

Session Five

Getting Present with the Discomfort



This aim of the fifth session is to recognise the mind's tendency to 'time-travel' away from one's ability to experience the richness of the current moment. For further information see Chapter 8 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can be particularly helpful if the athlete is:

- preoccupied by thoughts or feelings associated with past or the future events, and this is at the expense of them connecting more fully with the current moment.
- reporting difficulties tolerating the discomfort associated with challenging or difficult thoughts, feelings or sensations.
- reporting a desire to avoid or to get rid of difficult thoughts, feelings or experiences.

1. Overview of session

As Session Insight 1 illustrates, it's inevitable that athlete's concentration will wander. Their mind is doing what minds do. The trick will be to support the athlete to notice the wandering and bring their awareness back to the here and now with a sense of purpose and gratitude. This session allows the practitioner to guide the athlete through practical steps aimed at doing precisely that.



Session Insight 1

The practitioner should show the athlete the P.O.D. of *psychological flexibility* (available to download from www.flexiblemind.co.uk) and explain to them that this session attends in particular to the *Being Present* aspect of the P.O.D.

2. Practice Being Present

Practice - The EDIT Approach to Being Present (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

The practitioner can use the following script to help guide the athletes to actively notice and engage with the current moment and associated thoughts and feelings- whether pleasurable or uncomfortable. There is also an associated audio guide to this practice called 'The E.D.I.T. Approach to Being Present'. This E.D.I.T. practice encourages the athlete to not only connect to the present moment but to immerse themselves in it fully, rather than avoid or try to hide from internal experiences.

"We are going to use the E.D.I.T. Approach to help you to Be Present. E.D.I.T stands for:

- *Establish routines*
- *Drop anchor*
- *Identify Thoughts and feelings*
- *Thank your mind*

Let's break this down and focus on each of the specific components separately.

First, let's focus on 'E' for 'Establish a Routine'.

Routines are important for helping to make our lives more manageable. Establishing routines is a great way to proactively ensure that we don't get caught up in internal 'time-travel' - ruminating over things that we forgot to do, or didn't do so well, or worrying about the things that are yet to come.

Let's not forget the 7Ps - Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

Establishing a routine will require full consideration of various aspects of life both inside and outside sport. Consider using a diary (or calendar) to plan your week.

Consider allocating specific times to address the following life domains: maintaining friendships, nurturing relationships and family life, making time for recreation and relaxation, managing financial affairs, contributing to the community, looking after physical health (including nutrition, sleep), adhering to training schedule/regime, committing to having difficult but important conversations.

As you consider doing this, notice how your mind might resist with ideas that you aren't 'good with schedules'. Rest assured; you can establish a routine even though your mind might be suggesting you cannot. Be reasonable about what you can achieve within the time slots that you have available. Remember that you are not superhuman. Take care to prioritise what might be urgent - some things can wait. As important as 'To do' lists might be, it is also important to register what you have been able to complete - so take the time to tick off tasks that were achieved.

Secondly, let's focus on the 'D' for the 'Drop Anchor' stage of the E.D.I.T process. This is intended as a simple exercise to 'centre' and connect with the world around you. This is a technique that can be practiced throughout the day - particularly at times when you notice that you are getting hooked away from the current moment by thoughts and feelings. Drop Anchor is based on a 5-stage process:

1. Place your feet flat on the floor
2. Push the soles of your feet into the floor and feel the solidity of the floor beneath you as it supports you.
3. As you push your feet down into the floor, notice the tension in the muscles of your thighs. After holding this for 5 secs, allow that tension to release.

4. Notice now how your body is in contact with the chair — are there parts of the chair that your body is more clearly anchored to?

5. Now use your senses to explore what you might not have noticed in the room. Notice what you can see. Notice what you can hear.

See if you can set reminders on your mobile phone to engage in this simple five step 'dropping anchor' process at particular points during your day.

Thirdly, let's turn to the 'I' for 'Identify thoughts and feelings' aspect of E.D.I.T.

Take a moment to reflect on thoughts that you are aware that you have recently been experiencing. If you were to describe the character (or nature) of these thoughts in a few words how would you do that? Perhaps these thoughts were pleasant and day-dreamy, perhaps those thoughts were more commanding and instructive, or maybe they were harsh and critical?

Now take a moment to describe the feelings (i.e. emotions) that accompanied the thoughts you recently experienced? Perhaps there were feelings of joy and excitement, perhaps feelings of stress, or perhaps feelings of sadness or fear.

If you were to set aside some time in your schedule for the coming week, what one thing could you do that would link directly to the thoughts and feelings that you have just been describing to yourself? Who might you approach to support you with undertaking this action?

Lastly, let's explore the 'T' for 'Thank your mind' part of the E.D.I.T approach. Instead of getting hooked away from the current moment by thoughts and the feelings, see if you can respond with an attitude of kindness by 'thanking your mind' for doing the job it has done to alert you to potentially important issues. Practice saying: "Thanks Mind, I understand that these are issues that need to be addressed. I choose to respond with kindness and do what I can to take good care of myself and those that matter to me at this time".

Practice - Mindfulness Practices

The practitioner can help the athlete to develop *Being Present* skills through a variety of guided Mindfulness practices that are available as MP3 recordings or as prepared scripts. The practitioner should take care to check in with how the athlete experiences these practices. Whilst mindfulness can certainly help athletes to connect with moments of calm, it's true power lies in supporting athletes to be present with the breadth of day-to-day experiences and to notice when our mind has wandered from the 'now'. Session Insight 2 neatly captures the rich opportunities that the

present moment affords. There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done: One is called Yesterday; The other is called Tomorrow. So, seize today. Seize now.



Session Insight 2

3. Engaging the *Experiencer*

It is important for athletes to enhance their ability to notice that they are engaged in *processes* of thinking and feeling (i.e. experiencing), rather than solely focusing on the *nature* of the thoughts and feelings they are having (i.e. experiences). The *Experiencer* mode of mind (also referred to as the *Noticer*) can help athletes to occupy a broader perspective on their present moment experience and the opportunities that this brings to exercise more choice and agency in what their awareness gets allocated to.

To help the athlete engage their *Experiencer* mode of mind the practitioner can use the following script with the athlete:

"Notice your right foot, notice your left foot, now notice this [insert name of readily available piece of sporting equipment relevant to the athlete]. Connect now with the part of you that is doing the noticing. Harnessing, this part of your mind will be important for our work together."

Practice - The Arena Analogy (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

A more elaborate way of encouraging the athlete to engage the *Experiencer* is The Arena Analogy. There is also an associated audio guide to this practice called 'The Arena Analogy'. Commence this practice by showing the individual/group a photograph of a sporting arena (this can be tailored for different arenas depending on the athlete's sport), and then provide the following instructions:

"Grab a seat and make yourself comfortable – preferably with both your feet on the floor, your hands resting on your lap. Close your eyes. Or if you would prefer, fix your gaze at a point on the floor in front of you.

As I guide you through this process your task is just to follow my instructions and to notice what shows up in how you might be thinking or feeling.

The exercise should take only a few minutes.

To begin, take a couple of deep breaths. Connect with the felt experience of the air as it comes into your body as you breathe in, and as it leaves your body as you breathe out.

Relax into the chair that you're sitting in, becoming aware of the fact that it will support you throughout the exercise.

In your mind's eye imagine that you are competing in your sport. In this moment you are doing what you have rehearsed to do many times before, you are in the flow of the moment-by-moment experience.

(allow some time for the athlete to fix on this image)

Now imagine in your mind's eye that your perspective has widened - like a TV camera zooming out from where the sporting action is happening.

Connect with the perspective of a spectator sitting observing the event. Notice the distance between the action itself and the place where you are now observing from.

(allow some time for the person to fix on this image)

Now let's take the perspective wider still. I invite you to appreciate that the athletes and the spectators are all situated in the broader context of the arena or stadium.

The arena existed before the action was happening. It exists during the performance we have been discussing. And the arena persists after the action has concluded.

(allow some time for the athlete to fix on this image)

The arena is the context in which the cut and thrust of the action takes place, but it is also the context in which spectators' ability to notice the action takes place.

We are like the arena. We are the context in which our thoughts/emotions take place (i.e. experiences); we are the context in which we can notice our thoughts and emotions (i.e. experiencing), and we endure beyond those moments of being able to observe our thoughts and emotion (i.e. the Experiencer).

Notice the difference between these 3 different levels – our thoughts and emotions are experiences that we can have. It is us that engages in processes of experiencing thoughts and emotions. And it is us that has the ability to notice that we are engaged in processes of thinking and feeling.”



Session Insight 3

Session Insight 3 can be used to help athletes to recognise that staying in the present moment is not just about noticing the mind's tendency to 'time travel', it's about bringing an attitude of curiosity and appreciation to what is happening in the here and now.

4. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples of how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the concept of *Being Present* and if they are bringing this into their life. This will assist the practitioner in determining whether the athlete is ready to progress on from this initial work on *Being Present*. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I understand that there are benefits from being more present than being caught up with the past, but I am not convinced I can do much about it". This athlete has work to do. They get the principle of the work, but they might not understand how to put it into practice

Nearly There: "OK, I can sit with difficult thoughts and feelings but that is still feeling very challenging". This response hints at the athlete making progress with the *Being Present* work, but it seems that the focus is more narrowly on inner experiences rather than incorporating a broader awareness of other aspects of present moment experiences. Engaging the five-senses, for example, can help with this. The athlete also needs to be reminded that this is challenging work.

Ready to Proceed: "I recognise that I am the context in which processes such as thoughts and feelings occur. I can be present with the breadth of my experiences in this moment and know that I am not those experiences'. The athlete is connecting with the *Experiencer* mode of mind and is ready to explore additional approaches for building psychological flexibility.

5. Summary of session

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

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