

Session Three

Orientating to Our Inner Compass



This session identifies values as a motivating force, and outlines strategies for helping athletes to clarify their own values. For further information see Chapter 6 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 reporting a loss of direction, hunger and/or direction in their efforts
- The athlete is reporting feeling 'lost' or feeling unsure of their authentic self
- The athlete is struggling to link goals and targets to the 'bigger picture'.
- The athlete is interested to understand the important messages that might sit behind their struggles and difficulties.

1. Overview of session

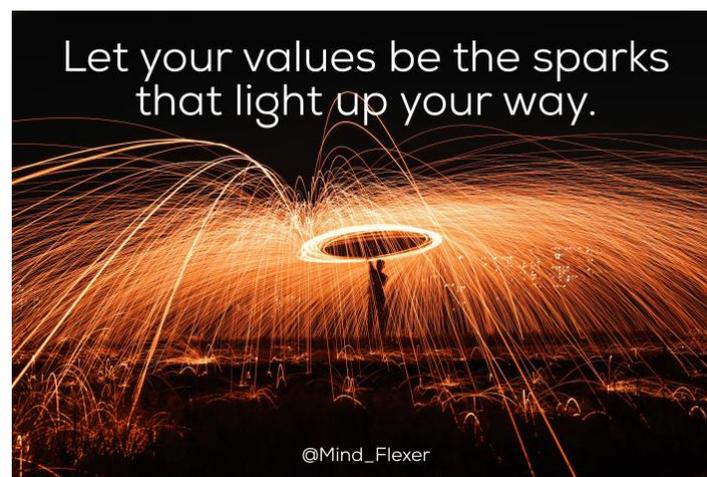
The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help athletes to take active, effective and committed action in line with their values (i.e. what truly matters to them) so that this can promote a rich and meaningful life. The practitioner should also highlight that there is a strong focus on the 'Doing What Matters' aspect of the P.O.D. in this session. As the *Session Insight 1* below highlights, sacrifices made in the service of doing what matters to us feel worthwhile. This can be referred to as accessing the 'Doing What Matters' mindset.



Session Insight 1

2. Defining Values

Values are qualities of action that we can bring to our everyday experience that reflect how we want to be in the world. They can be a powerful source of motivation that can help fuel our actions. Importantly, our values can influence the choices that we make, how we interact with others and how we relate to ourselves. As *Session Insight 2* below highlights, our values can be the spark that serves to light up our journey forward in life.



Session Insight 2

According to Wilson & DuFrene (2009): 'Values are freely chosen, verbally constructed consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity'. Put more simply, our values help to guide us in the choices that we make in our daily lives. They can be understood as the essence of what a person wants to be doing with his/her life; what he/she wants to stand for,

and how he/she wants to be behaving on an ongoing basis. A variety of other terms can be used to capture the spirit of what values stand for including 'chosen life directions', 'guiding principles', 'what we want to stand for' or 'our life compass'. As such, values offer possibilities to grow as a people, as well as athletes.

3. Clarifying the athlete's values

Practice A. Personal Highlight Reel (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"Let's spend some time thinking of a moment that stands out in your personal 'highlight reel'.

Grab a seat and make yourself comfortable. If you are happy to do so, close your eyes. Alternatively, you can fix your eyes in a soft stare at the ground in front of you.

Take a moment to think of a time when you were performing at a really high level. Perhaps other people remarked on how well you were performing. Or, maybe you had a sense of really being on it - really making an impact. This could be a moment during competition or in training.

Take a moment to recall your memories of that time.

What aspects of that experience were particularly sweet/vivid? For example, this might be a moment where you... (add a sport specific example e.g. ran half the pitch and scored a goal in the top corner, ran a PB etc.).

Can you describe the situation to me?

Can you recall what you were thinking in those moments?

Can you recall what you were feeling in those moments?

Take time to be really curious about those moments when you were at your best.

Notice the feelings that are showing up.

Where are you experiencing those feelings in your body?

If those feelings had a colour what colour might those feelings be?

Now, take a moment to consider this question - what was it that was so significant about that moment that meant you had those feelings?

What qualities were you demonstrating in your actions during those moments?

How would you describe those qualities in a few short words to yourself?

If you could have more of these moments in your life would you want to have them?

How might you find ways of demonstrating those qualities you demonstrated in those moments in how you move through the rest of today?

4. Suffering - a 'window of opportunity' to see values



Session Insight 3

Experiences of loss and disappointment (as per *Session Insight 3*) will ask important questions of athletes. The following script can be used to help athletes connect with how difficult emotions can provide an opportunity to understand what the athlete truly values.

Practice B. The T.E.A.M. B.U.S. (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"The acronym T.E.A.M stands for Treat Emotions As Messengers. It is important to recognise that challenging emotions (such as anxiety, frustration or anger) that sit at the heart of suffering can communicate that something important needs to be addressed.

The acronym B.U.S helps to demonstrate a three-step process that aims to help athletes to manage the emotions:

- **B**reathe – this will help your body and mind to slow down and bring you into the present moment.
- **U**nhook – recognise that thoughts are thoughts not facts.

- See what matters enough for you to have the emotion in the first place, and be proactive about attending to that area of your life.

Let's focus on Step 1 of the B.U.S. approach. 'B' stands for 'Breathe'. The use of controlled breathing can be an effective way of reducing the impact of challenging emotions that we are experiencing.

Take a seat and find a comfortable position. If you are happy to do so, close your eyes. Alternatively, fix your gaze softly at a point in front of you.

- Slow your breathing down to a slow easy pace
- Place one hand on your chest, and the other hand on your stomach
- Breathe in through your nose counting 1...2...3...slowly
- Breathe out through your mouth counting 1...2...3...slowly.

Let's see if we can do this for between 3 and 5 mins. The task is simple, try to stay with the felt experience of breathing in and out. Please don't 'beat yourself up' when your mind starts to wander, just notice that this has happened, and see if you come back to counting '1...2...3...' each time that you breathe in, and '1...2...3...' as you breathe out.

(Allow time to complete the breathing exercise)

Let's now proceed to Step 2 of the B.U.S. approach. 'U' stands for 'Unhook'. When we "unhook" ourselves, we can see our thoughts for what they really are: sounds, words, language passing through our minds that have the potential to 'hook' us, as if we are fish caught on a hook and reeled away from the direction that we want to be travelling in.

"Unhooking" skills help us to get back on track. When we unhook, we can be less inclined to see our thoughts as irrefutable facts, we can recognise that thoughts may or may not be important, and that thoughts may or may not be wise. Here is an example of one technique for unhooking, although there are many other examples also.

Take a moment to write down a thought that you can recognise shows up in the suffering you experience. Really notice the thought.

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to sit with the thought)

Now, I invite you to work through a two-stage process to help 'unhook' from the thought.

First, read the thought again but this time insert the following two-words at the beginning: 'I think...'.


Do you notice anything about how the impact of the thought might have changed?

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to notice)

Secondly, read the thought again but this time insert the following words at the beginning:

'I am noticing that I am having the thought...'.

Has the impact that the thought makes changed in any way?

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to notice)

By working through this two-stage process of recognising that you are engaged in the process of thinking, and then recognising that you can notice you are engaged in this process of thinking, you are starting to unhook from the thought. You are starting to introduce some flexibility in how you might relate to and respond to the thought.

Finally, let's now proceed to Step 3 of the B.U.S. approach. 'S' stands for 'See' - to see what it is that matters enough for the suffering to be there in the first place. The fact that we might be suffering means that something we care about is under threat.

Take time to think about what it is that truly matters in this situation. What is it that's really important that might be under threat? Can the source of threat be addressed directly?

If so, see what steps (including seeking appropriate support) can you take to do that.

In addition, can you see any actions that you can commit to so that you can be true to your values - even in the ongoing presence of this threat?

5. *WExceLLence* As Important Direction of Travel

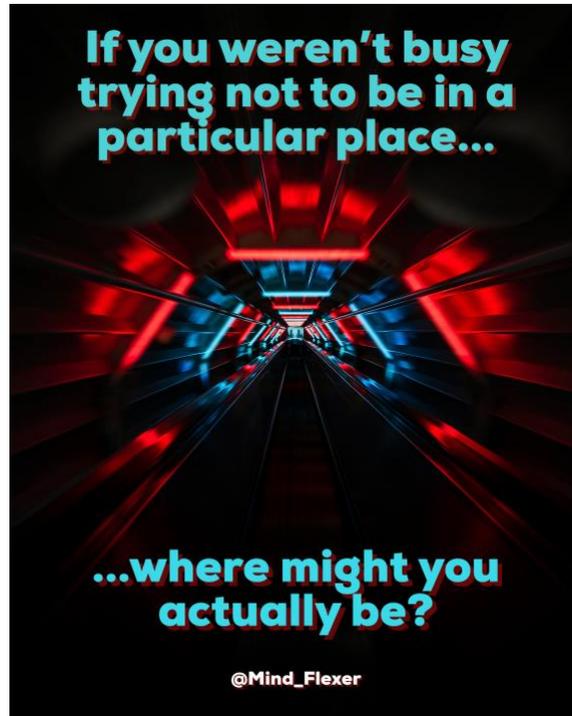
The practitioner should discuss *WExceLLence* as an approach to life that helps create a balance between values that can optimise the balance between performance and wellbeing. The athlete should be invited to complete the ***WExceLLence* Worksheet** (Available from www.flexiblemind.co.uk). The completion of the worksheet will provide opportunities for the athlete and their support staff to strike a balance between optimising performance and wellbeing - what can be referred to as *WExceLLence*. The worksheet reflects on goals that are linked directly to the values that they have identified, challenges that they might face in achieving these goals, and how these challenges can be overcome.

6. The Perils of Wearing Values 'Blinkers'

The practitioner should discuss with the athlete the importance of not getting too hooked in by our mind's suggestion that we should ALWAYS act in value-consistent ways. Values should guide our choices in effective and sustainable ways – and we should be aware of the risk of wearing our values-'blinkers'. In the build up to, and during, a horse race, a racehorse can benefit from having its field of vision restricted to keep its focus on the particular direction it is intending to travel, free from distraction. 'Blinkers' are a commonly used type of horse tack that are employed for this purpose. However, there comes a point beyond the context of a race when the blinkers need to come off, when the horse needs to have a broader field of vision to safely negotiate its environment and to orientate towards the food, water, and company that will sustain it. Similarly, athletes need to find sustainable, as well as effective, ways of being true to our values. *Values-fusion* is a term that is used to capture this over-use of the values-'blinkers'.

7. Committing to action

Understanding our values and ensuring that these guide the choices that we make in life is important. The question posed in *Session Insight 4* below helps to highlight the opportunities that can arise when athletes move towards what matters rather than moving away from difficult thoughts and emotions. Converting this insight into actual changes in behaviours is a crucial next step. The athlete needs to commit to actions that will allow these values-informed goals to be achieved. In *Session 1* 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 to track progress on the path to *WExceLLence*. Athletes' experience can really shift when they courageously choose to move towards what matters to us rather than rigidly choosing to avoid situations where difficult thoughts and emotions might show up.



Session Insight 4

For 'between-session' practice the athlete should be encouraged to identify SMART goals that are consistent with values that have been identified during the session and the completion of the *WExceLLence* worksheet.

8. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the ready to progress on from this initial work on values. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I have identified some values that I can now work towards completing". This athlete has work to do. They are struggling to distinguish between goals and values.

Nearly There: "Yeah I recognise that there are values that are important in my life, but I am a failure for being so distant from them". This response hints at the person being blocked in their efforts to engage in value-consistent behaviour by their mind's judgements about themselves.

Ready to Proceed: "I have greater clarity on what my values are. I know that as I move towards my values, anxiety and worry might show up. But I want to focus on achieving goals that are informed by my values in spite of these strong emotions". This athlete has developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognise

what values are, how they are closely linked to the risk of experiencing suffering and that goals can help us chart progress in valued-life directions. We are hard-wired to experience difficult emotions - why not have them whilst you are *Doing What Matters!*

9. Summary of session

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

Reference

Wilson, K. & DuFrene, T. (2009). *Mindfulness for two: An acceptance and commitment therapy approach to mindfulness in psychotherapy*. New Harbinger Publications.

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