
Session Six

Flexibility... of the Psychological Kind



This aim of the sixth session is to appreciate how flexibly moving around the P.O.D. can benefit the practitioner and the athlete. For further information see Chapter 9 of the *‘Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes’ Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind’*.

This session can:

- Review the concept of psychological flexibility with the athlete and how it can support the athlete's journey towards *WExceLLence*.
- demonstrate the benefits of psychological flexibility being greater than the sum of the individual P.O.D. elements (i.e. *Being Present, Being Open, Doing What Matters*).
- explain how to move flexibly around the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility.
- help practitioners and athletes check-in with their ongoing work using the *Flexible Mind* approach.

1. Overview of session

As *Session Insight 1* below highlights, investing time and effort into developing psychological flexibility can enhance wellbeing and performance. In this session, the practitioner should review with the athlete the concept of psychological flexibility and what it means to be psychologically flexible, as well as what might be considered psychologically inflexible.

This session also helps the practitioner and athlete appreciate that the benefits of psychological flexibility as a whole are greater than the sum of the individual P.O.D. elements, that there are many ways in which they can engage with the *Flexible Mind* approach, and that practitioners being rigid

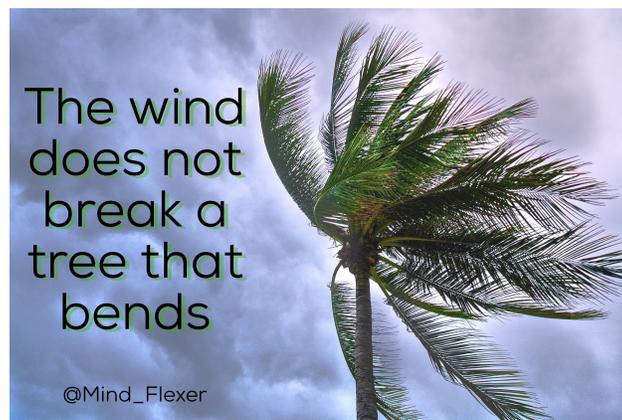
in how the P.O.D. elements are focused upon is not in the service of building psychological flexibility.



Session insight 1

2. Recognising when the mind is not flexible.

To understand *psychological flexibility*, is to also acknowledge when the mind is not flexible. As Session Insight 2 illustrates, being flexible has its advantages! The benefits of being psychologically flexible allows athletes to *be present, be open* to experience the inevitable challenging thoughts and feelings, and still be able to live their value-led lives, i.e. *do what matters*.



Session Insight 2

At the start of this session, practitioners should review and update the formulation table to help the athlete reflect on where challenges, in relation to being psychologically flexible, may be persisting. Focusing in turn on *Being Present, Being Open* or *Doing What Matters* allows attention to be drawn

to one or more of these P.O.D. elements which might be fueling rigidity in how the person relates to their thoughts and beliefs.

A. Being Present and Being Open Practice

From these initial discussions, where an athlete identifies difficulty in *Being Present*, the practitioner can use the following script for a **breathing and body scan**, to help the athlete to become more present and recognise when their mind may ‘time-travel’ away from being present as well as helping them *be open* to challenging or unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

Practice: Breathing and Body Scan

“Sit in a comfy chair, relax and let your eyes close if you wish. Now just begin to notice and acknowledge sensations that are occurring in your body.

Take a moment to scan yourself from head to toe and just notice, with curiosity, any sensations you may be experiencing. What does it feel like where your body contacts the chair?

Are your shoulders tight or relaxed?

After noticing any sensations that may be present from head to toe, now shift your attention towards your breathing.

Take 5 deep breaths, notice air rush in through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth, observe how your chest rises and falls.

If you begin to observe thoughts in your head, you may notice the thought ‘what am I doing this for?’, simply notice it, see it pass through your mind and once again focus back on your breathing.”

The practitioner should advise the athlete to do this breathing and body scan practice regularly to develop their ability to *be present* and *be open*.

B. Doing What Matters Task

If, in the initial discussion with the athlete about their *psychological flexibility*, the athlete’s responses indicate to the practitioner that they are struggling with *Doing What Matters*, it may be the athlete isn’t fully cognizant of what it is that matters to them. The practitioner can use the following task to help the athlete identify and clarify their values. This will ultimately help enhance the *Doing What Matters* P.O.D. element of *psychological flexibility*.

Practice: Athlete of the Year Award (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

The following task can be used to help the athlete identify or clarify what their values are. Provide the following instructions to the athlete:

“It’s the Annual World Sports Awards Ceremony. You have been nominated for the ‘Athlete of the Year Award’ this year, and you have been sitting excitedly at your table, eagerly waiting for the announcement of the winner.

The big moment eventually arrives, and the ceremony’s host welcomes the special guest (who is immensely respected within your sport) onto the stage so that they can present the award. The special guest slowly opens the envelope and smiles before announcing your name as the winner. You have won the coveted Athlete of the Year Award. Congratulations!

You make your way on to the stage to receive your award. The audience is clapping and cheering you as you go. You’re beaming from ear to ear, feeling proud and delighted with your achievement and the acknowledgement from your peers and family.

Upon receiving your award, the special guest starts to give a speech to the audience about who you are as an athlete and a person, and the qualities that make you a worthy winner of the award.

Take a moment now to think about the attributes and qualities that you hope that the guest speaker would pick up on in the speech. How would you like them to describe you as a person? As an athlete? How would you like them to describe how you treat other people? To conclude this exercise, I invite you to:

1) write down on a sheet of paper or on the Notes app of your mobile phone at least 4 key qualities that you would hope the guest speaker would comment on.

2) think about ways in which you can bring those key qualities into how you are the rest of today. What one action might you be able to commit to that would help you move more towards demonstrating one or more of those qualities.

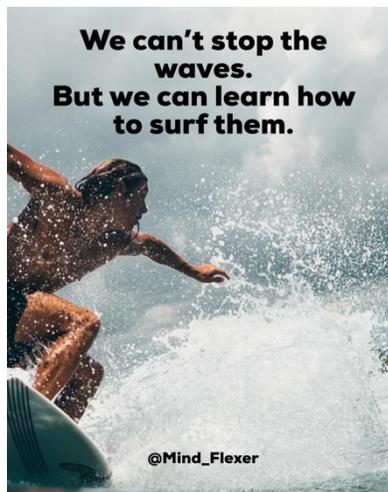
Notice whether your mind might be casting doubt on your ability to demonstrate these qualities and commit to demonstrating them anyway.

This concludes the ‘Athlete of the Year’ Award Exercise.”

The task above can help the athlete establish clear values that are personal to them, rather than imposed. This can further enable a discussion between the practitioner and the athlete about what behaviours and actions the athlete can carry out to align with these values and what barriers they may need to negotiate in order to be value-led.

3. Transitioning through the P.O.D.

As *Session Insight 3* illustrates, it is inevitable that the tides of life will present challenges to us all. Trying to fight against these tidal surges may not be best the way forward. Developing *psychological flexibility* can help negotiate the peaks and troughs that life brings.



Session insight 3

So, as well as identifying P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility* on which the athlete would benefit from working, it is important that practitioners need not be prescriptive in the order of work. *The Flexible Mind* approach affords multiple opportunities for constructive interactions with the athlete. The practitioner and athlete should note there is no fixed sequence of actions to enhance *psychological flexibility*. It is recommended that practitioners and athletes flexibly transition from one P.O.D. aspect to another when appropriate. This non-prescriptive order of working is reflective of the ethos of the *Flexible Mind* approach to enhancing *psychological flexibility*.

It should also be noted that the athlete's responses to questions may allow the practitioner and athlete to take a number of different approaches to enhancing psychological flexibility during this session. The ability for the practitioner to move flexibly around the P.O.D. during a session is important for helping the athlete to realise that the focusing on *Being Present*, *Being Open*, or

Doing What Matters skills at any particular point in the session is in the service of something greater i.e. the fostering of *psychological flexibility*.

Below are some examples of questions that practitioners can ask that can facilitate the transition from one P.O.D. aspect to another;

Transition from...	Transition to...	Practitioner Questions
Being Present	Being Open	As you notice the thoughts/feelings, what stories does your mind generate about the impact that these will have on your life?
Being Open	Doing What Matters	Now that you have been able to unhook from the difficult thoughts, what would you like to invest your time and energy in?
Doing What Matters	Being Present	As we sit here now, taking time to think about this value, and how much that matters to you, can you describe how that makes you feel?
Being Open	Being Present	Now that you have been able to let go of struggling with your mind's stories about your life, what other aspects of your present moment experience can you also connect with?

Check out Chapter 9 in *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* for other example transition questions from one P.O.D. aspect to another.

Rather than making the transitions for the sake of making them, the practitioner should make the transitions with the explicit intention to help promote the athlete's *psychological flexibility*.

4. Checking progress

Here are some examples of how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they understand the concepts that have been the focus of this session. These can assist the practitioner in determining if the athlete is ready to progress. The different stages of understanding are categorised as *Needs More Work*, *Nearly There* and *Ready to Proceed*.

Needs More Work: "I've practiced mindfulness a few times. I've got it. What's next on the list?" - This suggests the athlete has not fully appreciated the dynamic nature of developing P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility and the need for continued practice to support the *Flexible Mind*

approach. It also suggests they don't yet appreciate the flexible nature with which you can transition around the P.O.D. rather than work in individual aspects in a systematic order.

Nearly There: "I can recognise when I'm not *Being Present* and can successfully reorientate my mind to the present moment. I'm clear on what actions I need to take to live in line with my values. So, do I really need to be open to my thoughts and emotions? For some, I'd rather just get rid of them". - The athlete is doing well to recognise the different P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility, however, needs some further help to appreciate the importance of the collective contribution of them all in the service of fostering greater psychological flexibility.

Ready to Proceed: "I enjoy working around the P.O.D. Different days may mean I need to focus more on one P.O.D. aspect over the others to help sustain my psychological flexibility. For example, on competition days, I really struggle with *Being Present* - my mind shoots forward to "Am I going to win? What if I don't perform well?", but *Being Present* is no problem for me on training days. I like that I can work with my practitioner on all aspects, or focus more energy on one aspect that needs it most". - This suggests the athlete appreciates the flexible manner in which they and their practitioner can transition between the different P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility, and they recognise the ongoing process of improving psychological flexibility.

5. Summary of session

An important consideration to emphasise in this session is that *psychological flexibility* is dynamic and requires ongoing practice.

The practitioner should review the formulation with the athlete to identify the P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility* with which the athlete might be having difficulty. Considerable time during this session should be given to allow the athlete to reflect upon their progress in the different P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*. This will further allow the practitioner and athlete to identify and work on one or more P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*, as required.

In this session the practitioner can also use the appropriate questions to transition the focus toward any other of the P.O.D. aspects that require enhancement.

Together the practitioner and athlete should explore opportunities for the athlete to continue to work on the different P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*, recognising the benefit is greater when considering the sum of all the P.O.D. aspects rather than each one individually.

Once the practitioner has summarized the key points covered in the session, it is advisable for the practitioner and athlete to agree a plan of action and make arrangements to meet again to review it and consider further work.

The Flexible Mind Session Guides - Session Six

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