

Think Like a Practitioner! Utilizing Theories of Anxiety

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My choice of theory to present to performers would be the Attention Control Theory (ACT)(Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007; Eysenck & Derakshan, 2011) and I also believe it to be a great model to explain the relationship between anxiety, arousal, and coping.

Several studies provided promising results that indicate that anxiety impacts attention control and performance (Horn & Smith, 2019). I can illustrate my presentation of ACT with a simple story based on the studies that prove its credibility. Tracking the eye-gaze behavior of climbers indicated that high-anxiety conditions resulted in suboptimal processing efficiency (Nieuwenhuys, Pijpers, Oudejans, & Bakker, 2008). Connecting the theory with real-life examples is a powerful technique to communicate it successfully.

ACT also stands out with its practical implications (Horn & Smith, 2019), therefore it is well suited to prepare athletes for future interventions and training. It is essential that ACT explains both the detrimental and the beneficial effects that arousal has on performance. Compared to non-elite athletes, elite athletes appraise similar levels of anxiety as beneficial (Neil, Mellalieu, & Hanton, 2006), therefore lowering the level of the evaluative threat they experience. Threat appraisal about a person's future performance is suggested to increase anxiety and can impair performance (Horn & Smith, 2019). ACT also offers a great framework to introduce the psychological skills associated with coping (Hayslip, Petrie, Macintire, & Jones, 2010). The positive effects of self-talk, imagery, and goal setting fit well into the theory as they support the goal-directed attentional system and shift attentional function to task-related

stimuli. Relaxation reduces anxiety therefore it reduces the focus on threat-related stimuli and the stimulus-driven attentional system (Neil, Mellalieu, & Hanton, 2006).

ACT has the word "control," and it is a positive word to associate the theory with even if we know that the control is not always conscious. The word "control" gives the impression that the client can have power over the negative effects of anxiety. Introducing ACT, I would put emphasis on the word control, indicating that performance can be improved by learning the psychological skills that reduce anxiety (Hayslip, Petrie, MacIntire, & Jones, 2010). Challenge appraisals can also be controlled to reflect a growth mindset and reframe the negative emotions and fear tied to a compromised achievement outcome (Lazarus, 1999). Appraising a challenge as an opportunity for growth can reduce anxiety and increase the level of positive emotions (Neil et al., 2007).

Presenting a theory like ACT must be adjusted to the client or group of clients I work with. Age, previous experiences in mental training, education, expectations, current results and special characteristics of the group or the individual are all information that help me to tailor my communication for the best results. I need to understand what my clients needs and what they expect from my session. The style, atmosphere and optimism of our interaction is just as important as the information I convey. My presence makes an impact and creates associations that need to increase motivation and empower athletes and coaches to keep searching their own solutions for anxiety and coping because all of them have a different set of cognitive, psychological and behavioral reactions to anxiety in various competitive settings.

References

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