

PRESENTER'S GUIDE

Psychological Intervention for Stress Management and Performance in Young Athletes

SupportForSport.org



PRESENTER’S GUIDE OVERVIEW

At the youth sport level, sport training, pressure to perform, and developmental pressures can contribute to stress. Learning how to manage stress in sport can enhance the personal development and sport growth of young athletes. This presenter’s guide provides a step-by-step explanation of a psychological intervention program for young athletes focused on motivation, goal setting, concentration, visualization, activation, and relaxation. Participation in the “Psychological Intervention for Stress Management and Performance in Young Athletes” workshop is an initial step in the psychological development of stress management skills.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE IN YOUNG ATHLETES OVERVIEW

Objectives

- Young athletes will be able to identify indicators of stress that they may experience during their sport participation, both in training and competition.
- Young athletes will learn about motivation, attention and concentration, and activation, and will practice goal setting, visualization, and relaxation, psychological skills that can help them to appropriately manage stress during sport training and competition.

Content and timeline

Session	Content	Duration
1	Motivation	50 min
2	Goal setting	50 min
3	Attention and concentration	50 min
4	Visualisation	50 min
5	Activation	50 min
6	Relaxation	50 min

SESSION 1 - Motivation

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction to the program and to the session.

20 min What is motivation? Key concepts, definition, and types.

15 min Viewing and discussing a video about an athlete who has lost his motivation.

10 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

Supplies: Flip chart or white board for sharing ideas. Equipment and screen (or wall) for projection and playback of the video at the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ3rorqAZVw> You may want to download (rather than stream) the video to make sure that it will play when meeting with the athletes. Make sure that you have power, that all the athletes can see the video, and that all the athletes can hear the audio (problems with audio are common). It can be helpful to test the video and audio at the location where you are meeting with the athletes to make sure that everything works.

Introduction to the Program:

At the beginning of the first session, introduce yourself by saying something like “My name is _____, and I care about stress management because being able to manage stress has helped me to.....” Briefly explain the content, methods, and schedule of the program. Tell the participants that they will be working on three psychological topics, with two sessions devoted to each topic, for six total sessions. In the first session we will learn and talk about the topic. In the second session of each topic, an applied technique for addressing the issue will be presented. Session topics are:

1. motivation
2. goal setting
3. attention/concentration
4. visualization
5. activation level
6. progressive relaxation

Introduction to the Session

Tell the participants that this session is about motivation. Have participants describe a time when they were motivated that they are comfortable sharing with the group. To get the conversation started, you can be the first person to share an example. Using an example from when you were the age of the athletes could be helpful.

What is motivation? Key concepts, definition, and types.

Ask the athletes what they think motivation is and record their answers on a flip chart or whiteboard that everyone can see. After a brief discussion, ask them to construct as complete a definition of motivation as possible. (You can put them in groups of 5 and give them 5 minutes to develop a definition to share with the other groups.) Subsequently, explain:

- **What is motivation?** Motivation is a process that helps people to start and continue doing things that help them reach their goals or meet needs. There are two main types of motivation: Intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is when people do things because they like doing them. Doing the task is motivating or fun. Extrinsic motivation is when people take action to get something they want (like winning) or to avoid something they don't want to happen (like getting in trouble). That is, in intrinsic motivation, the reasons why the action is carried out are located within the person (enjoying it, getting better, feeling good), and in extrinsic motivation, the reasons are located outside the person and are external (prizes, money, being a starter).
- **It is helpful for athletes to be guided by intrinsic motivation when participating in sport.** In sport, it is common for athletes to compete and strive for extrinsic rewards, like awards or social recognition (getting more people to notice you). Research shows that intrinsic motivation produces better results in the long run because people who do sport for well-being, fun, or satisfaction are less likely to quit or get frustrated about their sport. People who are motivated by their own goals often continue to work hard and get better even if they lose.
- **How athlete motivation influences sport performance.** Motivation plays an important role in learning sport skills, in training, and in competition.

Viewing the Video

Next, the athletes watch a video of a soccer player who had lost the desire to play because he had let himself be amazed by the eccentricities of money and fame and had ended up being very affected. In the video, this athlete tells how he rediscovered himself through sport and learned to appreciate and focus on what is truly important in sport. Tell the participants to pay attention to the athlete's motivation and feelings when watching the video, and that their observations will be discussed after the video is done. Once the athletes have finished watching the video, ask them to give their opinions about the video and to suggest ways of dealing with a situation like this, thus creating a brief forum for discussion.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

At the end of the session, give participants an opportunity to share their impressions of the session and obtain answers to any questions they may have about the session. Preview the next session by saying "Next time, we'll be talking about and practicing ways to enhance our own motivation."

SESSION 2 – Goal Setting

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction.

20 min Goal setting technique.

15 min Planning objectives.

10 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

Supplies: Season Goal Sheets, Next Competition Goal Sheets, and pens or pencils for each athlete.

Introduction

Ask the athletes what they remember about motivation covered in the previous session and remind them of key ideas they miss (if any).

Goal Setting Technique

Tell the athletes that “This session is designed to help you build skills to manage your motivation. We will talk about goals and will practice setting goals.” Next, ask athletes about how goal setting might be helpful. Responses may include “motivation,” “helps people to try hard,” helps people focus on the steps to reach goals,” helps people be aware of what good results depend on,” and “reminds people what they want to do.”

- **What is goal setting?** Goal setting is a technique used to increase or maintain athletes' motivation for a period of time (for example, one season, one month, three months). Setting goals increases the quality and quantity of athletes' work and effort compared to when goals are not set. Goals can help athletes to focus on the process to get the future big results they want. Goal setting also motivates athletes in training by reminding them what they are trying to do, which can help athletes work harder or better.
- **Outcome and process goals.** Goals can be focused on outcome or process. Outcomes are things like winning that may only be partly or not at all under athletes' control. An example of an outcome goal might be winning a championship. Athletes who play well still might not win because the other team was even better or because something happened like a teammate getting hurt. Process goals are things that athletes can control like how hard they work and getting to practice on time. Goals can have a short-term, medium-term, or long-term focus. Many athletes set long-term goals and use medium-term and short-term goals to reach their long-term goals.

- **Guidelines for setting goals.** There are many goal setting approaches, and athletes can use the one they like best. Most goal setting strategies have people:
 - Set positive goals focused on what they want to do (rather than what they want to avoid).
 - Set goals that are measurable. Rather than “run faster,” the goal would say what distance to run and how many seconds faster. Instead of “play better,” the goal would explain what playing better means (like “make two passes to a teammate before shooting”).
 - Set difficult but achievable goals. Set goals that are hard enough to be interesting or challenging, but not so hard that they get frustrating and lead to giving up.
 - Write down goals, which makes them easier to remember and work on.

Setting Goals

Give the athletes a Season Goal Sheet and a Next Competition Goal Sheet. Have the athletes work together on their Season Goal Sheets. It may be helpful to put them into groups of 5 for 5 to 10 minutes and then discuss as a big group. When the Season Goal Sheets have been completed, have the athletes work on their Next Competition Goal Sheets. Remind the athletes to set process goals that are under their control when possible.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

At the end of the session, give the athletes an opportunity to share their impressions of the session and obtain answers to any questions they may have about the session. Preview the next session by saying “Next time, we’ll be talking about attention and concentration.”

SEASON GOAL SHEET

Name:	Date:	Sport:
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	SPORT GOALS	STEPS THAT CAN HELP ME REACH MY SPORT GOALS
LONG-TERM GOALS		
MIDDLE-TERM GOALS		
SHORT-TERM GOALS		

NEXT COMPETITION GOAL SHEET

Name:	Date:
FIRST GOAL FOR NEXT COMPETITION	
What can I do to help me reach this goal?	
What barriers can make it hard for me to reach this goal?	
What steps can I take to overcome these barriers and reach my goal?	
SECOND GOAL FOR NEXT COMPETITION	
What can I do to help me reach this goal?	
What barriers can make it hard for me to reach this goal?	
What steps can I take to overcome these barriers and reach my goal?	

SESSION 3 – Attention and Concentration

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction.

35 min What are attention and concentration? Key concepts, definitions, and types.

10 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

Supplies: Flip chart or white board for sharing ideas.

Introduction

Ask participants what they remember about the previous session and how they have been using goals. One of the reasons that goals are helpful is that they help people pay attention to and concentrate on important things.

What are attention and concentration? Key concepts, definitions, and types.

First, ask participants about what they know about attention and concentration and, after several turns to speak, ask them to build together a more comprehensive definition of both terms. You can break them into small groups of 5 for 5-10 minutes and then share their discussion with the large group. Add information that the groups miss.

- **What are attention and concentration?** Attention can be defined as a person's ability to select and concentrate on important things. If you pay attention to what is important, it is easier to meet your goals. Concentration is the ability to keep attention on something important for a period of time.
- **What is attentional focus?** Attentional focus is directing your attention to focus on something. You can focus broadly on the big picture or narrowly on a small detail. You can also focus internally on yourself or externally. When you combine them, you get four types of focus: Broad external (assess the sport situation), broad internal (analyze and decide based on all internal information), narrow internal (prepare for execution), and narrow external (so that you focus only on the most important parts of the game).
- **How do you concentrate?** There are several main ways to increase concentration in sport and school. Things that you can do to concentrate for an extended period of time include:
 - making a good concentration environment (limiting phone use and turning off the TV or computer if they are distracting)
 - having healthy habits (resting properly, eating healthy food, getting enough sleep)
 - taking some deep breaths or doing meditation to control stress and/or anxiety
 - planning a routine that helps you to have everything under your control (as with, for example, making a competition plan or getting your gear ready the night before competition).
- **You can learn skills to focus your attention and concentrate better.** Deep breathing, relaxation, visualization, mindfulness, and yoga are among your options. The next session will go in depth about visualization, one of the most frequently used techniques to enhance concentration.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

At the end of the session, give participants an opportunity to share their impressions of the session and obtain answers to any questions they may have about the session. Preview the next session by saying “Next time, we’ll be talking about and practicing the technique of visualization.”

SESSION 4 - Visualization

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction.

10 min What visualization is and how to apply it.

10 min Watching testimonials of athletes who practice visualization.

20 min Implementing visualization.

5 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

Supplies: Equipment and screen (or wall) for projection and playback of the video at the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-mm90LFPqU> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZf24MEemKI> You may want to download (rather than stream) the videos to make sure that they will play when meeting with the athletes. Make sure that you have power, that all the athletes can see the video, and that all the athletes can hear the audio. It can be helpful to test the videos and audio (problems with audio are common) at the location where you are meeting with the athletes to make sure that everything works.

Introduction

Ask the athletes what they remember about the previous session on attention and concentration “Did anyone try something to make their attention and concentration better since last time? What about goals?” Tell the athletes that the current session is about visualization.

What Visualization Is and How to Apply It

Explain that visualization is, “a technique that allows you to mentally practice the movements in your sport and allows you to change and practice things in your mind in order to improve.” Add that visualization helps athletes learn to make tactical decisions, so they can make the right decisions in their sport. Visualization can be used to prepare for performance in competitions by mentally practicing sport situations that can help athletes to perform better in both training and competition

For best results with visualization, it is helpful to:

- Be in a quiet place, away from interruptions.
- Relax. Breathing exercises can be useful for this purpose.
- Concentrate. Focus your attention.
- Take control of your images. Make it so that the image you want is the one that is in your mind.
- Involve your senses when you are visualizing. Try to use your senses to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch while you are visualizing.
- Imagine the environment. Spectators, teammates, opponents, and noise may be present in your visualization.

Watching Testimonials of Athletes who Practise Visualization

Show videos of athletes who use visualization as part of their sport training. Specifically, show videos of Michael Phelps (Olympic swimmer) and Sadie Bjornsen (cross-country race). After showing the videos, lead a discussion in which participants describe their opinions of the content of the videos.

Implementing Visualization

Say “Let’s try a visualization exercise.” Give the following instructions:

“Now, I am going to present you with different sport situations. In each of them, visualize the situation and provide as much detail as you can imagine. When you are visualizing, try to use all your senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—to make the visualization as realistic as possible. When it is time to visualize, I will ask you to close your eyes, put other thoughts aside, and relax. Keep your eyes closed while trying to imagine each situation for about a minute. I will let you know when to open your eyes between each situation. Do you have any questions before we begin the activity?”

Present the following situations for about one minute each and let participants know when the time is up so they can open their eyes between each situation:

- Okay, now close your eyes and imagine you are alone on the _____ (insert appropriate venue of play; e.g., field, court, pitch). Focus on the _____ (insert appropriate venue of play). Notice what it looks like in your imagination. What do you see? Do you hear any sounds? Is there anything that you can feel or touch? Is there anything that you smell or taste? Explore the image in your mind. (Pause for a few moments.) Now let the image slowly fade, return to the room, and open your eyes.
- Okay, now close your eyes and imagine that you are on the _____ (insert appropriate venue of play). **Your teammates and coach are also there.** And there are spectators. Notice what it looks like in your imagination. What do you see? Do you hear any sounds? Is there anything that you can feel or touch? Is there anything that you smell or taste? Explore the image in your mind. (Pause for a few moments.) Now let the image slowly fade, return to the room, and open your eyes.

Check in with the athletes to see how they are doing with the visualization by saying “What was easiest for you to visualize? What was harder for you to visualize? What was fun to visualize?”

Discuss the athletes’ responses before moving on to the next three situations:

- Okay, now close your eyes and imagine **you are actively in play in your sport.** Your teammates, your coach, and spectators are present. Notice what it looks like in your imagination. What do you see? Do you hear any sounds? Is there anything that you can feel or touch? Is there anything that you smell or taste? Explore the image in your mind. (Pause for a few moments.) Now let the image slowly fade, return to the room, and open your eyes.
- Okay, now close your eyes and imagine you are actively in play in your sport. Your teammates, your coach, and spectators are present. **You fail. You do not accomplish your goals.** How do you feel? Notice what it looks like in your imagination. What do you see? Do you hear any sounds? Is there anything that you can feel or touch? Is there anything that you smell or taste? Explore the image in your mind. (Pause for a few moments.) Now let the image slowly fade, return to the room, and open your eyes.

- Okay, last one, now close your eyes and imagine you are actively in play in your sport. Your teammates, your coach, and spectators are present. **And you succeed. You accomplish your goals.** How do you feel? Notice what it looks like in your imagination. What do you see? Do you hear any sounds? Is there anything that you can feel or touch? Is there anything that you smell or taste? Explore the image in your mind. (Pause for a few moments.) Now let the image slowly fade, return to the room, and open your eyes.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

Discuss the athletes' experience of visualization exercise using the following questions as a guide:

- How realistic was your visualization during the exercise?
- How clearly did you hear sounds during the exercise?
- How realistic was the sensation of your movements during the exercise?
- How aware were you of your mood during the exercise? What moods did you experience?
- Did you visualize yourself through your own eyes or as if you were watching yourself on television?
- How could you use visualization on your own?

Conclude the session with an attempt to resolve any doubts and difficulties that may have arisen during the visualization exercise, highlighting the importance of the continued practice of this technique as an integral part of training. Tell participants that: "Not every athlete enjoys visualization. Many athletes find some visualization helpful and get better at it with practice."

SESSION 5 - Activation

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction.

35 min What activation is and how to manage it.

10 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

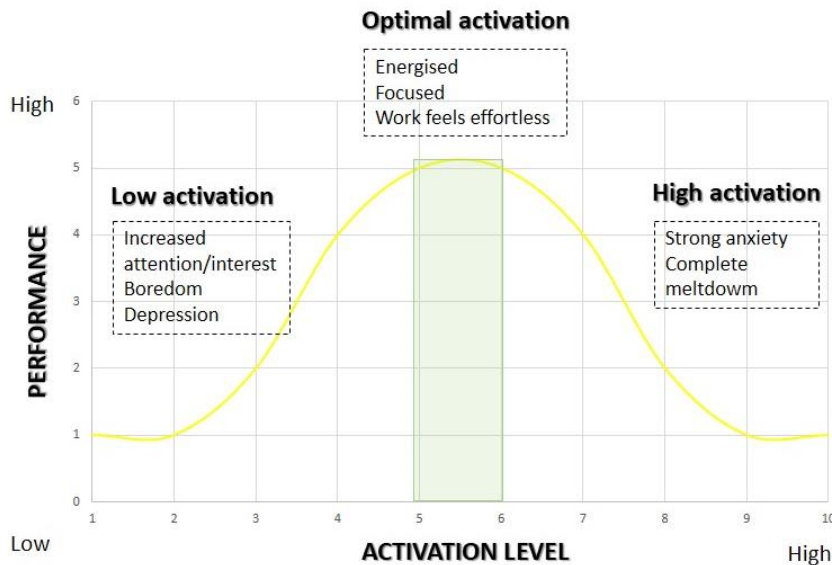
Introduction

Our last session was about visualization. What do you remember from that session? Have you used visualization since then? If so, how have you used it? For those of you who haven't, why not? Okay, so today's session is about activation and how to manage it.

What Activation Is and How to Manage It

Ask the athletes if they know what activation is. After several responses, clarify what activation is, how it is related to sport performance, and what can be done to manage it by explaining the following:

- Activation has three parts: (a) physiological (body) part (heartbeat, breathing, muscle tension, sweating, etc.); (b) behavioral part (things you say and do; for example, moving non-stop, staying in one place, yelling, talking, being silent); and (c) mental or cognitive part (for example, thoughts, emotions, mental images, etc.).
- Activation is defined as an athlete's level of "alertness" and how ready the athlete is to cope with a threat or sport challenge.
- There are two types of activation: (a) Negative activation, which relates to situations of threat, pain, or anxiety in which athletes feel nervous or tense; and (b) Positive activation, which relates to situations in which people feel energized and ready.
- **The relationship between activation level and sport performance.** Explain the Inverted-U Theory detailed in Figure 1, which shows that the more activated athletes are, the better they play or perform up to a certain point. If athletes have too little activation, they are asleep. If they have too much activation, their level of play or performance can be worse. Very high levels of activation and very low levels activation have a negative effect on performance. It is good to figure out your ideal level of activation.



- Activation is a little bit different from other psychological factors like stress and anxiety. For example, you can be highly activated and not at all anxious. The ability to regulate activation is important for athletes.
 - Ask the athletes: “What are ways to increase activation if you are not energized or fired up enough?” Discuss several answers
 - Ask the athletes: “What are ways to decrease activation if you are too energized?” Discuss several answers
- Techniques are available for athletes to increase or decrease their level of activation. Sometimes, it may be necessary to increase activation before the start of a competition or a demanding training session. This can be accomplished, for example, by activating your body, doing physical activities that activate you and are suitable for your sport (e.g., a sprint, a good warmup), using your thoughts or self-instructions (telling yourself what to do to become more activated), and taking fast and short breaths. Activation can be *decreased* by doing relaxation exercises, taking slow and deep diaphragmatic breaths, carrying out a familiar routine of behaviors to be performed before and during competition, and coming up with a realistic plan of action to anticipate potential problems and come up with solutions beforehand.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

At the end of the session, give participants an opportunity to share their impressions of the session and obtain answers to any questions they may have about the session. Preview the next session by saying “Next time, we’ll be talking about and practicing the technique of relaxation.”

SESSION 6 - Relaxation

Duration: 50 min

5 min Introduction and description of the session.

35 min Implementation of Jacobson's progressive relaxation technique.

5 min Sharing impressions and concluding the session.

Introduction

Ask participants what they remember about the previous session about activation. Ask if participants have noticed their activation level. Introduce the aims of the current session by saying "Today we are going to talk about relaxation. Relaxation is something you can use when your activation level is too high. This type of relaxation is something that some athletes use before a competition when they are nervous. Other athletes use it after a game to relax or to help them sleep.

Experiencing Jacobson's Progressive Relaxation Technique

For this exercise, ask the athletes to remain seated in their chairs (or, if there is sufficient space, to lie down) and close their eyes. Jacobson's progressive relaxation technique is based on the tension and relaxation muscle groups of the body in order to relax them. Tell the athletes that: (a) they are going to tense and relax their muscles and focus on the relaxation; (b) they will be relaxing their muscles twice as long as they are tensing them; and (c) it helps to close their eyes when they are relaxing.

Once participants are comfortable, calm, and without distractions, say calming introductory phrases such as "you are comfortable and relaxed," "you can feel your breathing," and "you only hear silence." Next, to start working on the first muscle group, give the following instructions:

- Direct your attention to your right arm, the right hand in particular. Close it, squeeze it tightly, feel the tension generated in both your hand and your forearm, and hold for 5 seconds, 4, 3, 2, 1.
- Stop squeezing your hand, relax it, and let it rest. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation for 10 seconds, 9, 8, 7, 6, notice your hand relaxing, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.
- Close your right hand tightly again and feel the tension in your hand and forearm. Focus your attention only on the tension for 5 seconds, 4, 3, 2, 1.
- Loosen your muscles and stop squeezing, allowing your fingers to spread out in a relaxed manner. Note once again the difference between muscle tension and relaxation for 10 seconds, 9, 8, 7, 6, notice your hand relaxing, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Continue in the same fashion with the left arm and hand. Then move on to the following muscle groups (alternating between right and left side where appropriate): forearms, biceps, shoulders, forehead, eyes, jaw, throat, lips, neck, back of the neck, back, chest, abdomen, and legs (thighs and calves). After the relaxation exercise, slowly bring the athletes back to the room and give the athletes 5 minutes to rest.

Sharing Impressions and Concluding the Session

Engage participants in a brief discussion in which they share their impressions by responding to questions such as:

- What was relaxation like for you?
- How can progressive relaxation help me personally?
- When would it be good for me to do progressive relaxation? (for example, the night before an exam, an important match, etc.)

Conclusion of the Program

Over the course of our sessions together we have worked on three psychological topics, with two sessions devoted to each topic. In the first session we learned about the topic and in the second session of each topic, an applied technique for addressing the issue was presented. Session topics we covered were:

1. Motivation and goal setting
2. Attention/concentration and visualization
3. Activation level and progressive relaxation

Give participants an opportunity to share their impressions of the program and obtain answers to any questions they may have about the program. Tell them that you enjoyed working with them and thank them for their participation.