

Session Seven

Developing the Game Plan



This session aims to help practitioners to consolidate the ability of athletes to be self-sufficient in applying the *Flexible Mind* approach.

This session can speak to the following types of situations:

- The athlete is facing a substantial critical moment in their career i.e. transition to senior sport or retirement
- The athlete has a strong athletic identity and has neglected other aspects in their life to pursue their career as an athlete.
- The athlete is experiencing high levels of self-critical thoughts in their sporting performance and wider life.
- The athlete is nearing completion of work with the practitioner and wants to be self-sufficient in promoting behaviours for sustainable performance enhancement.

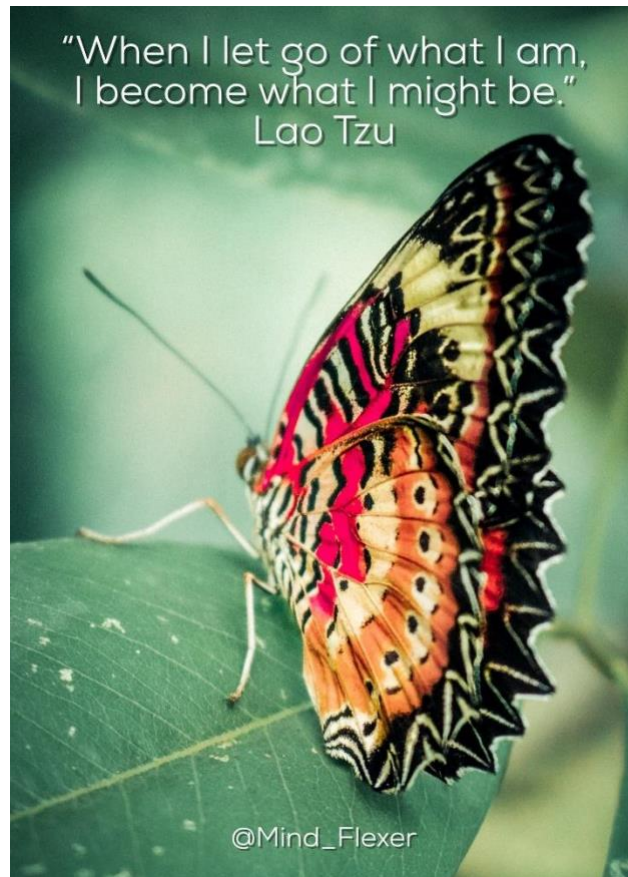
1. Overview of session

The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help enhance the athlete's awareness of the lifelong nature of committed action and underline the benefits this can bring. The session provides the opportunity for the practitioner to extend the athlete's understanding of how the P.O.D aspects of *psychological flexibility* come together to optimize *WExceLLence*. The practitioner should also help the athlete explore ways in which they can develop a plan to continue moving towards *WExceLLence* beyond their work with the practitioner.

2. In Pursuit of Performance...

In the world of elite sport, the mantra of 'live, breathe, and sleep sport' is strongly advocated, even in youth development settings. As a result, athletes may begin to form what has been termed an 'athletic identity', which is when athletes begin to narrowly define their sense of self-

worth with their achievements in their chosen sport. The related concept of 'the glorified self' can arise when an athlete's sense of self stems from receiving public recognition, praise, and rewards for their sporting performances (Adler & Adler, 1989).



Session Insight 1

From a *Flexible Mind* perspective, athletes can become 'hooked' or 'entangled' with the narrative of their identity as an athlete and this can serve to stifle broader narratives about who they are, and what qualities they want to champion through their choices and their actions. The practitioner must consider the potential ramifications that may lie ahead for the athlete in their mindless pursuit of performance excellence. If the athlete suffers a dip in performance or is forced to unexpectedly retire from sport, the question has to be asked, what will the athlete base their sense on? What else does the athlete have in their life that is bringing fulfillment? The Flexible Mind approach can help athletes to appreciate the importance of investing time and energy in other life domains beyond the world of sport.

3. Helping the Athlete Make Sense of their Experiences

Consistent with the emphasis that can be placed on athletic identity, it is not uncommon for athletes to feel the need that they need to look strong from the outside, even when contending with thoughts about being weak and powerless during the many highs and lows that they can encounter during their careers. Athletes' reports about their own experiences are arguably the richest source of information for how to facilitate performance enhancement (Friesen & Orlick, 2010).

For any athlete to develop their levels of *psychological flexibility*, they must be supported to access the reports that their minds are generating about their experiences. Practitioners can use the following script for 'The Sports Correspondence' practice to help athletes to notice the mind's reports and recognize that thoughts are thoughts - not facts.

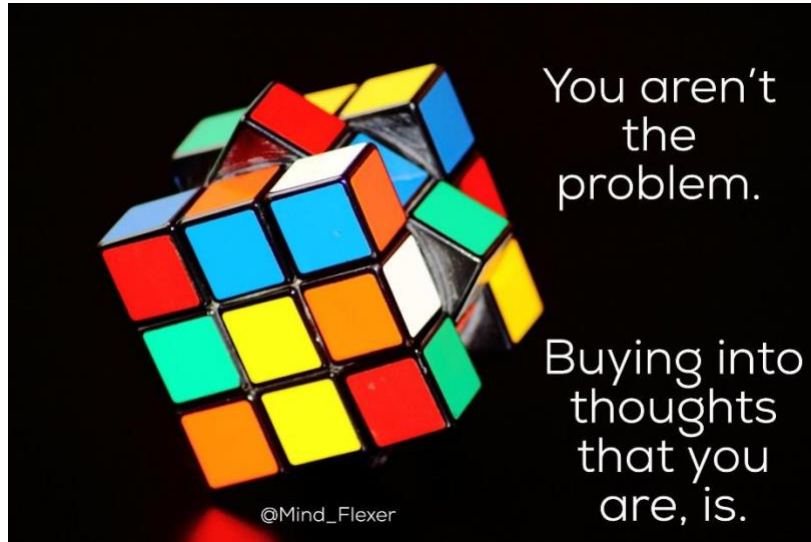
Practice A. The Sports Correspondence

"Try to imagine that you are a sports correspondent reporting from the 'scene' of your mind when difficult thoughts show up - 'Hello, my name is [insert the athlete's name] and here I am at 11:30 am on a Thursday morning at the training session. I can confirm that my mind has just given me the thought that I am not good enough'.

Ask yourself what difference the shift in perspective might have brought about in how you perceive any self-critical thoughts that you may have."

The example above isn't about dismissing or trivializing the athlete's thoughts; it is simply about helping them to notice their mind at work and to create space to choose to respond in ways that are consistent with their values.

Session Insight 2 (overleaf) can be used to help illustrate that having thoughts about being less than perfect are not the problem per se, it is the extent to which we buy into those thoughts that intensifies the impact that these thoughts can have on our ability to live a life that is characterized by meaning and vitality.



Session Insight 2

4. Asking the athletes: "What *could* you do?"

Practitioners should support the athlete to see any dilemmas that they face during their careers as opportunities to make choices that provide opportunities to move them towards their values. It is not uncommon for practitioners to field "What should I do?" questions from athletes when they are facing a dilemma. Rather than making suggestions or choices for athletes, practitioners can instead support the athletes by asking in turn "What *could* you do?" The *Flexible Mind* approach aims to empower athletes to ask themselves 'What choices can I make that will be in service of my values?' Practitioners can use the following script to help an athlete to reflect on their values and the direction that they want to move in life.

Practice B. The Birthday Party Speech (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"Let's fast-forward a few years. Imagine that it's your birthday and you have reached one of those milestone birthdays like a 50th birthday.

Your friends and family have organised a surprise party at one of your favourite restaurants.

Picture yourself arriving at the venue, and walking through the doors. Try to connect with the thoughts and feelings that would be associated with suddenly seeing all of the important people in your life smiling back at you. Feelings of surprise but also feelings of excitement and gratitude.

Now take a moment to think about who exactly might be at the party. Who would you like to be there celebrating with you – it could be family members, friends, colleagues... Really try to picture them in your mind's eye (even if that means they'll be older, greyer and balder than they are currently!).

Now let's imagine that the evening has progressed and it's time for a toast. A dear friend (someone who you respect deeply) steps forward and raises their glass to say a few words about you. They talk about the type of person that you are, the life that you have led and what you mean to them. Now imagine what you would like them to say. Notice your mind's tendency to drift off to think about what they are likely to say. Instead, focus on what you would hope that they might say. Try really hard to imagine what qualities and attributes you would want them to comment on about how you are in the world?

Okay, coming back to the present moment, reflect on how the exercise landed with you. I invite you to think now about how you can integrate the qualities and attributes that you wanted to hear in the speech into the choices you make today and the interactions that you have with others.

Notice whether your mind is trying to cast doubt on your ability to demonstrate these qualities. Thank your mind for that, and see if you can still commit to demonstrating those qualities anyway."

Establishing what values are important to athletes clearly matters, and supporting athletes to take committed action even in the face of pain and discomfort is crucially important to *The Flexible Mind* approach. The practitioner should encourage the athlete to repeat the above technique to help refresh their 'values playlist' periodically.

5. Maintaining Gains Beyond the Intervention

For athletes to sustain the benefits of *the Flexible Mind* approach in the longer terms, it will be important for them to engage in committed action time and time again. The practitioner should discuss how *WExceLLence* is not something that can be completed, instead it is an approach to how they live their life. In their efforts to maintain *WExceLLence* athletes will face a multitude of

'Choice Points' that arise throughout their day on and off the pitch. The practitioner should look to draw the attention of the athlete to the importance of appropriately using goal setting to commit to actions that are consistent with their values.

To ensure that athletes are making effective goals, the practitioner should support athletes to use SMART criteria. In Session One of *the Flexible Mind* approach (see Chapter 4 of the *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*) the importance of using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) criteria to guide values consistent behaviour was highlighted. SMART goals are a great way for athletes to monitor their progress and be self-sufficient in sustaining the *Flexible Mind* approach. Session Insight 3 can be used to help the athlete and practitioner reflect on the appropriateness and viability of particular goals and to ensure that these are in keeping with the athlete's values.



Session insight 3

6. Developing a Blueprint for the Future

At the end of the intervention, it is useful for the practitioner to encourage the athlete to reflect upon the process and the gains made during the sessions. During this reflection, the practitioner

should discuss a 'blueprint for the future' in which the athlete takes time to think and identify any setbacks and/or challenges that they may encounter in the future.

Specifically, the practitioner should ensure that the blueprint draws attention to the athlete's values and barriers to their progress- for example, what situations are likely to hook the athlete and pose a challenge to *Being Present, Being Open* and *Doing What Matters*? In addition, the practitioner should help the athlete to establish *early warning signs* e.g. thoughts, feelings and behaviours that might indicate that the athlete is struggling with a metaphorical steep, uphill climb - and suggest reminders of the resources that they now have at their disposal that they can use to help themselves during these times.

7. Summary of Session

Summarize the key points covered in the session. At the athlete's discretion, make arrangements for an 'extra time' follow up session 2-3 months after the final session. This potential 'extra time' session should not be about introducing new material or skills but rather providing a safe space for the athlete to reflect on their progress in sustaining the *Flexible Mind* approach long after the intervention ends. This session can also be helpful in reminding the athlete of the work completed together to help maintain the gains beyond the intervention.

Reference

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1989). The gloried self: The aggrandizement and the constriction of self. *Social psychology quarterly*, 299-310.

Acknowledgement: This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Developing the Game Plan* (Session 7) in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 237-261). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Web: www.flexiblemind.co.uk



@Mind_Flexer

Email: support@flexiblemind.co.uk

