

Session Two

Mind full vs. Mindful



This session focuses on promoting an understanding of what mindfulness is, how it can be experienced, and what value it brings. For further information see Chapter 5 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can speak to the following types of issue:

- The athlete is spending a lot of time living in the past (i.e. ruminating about previous experiences) or in the future (i.e. worrying about upcoming experiences).
- If the athlete seems to be 'coasting' as if on autopilot and is losing out on the richness of what is happening in the here and now.
- If the athlete is tangled up with their internal experiences (i.e. thoughts and feelings) and not really connecting with the world around them.

1. Overview of session

The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help athletes to more consciously contact the breadth of their present moment experiences with an attitude of curiosity and openness. The session provides the opportunity for the practitioner to highlight that mindfulness skills involve a combination of the Being Present and Being Open aspects of the P.O.D.

2. What is mindfulness?

Key points that practitioners can share with athletes to promote a good understanding of what mindfulness is:

- Mindfulness has been defined as “*awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally*”¹
- One of the key advantages of mindfulness is that it allows us to connect openly with the richness of the present moment - helping us to really notice our experiences whilst not being swept away by them. In other words, mindfulness is about being in the ‘here and now’ - it is about being fully present with the breadth of current moment experiences.
- Although certain practices (like ‘mindfulness of breath’ exercises) can help athletes to develop their mindfulness skills it is important to emphasize that mindfulness is not something a person does per se, instead it is an attitude that they bring to how they do something - for example, a person can mindfully brush their teeth, lace their rugby boot, place a football on a penalty spot, or place a golf ball on a tee.
- Research evidence suggests that mindfulness can play an important role in improving both performance and aspects of mental health and wellbeing (See Chapter 2 of the *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athlete’s Wellbeing and Performance* for more details).
- Practicing mindfulness can help athletes to move towards *WExceLLence* - the optimal balance between promoting wellbeing and enhancing performance.

3. Creating Space

Mindfulness is a combination of the *Being Open* and *Being Present* aspects of the P.O.D of psychological flexibility

- *Being Open* is about noticing thoughts and feelings as these emerge and making space for these alongside other aspects of our experience. This attitude of openness helps to create a gap between thoughts or feelings occurring and engaging in habitual ways of responding to these experiences e.g.. futile efforts to avoid/suppress thoughts, using alcohol to dampen the feelings.
- *Being Present* is about noticing when we have been pulled away from the present by our mind’s tendency to wander and responding by anchoring ourselves back in the present.

Rather than *Being Open* and *Being Present*, it may be that athletes have fallen into well-established patterns of trying to avoid situations that cause stress and try to get rid of thoughts and feelings associated with stress. To help athletes to recognize how futile efforts to control one’s thoughts can be, guide them through the ‘Pink Elephant’ exercise below.

¹ <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>

The 'Pink Elephant' Exercise

"I am going to say something to you now and I don't want you to think about it. I don't want any aspect of what I say to enter your head, at any point. What I want to say is "Pink Elephant". Remember, I don't want you to think about this animal, or imagine what it looks like, or even what it sounds like. Again, don't think about it, don't let the image enter your head at any point. So... what are you thinking about?"

Now, spend time thinking about your earliest sporting memory? Spend 30 seconds going back there. Sit with this memory... Now try to delete it from your mind.... Is it gone?"

The practitioner can show the athlete the image below (Session Insight 1) to help illustrate the point.



Session Insight 1

Rather than engaging in counterproductive efforts to get rid of thoughts and emotions, mindfulness practices help athletes to recognize these experiences as momentary experiences that form part of a broader stream of experiences. Mindfulness can help athletes connect with their ability to notice this stream of experiences rather than being swept away by it. By investing

time in developing mindfulness skills, the athlete will have an increased ability to shift their attention from internal events (thoughts and feelings), to also connect with their wider present moment experience.

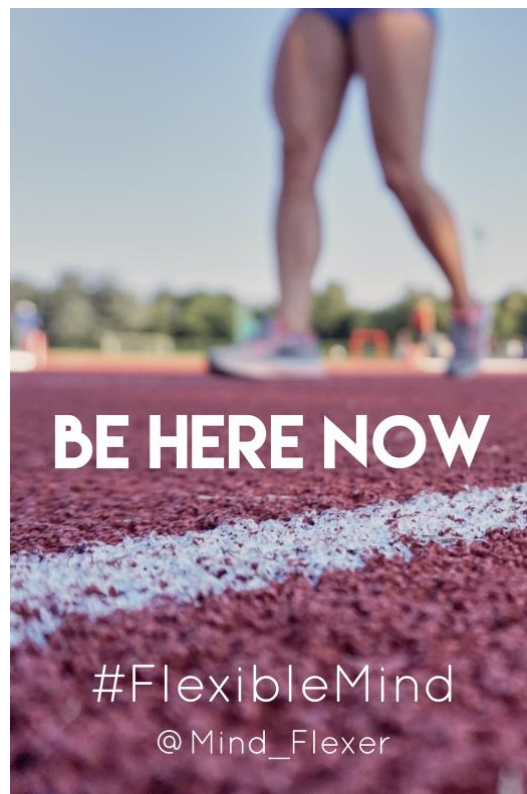
4. Bringing Mindfulness to Life

To help elaborate on this point the practitioner could use the *Introducing B.O.P.* script outlined below

"What do you think Mindfulness is? I want to ensure you have a clear understanding of what mindfulness is, as at times it can be misunderstood. It can be portrayed as meditation or relaxation exercises, but it is best understood as a heightened form of focus, it is attending to our moment-by-moment experiences with a sense of curiosity rather than judgment.

Let us think of mindfulness as 'Being Open and Present (B.O.P.)' or, if you prefer, 'Being In the Moment'. If it helps you to understand and engage with this concept, we can use terms like 'dropping the anchor' or 'getting grounded' in the place of 'mindfulness'.

There can be no room for daydreaming on life's journey, instead the aim is to connect fully with the vividness of the journey. This, in a nutshell, is mindfulness in action."



Session Insight 2

As Session Insight 2 (see above) highlights, buzz phrases like 'Be here now' can help capture the essence of mindfulness and help the athlete to reconnect with the qualities of being that mindfulness espouses. Describing to an athlete what mindfulness is will be important, however helping him/her/they experience it will be the most important form of learning.

In session, the practitioner should guide the athlete through *Practice A* and/or *Practice B*.

Practice A. Centering Practice

The following script for the *Centering Practice* will be helpful for supporting the athlete to experience mindfulness. Prior to the commencement of the practice, the athlete should be given a piece of kit that is routinely used in the course of their sport e.g. rugby ball, football boot, hockey stick, swimming goggles - whatever is appropriate and available.

"I am going to take you through a basic mindfulness practice. To do this, I want you to sit comfortably, either with your eyes closed or just focusing on a point in front of you. Now I want you to hold this piece of familiar sports equipment and use your senses to connect with this object. As you do this, I will allow you time to be present with this instruction - I want you to bring an open and curious mind to this object. What do you see... how does it feel... how does it smell? As you do this, I want you to make a comment or two aloud about the object and then allow a minute or two to pass.

(Allow the time period to elapse)

I want to know if you noticed that your mind had wandered to other things, did you think about what you were having for dinner, did you wonder why you are doing this, or maybe you remembered events associated with the object? If you did, great! Your mind is doing what minds do!!

A key takeaway from this exercise is to notice that wandering of the mind, notice when you start thinking of things other than the object in question. Noticing this, and then bringing your attention back to the object is like you flexing your mindfulness muscles. I want you to complete this exercise before a training session, simply notice what thoughts and emotions you are bringing into a session. Doing this before each session will enhance your mindfulness skills, so that you can call upon them when you are under pressure.

Take a moment to stop and notice. By any chance are you noticing thoughts of not doing this, are you noticing doubts you have about the practice and its impact on your performance? That's okay, simply notice that you have a choice to complete these exercises with whatever thoughts and feelings may arise."

In addition to the *Centering Practice*, practitioners can also consider using the following script for the *Mindful Walking* exercise to help athletes to adopt a mindful orientation to the present moment.

Practice B. Mindful Walking

"Being consistent with mindfulness practice is the key to reaping the rewards in terms of performance excellence and your own sustained wellbeing. The example I want to talk about today involves an action you do every day. Walking. When you walk, how often do you pay attention to this movement? Rarely I would suggest.

What I want you to do is to get really present with the experience of walking, what that means is bringing your attention to the sensation of the weight transfer from your heels to toes as you move. See if you can really connect with the felt experience in the soles of your feet as you walk.

As you do this, I want you to be really open to any thoughts or feelings that pop up in this moment. Remember, I don't want you to judge any thoughts or feelings that emerge. Just simply notice them and see them for what they are, then anchor yourself back in the experience of walking, through bringing your attention back to that weight transfer.

(Allow some time for the athlete to engage in the mindful walking)

This is a great exercise to practice when walking onto a training pitch or to the changing rooms. This form of mindful practice will develop your ability to notice when you are not present and give you the tools to get back there. Why not set SMART goals related to this? For example, a great weekly goal to have is: "I will mindfully walk onto the field before each session".

5. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the concept of Mindfulness. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I just can't stop thinking about my nerves and what might happen if I don't perform, it is really annoying". This athlete has work to do. They are struggling to break free from the thoughts of being nervous, which is then pulling them into the future and making them frustrated. It would not be easy to perform with thoughts and emotions like this, they need to work on their mindfulness practice and ability to be present and open to their moment-to-moment experience.

Nearly There: "Yeah I feel I can notice the bad thoughts but I'm struggling to remove them". This response hints at some progress being made, although we would seek to continue to change

■ this athlete's relationship with these "bad" thoughts, encouraging them to be more non-judgmental of their thoughts. It will be important to shift away from a preoccupation with "removing" the thought. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to remove thoughts, the focus is instead on allowing thoughts to be present as one of a multitude of different aspects of present moment experiences - this can help to disrupt the endless chaining that minds can make between different thoughts. This shift in focus can allow thoughts to be part of our experience without dominating our experience.

Ready to Proceed: "I notice the thoughts that I am having, and I can also broaden my awareness to be curious about other parts of my experience in the present moment". This athlete has developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognize what it means to be mindful.

6. Summary of session

A key point to emphasize in the session is that mindfulness is like a muscle - the more that the athlete practices mindfulness the stronger their ability to stay grounded in the moment will become. There are a multitude of apps (e.g. Smiling Mind™, Headspace™ etc.) that athletes can utilize to develop their mindfulness skills at a time and place that best suits them. In addition to the formal mindfulness practices, athletes can engage in more 'informal' mindfulness practices. The athlete should be encouraged to pick an activity of daily living (e.g. washing the dishes, making a cup of tea, brushing one's teeth etc.). These can be rich sensory experiences with things to see, hear, smell, touch and taste, but often an athlete's mind will have wandered far away from connecting in a curious way with the wealth of these sensations. Encouraging the athlete to pick an activity of daily living to be more mindful of can be a great way to develop the mindfulness muscle.

Together the practitioner and the athlete should explore the athlete's willingness to schedule mindfulness practice into their week. The athlete should be encouraged to notice what stories show up in their mind when considering setting aside time for practice (e.g. I'll give this a go/This isn't for me/I'm not good at this/I'll never be able to maintain it/I don't do 'meditation' etc.). The athlete should be asked if they would be willing to have these stories show up and still commit to giving it a go - that's psychological flexibility in action! Together, the practitioner and the athlete should agree a plan of action and review it at the next session.



Acknowledgement:

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