproductive/Unhelpful)
Ex: "You've got this!" (said calmly, right before a solo skill in practice or competitions).	Ex: "It's nice out." (stating facts comes normally to me, so I just go with it).	Ex: "You're supposed to win" (whenever we're playing an "easy" opponent).
Ex: "It's fine, you're good." (Encouragingly - when I make a mistake I know how to fix).	Ex: "It's fine, you're good." (When I've just completed a shift – I'm not paying attention to anything at that point).	Ex: "It's fine, you're good." (Anything calming really. Lying only makes things worse, because I don't believe what I'm saying/thinking).

After gaining awareness of their typical thought patterns, the Acquisition phase can be built around practicing how to use more automatic positive (productive) thoughts than negative (unproductive) ones. There are plenty of self-talk strategies that can be used to achieve this, below are a few simple examples that can be integrated into the daily training environment.

- **Pre-emptive** affirmations ("I am ready." "I've got what it takes." "I can do this.") are a useful way for athletes to incorporate more positive self-talk into their performance. Some teams will come up with collective affirmations that emphasize a shared identity/characteristic/goal for the group ("Defense wins games." "Fast and smooth" "Vroom vroom, let's ride!" Using statement pre-emptively before any other thoughts come to mind means that negative thinking is kept to a minimum.
- **Replacement** – competing thoughts can also be introduced when a negative thought comes up. For this strategy, athletes think of a positive thought they can use to replace their negative thoughts ("Everyone is so much better than you." → "Keep going, you're learning and improving."). The replacement thought can be anything that does not hinder the athlete's performance but should be a statement that (1) they believe, and (2) has the strength to compete with their automatic negative thought.
- **Reframing** – our self-talk is often more negative than the feedback we offer to others. So, one technique we can use is to ask: "What would I say to a teammate right now?" or "How would a friend talk to me in this moment?" Reframing can also be done by changing the tone of our self-talk (e.g., from loud to soft; angry to calming; motivational to instructional), its perspective (e.g., I just messed up → Jane just messed up), or its outlook (e.g., I'm so anxious → I'm so energized and excited).
- **Refocusing** – many times our self-talk is deemed unproductive or unhelpful because it pulls our focus away from what is relevant. Breaking positive thoughts into quick, key words, often closely linked to proper execution of a skill ("Track back." "Head on a swivel." "Recycle"), can help an athlete keep their focus where they want it to be.

Once the potential self-talk strategies have been shared with athletes, the Acquisition phase of the MST is less about coaches setting aside time to practice self-talk techniques and more about reminding their athletes to test out various strategies and see what feels like a good fit for them.

Finally, during the Implementation phase the athlete should be practicing their self-talk in imagined, practice, and competitive situations.

- Encourage athletes to continue using their self-talk log, but in a more limited way (e.g., experiences an unanticipated situation and wants to be prepared in the future).
- Positive self-talk can be integrated into athletes' imagery scripts (e.g., practice replacing unproductive thoughts when imagining yourself in a performance situation; rehearse what you want your self-talk to sound like when facing specific adversity).
- If you notice an athlete isn't acting like their "usual self" check in with them and if they

are open to it suggest some potential affirmations or instructional cues that they can repeat to themselves when they perform.

Creating Integration – Tips and Tools for Best Practice

1. How and when can I integrate psychological skills into my pre-practice/pre performance? (including activation, warm-up, travel time to the facility, etc.)

2. How and when can I integrate psychological skills into my practices/during events? (including drills, run-throughs, scrimmages, etc.)

3. How and when can I integrate psychological skills in the "in-between" moments of my practices and events? (including pre-briefs, water breaks, time outs, transitions, etc.)

4. How and when can I integrate psychological skills into my post-practice/post-event plan? (including cool downs, stretching, debriefs, reflections, homework, etc.)

5. Putting your coaching CAPS on: How can I use this information to shape my Communication, Approach, Preparation, and Structure?

Quick Tips

- The ultimate key to success with MST is you, the coach. When you believe in the value of mental skills and are willing to make it a regular part of your training, then athletes are more likely to "buy in" to developing these skills as well. Ideally, you would work on refining mental skills over time, the same way you do the technical, tactical, and physical components of your sport.
- There is no one right way to practice MST. Successful programming is about what works best for the individual (i.e., an athlete might get "bored" or be "unable to see" images in their mind, but might be able to focus on auditory and kinesthetic/feeling cues easily; one individual might find a harsher tone of self-talk to be motivating while another may prefer a calmer or friendlier tone).
- Practicing mental skills training for as little as 10 minutes a day (total) has been shown to have positive effects on performance and well-being. Incorporating quality repetitions in the form of deliberate use of mental tools leads to better outcomes than does incorporating a heavier volume or larger quantity of mental skills practice.
- To get into the habit of practicing mental skills daily (particularly if you have beginners who are new to MST programs), it is important to plan, track, and log use of the skills. Identifying a time of day where a specific tool will be used for a particular purpose is helpful until an individual gets into a routine with their MST.

Reflection Questions

- Other than improving performance, what are some of the benefits of incorporating mental skills training into your daily sport environment? What can you do as a coach to ensure your athletes make the most of those other benefits?
- What would the 3 phases of an MST program (education, acquisition, and practice) look like in your coaching context?

Personal Takeaways & Module Notes