

Session Four

Being Open, Living Big



This session focuses on *Being Open* - helping athletes to develop a willingness to open up to the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that might show up on the journey towards *WExceLLence*. For more information see Chapter 7 of the '*Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*'.

This session can speak to the following types of issue:

- Uncomfortable or distressing thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of the journey towards *WExceLLence*.
- Athlete's report struggling against uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

1. Overview of session

The aim of this session is to help the athlete to:

- Understand moments when we become hooked by our thoughts, and how this can make moving towards *WExceLLence* difficult.
- Practice some techniques that can help athletes to unhook themselves from these thoughts.
- Develop levels of acceptance that will support movement towards *WExceLLence*.

2. What do we mean by *Being Open*?

Athletes can get hooked by thoughts about:

1. **Current situational conditions (environmental and interpersonal):** e.g. the cold, dark mornings are making it hard to get out for my training runs; the coach just doesn't like me.
2. **Feared future events (for self and/or others):** e.g. I'll put all this effort in and then they will cancel the event due to a public health emergency; I'm going to fail.
3. **Personal capabilities:** e.g. When the pressure comes on, I'm not resilient enough; I am too prone to injury.
4. **Capabilities of competitors:** e.g. My competitors are better resourced than me and have better support teams than me; That athlete has always had the edge on me.
5. **Lack of meaning or coherence:** e.g. I've fallen out of love with sport; I am not sure what all these sacrifices have been for.

Struggling against such uncomfortable or distressing thoughts can deplete an athlete's ability to make the most of opportunities. *Being Open* is not about working hard to change or get rid of these experiences. It's about not getting hooked by them and developing a willingness to bring difficult thoughts along on the journey towards *WExceLLence*.

When working with the *Being Open* aspect of the P.O.D. practitioners should take care to emphasize the important difference between athletes being willing to have difficult thoughts and feelings vs. athletes wanting those difficult thoughts and feelings. *Being Open* is about having the courageous willingness to have difficult experiences - this is not the same as wanting those experiences. It's fair to say that most people would not want to have difficult thoughts and feelings, but the *Flexible Mind* approach emphasizes that having difficult thoughts and feelings is an inevitable part of what it is to be human. People are hardwired to have difficult emotional experiences, so why not have these experiences *Doing What Matters*? The willingness that *Being Open* fosters can empower athletes to make choices that are in keeping with their values. *Being Open* is about athletes holding onto unhelpful thoughts less tightly, so they are not weighed down by them. This can create space between the athletes' thoughts and responses, affording them the capacity to shift their attention back to *Doing What Matters*. Session Insight 1 overleaf can be used to help athletes that challenging thoughts that they experience need not block their progress.



Session Insight 1

3. Helping the athlete with *Being Open*

Practitioners can use the following two practices (A and B) to experience *Being Open*:

Practice A. Leaves on a stream. The aim of this practice is to invite the athlete to get some distance from their thoughts and feelings (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"We are going to work through a short exercise that will encourage you to get some distance from your thoughts and feelings. I want you to sit in a comfortable position, you can either close your eyes or just gently fix them on a spot in front of you. Now, I invite you to visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream.


You hear the birds singing. The weather is warm, and you can feel a slight breeze on your face.

As you look out from where you are sitting you can notice leaves that have fallen onto the surface of the stream that are moving gently with the flow of the river.

For the next few minutes, I invite you to notice thoughts that might experience and imagine placing each thought on a leaf... then just watch it as it floats away along the surface of the stream, until the point that it disappears from view.

See if you can repeat this process for each new thought that you notice. The thoughts could be thoughts of things that have happened, events yet to occur, judgements about yourself or of others - each and all of these thoughts can be placed on a leaf of its own and allowed to float by.

(Allow some time to pass)


If you are struggling to notice anymore thoughts. That's okay. I want you to just go back to watching the water flow by, your thoughts will soon start up again. There is no need to try to change the speed at which the stream is flowing, so that these thoughts come into your view more quickly, or move out of view more quickly, just let them come at their own pace. Continue to notice thoughts and wait for others to float downstream.

(Allow some time to pass)

If your mind begins to tell you that "This is a waste of time," or "How will this help me?," just place these thoughts on leaves too, let them pass. If a thought comes up more than once, that is okay, just continue to place it on a leaf and watch it float by.

As you do this, difficult or painful feelings may arise. Just simply acknowledge them and say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of x,y,z", then once again, place these thoughts on a leaf and allow it to float along.

(Allow some time to pass)

If at any point during this exercise you have been distracted, this is normal and happens to everyone. As soon as you realize that you have been distracted, I invite you to bring your attention back to the stream.

(Allow some time to pass)

As we draw this exercise to a close, I invite you to acknowledge your willingness to notice your thoughts and let them pass by."

Practice B. Completing the sentences (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"I would like to introduce an exercise that I hope will help you in your quest to develop a Flexible Mind.

There is a risk that the exercise may prove a little uncomfortable at times, but that risk is in the service of something important – helping you to be more open to your experiences. If you are willing to give it a go, then let's begin...

If you are happy to do so, I invite you to close your eyes. Otherwise just fix your gaze softly on the floor in front of you.

I would like you to think of a recent time that you made a mistake, I want you to go back and relive that moment. Bring to mind what you were seeing at that time, what you might have been hearing, and what emotions you might have been feeling. If there were other people around try to bring to mind how they reacted to the mistake that you made.

As you do this, just acknowledge that there may be some difficult emotions showing up. You may feel like you want to avoid those emotions, that is understandable. But see if you can lean into the memory of that experience a bit more and make space for those emotions.

(Allow time for the memory to be elaborated)

See if you can work to bring as much of the detail of making that mistake into the room with you now.

Staying in the moment, I want you to imagine completing two sentences in the immediate aftermath of the mistake.

The first sentence starts with 'I am...', and I want you to complete this sentence with your own ending. How would you sum up what opinion you had of yourself in the aftermath of that mistake? 'I am...'

(Allow some time to pass)

The second sentence is 'Other people see me as...' and again just complete this sentence with your personal ending. How would you sum up what opinion other people had of you in the aftermath of that mistake? 'Other people see me as...'

(Allow some time to pass)

Notice the chair against your back. Notice the feeling of the ground beneath your feet.

OK, opening your eyes now, I would like you to write down the two sentences on a piece of paper. You will not be showing this to anyone else. This is just for you. So, firstly write down how you completed the sentence 'I am...'; and then how you completed the sentence 'Other people see me as...'

Once you have done this, I want you to put two words at the beginning of each of the sentences. Those two words are - 'I think'. So, your sentences should now begin 'I think I am...' and 'I think other people see me as...'

Notice whether the impact of these judging statements has changed in any way. Hopefully in explicitly labelling the judgments as being thoughts (i.e. products of thinking), you will be able to see that these judgments are not facts.

Now, I invite you to read both of the sentences backwards.

Notice again whether the impact of these judging statements has changed in any way. Hopefully, this will allow you to connect with the fact that these judgments are constructed through language, and that we can also focus on how this language is constructed rather than the content/meaning of the language.

As we draw this exercise to a close, I encourage you to give yourself credit for showing up to this memory of a mistake that you made, your ability to connect with the judgments associated with that mistake, and your willingness to try shifting your relationship to those judgments.”

The two practices described above can be helpful for assisting athletes to appreciate that their thoughts and feelings are not their enemy. Developing a courageous willingness to allow space for these experiences can mean that the athletes’ life choices can be guided more by how they truly want to be in the world. *Session Insight 2* (below) can be used to help the athlete to understand the shift in focus that a *Being Open* stance can bring.



Session Insight 2

The *Flexible Mind* approach does not view the attitude of acceptance/willingness that ‘Being Open’ fosters as weak or passive. Acceptance is the active, courageous willingness to have difficult thoughts and feelings, and still do what matters. #DoubtButDo.

4. 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 *Being Open* and if they are bringing this into their sporting lives. This will assist you in determining whether the athlete is ready to progress on from this initial work on *Being Open*. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "Yeah I rarely do my injury rehabilitation exercises. I am just too tired to do them before the gym session, I don't want to be more tired for the gym session". This athlete is fixed with their thoughts and believes them to be true. They also do not have a willingness to experience more discomfort, in this case be more tired. They need to work on seeing their thoughts for what they are, just thoughts. This will create space for them to unhook and move along the *WExceLLence* path.

Nearly There: "I do my injury rehabilitation exercises, even though I have thoughts that I am too tired. But I think it's not going to do me much good." This response hints at some progress being made, as this athlete is able to notice thoughts about being too tired but still does the rehab. However, there is still evidence of them getting hooked by mind chatter relating to the rehab not doing them much good.

Ready to Proceed: "I noticed that I was pretty tired this morning and my mind was giving me the 'let's skip my injury rehabilitation exercises before the gym', but I caught myself and got them done because I know these are the hard yards that will make the difference". Lovely stuff. This athlete has clearly developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognise what *Being Open*, living big really means.

5. Summary of session

Summarize the key points covered in the session and make arrangements to meet again to review and undertake additional work.

This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Being Open, Living Big* (Session 4) in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 165-185). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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