

## Introduction

# Setting the scene for the *Flexible Mind* approach

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This introductory section of the *Flexible Mind Session Guides* aims to provide a rationale for the approach and highlight some important considerations to ensure that practitioners and athletes get the most from the approach.

## Psychological Flexibility

The *Flexible Mind* approach is based on Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT). ACT is a form of psychological training that helps to build *psychological flexibility*. Hayes (2019, p5.) has defined psychological flexibility as the 'ability to feel and think with openness, to attend voluntarily to your experience of the present moment, and to move your life in directions that are important to you, building habits that allow you to live in accordance with your values and aspirations'. The aim of the *Flexible Mind* Session Guide is to help practitioners to deliver sessions with athletes so that they can build psychological flexibility to develop and sustain an optimal balance between performance excellence and mental health and wellbeing. We call this balance *WExceLLence*. The material presented in this *Flexible Mind* Session Guide is drawn from the book *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (White et al., 2021). It is important to empathise that the *Flexible Mind* Session Guide should be used to *complement* the more detailed information presented in the book rather than to act as a substitute for it.

## Who should deliver the approach?

The *Flexible Mind* approach should be delivered by practitioners who have at a minimum a postgraduate degree in a form of applied psychology (e.g. sport and exercise psychology, clinical psychology, counselling psychology etc.). This will help provide the requisite knowledge of psychological processes for intervention delivery. As such practitioner psychologists (such as sport and exercise psychologists, clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists etc.) will be well placed to deliver the intervention. We will be adopting the term 'practitioner' throughout the text, to collectively describe these various professions. It will, however, be important for these practitioners to seek appropriate supervision for delivering the intervention. There are a range of 'warning lights' that practitioners should be alert to which should signal when issues need to be escalated and specialist consultation is required. Warning lights include a sustained period of low mood, acute distress/trauma, grief, psychosis, suicidal ideation/intent, and/or addictions. If such issues arise, then urgent support should be sought from a mental health professional. Sport-specific factors that would meet criteria for 'warning lights' would include: 1) Physical injury will necessitate the involvement of experts in the physical management and rehabilitation of the injury, 2) Sustained performance decrement will require the involvement of the head/assistant, strength and conditioning coaches, 3) Weight loss/weight gain will require consultation with the nutritionist, strength and conditioning coaches, 4) Competition anxiety would benefit from specialist input from sport psychology.

## Introducing the P.O.D.

The *Flexible Mind* approach is a pragmatic one - it aims to help athletes explore whether behaviours are effective (or 'workable') in the context that they occur for them enhancing *WExceLLence*. If existing strategies are serving them well in this regard, then great, they should keep doing those things. If, however, existing strategies are proving to be ineffective or counterproductive then the *Flexible Mind* approach can be helpful for informing alternative approaches. The three key processes that the *Flexible Mind* approaches draws on to build *WExceLLence* are Being **P**resent, Being **O**pen, **D**oing what matters a.k.a. the *P.O.D of psychological flexibility*.

**Being Present:** Is about recognizing that there is a 'you' that can notice the breadth of current moment experiences.

**Being Open:** Is about adopting a courageous and curious willingness to explore current experiences (even if they are difficult) and unhooking from the mind's tendency to want to define ourselves on the basis of these experiences

**Doing What Matters:** Is about getting clear about our values and committing to actions that are consistent with these values.

By focusing on the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility, the *Flexible Mind* approach supports athletes to choose to build repertoires of behaviour that serve the function of allowing them to move 'towards' *WExceLLence* and be less prone to engaging in behaviours that serve a more restrictive function of moving 'away' from threats; threats that can actually be understood as the 'price of admission' for doing what really counts.

## How to approach the delivery of sessions

The session guide will provide detailed information about how sessions of the *Flexible Mind* approach can be structured. Guidance is provided about how the approach can be delivered to athletes across seven different sessions. In considering how to deliver the *Flexible Mind* approach, we propose that practitioners use what we refer to as the A.R.C. method to sessions:

**A:** Attend to key principles and new knowledge

**R:** Review the athletes' level of understanding

**C:** Consolidate learning through between session practice (a.k.a. as 'homework').

It is important for practitioners using the *Flexible Mind* approach to avoid being rigid and dogmatic in the conduct of this work. If you talk the flexible talk, it is crucial that you walk the flexible walk. Depending on the athlete, and their particular context, the relevance and utility of particular 'sessions' will vary.

Rather than having to be delivered in a particular order, the sequencing of the *Flexible Mind* approach sessions as detailed in this session guide should be tailored to the individual athlete. Important factors to consider include the: a) particular challenges that the athlete is experiencing and wishes to prioritize, and b) opportunities that exist for quickly engaging the athlete in the work - if the athlete doesn't feel the approach for them, then the work might be dead in the water. The *Flexible Mind* approach provides important opportunities to meet the athlete where they are currently, rather than where a practitioner wants them to be.

The *Flexible Mind Session Guide* is itself not intended to be prescriptive - the guidance provided about how to structure sessions is not intended as a definitive description of how things ought to be done. Instead, the guidance should be regarded as illustrative; providing an indication of how the *Flexible Mind* approach can be applied.

Some key points that practitioners should bear in mind when delivering the Flexible Mind approach:

**A. *Be client-led:*** Readers of this book should not determine the end-point of *Flexible Mind* 'sessions' with an athlete as being marked by the passing of arbitrarily set periods of time e.g. 60 or 90 minute meetings with athletes. Instead, the endpoint for these sessions should be determined by the progress that the athlete is making. As such, the 'sessions' presented in forthcoming chapters may require multiple meetings between the practitioner and the athlete, as well as the completion of exercises and practices between these meetings if they are to yield progress. So in your reading of our use of the word 'session' in this book, please don't think that we mean that the principles and processes covered in each of the chapters need to be covered in one meeting with the athlete.

**B. *Be integrative:*** The *Flexible Mind* approach, as with ACT approaches more generally, can be integrated alongside a range of other techniques and strategies (social identity approaches, mindfulness-based approaches, enhancing athletes emotional lexicon etc.) that practitioners might have experience of using to enhance performance or emotional wellbeing - provided these do not run contrary to the ethos of enhancing an active, open, courageous willingness to have difficult thoughts and feelings.

**C. *Track changes across time:*** Although the specific outcomes (and associated assessment instruments) will vary, practitioners using the *Flexible Mind* approach should be aware of the importance of tracking progress in the following domains which are all key to *WExceLLence*:

- Indicators of performance
- Indicators of mental health and subjective wellbeing
- Psychological flexibility and the completion of actions that are in keeping with value-consistent behaviours.

These assessments should be made at the beginning of the intervention, at regular points during the intervention, and at the end of the intervention to allow both the practitioner and the athlete to track progress across time. There are a number of well validated, free to use self-report outcome measures that can be used to monitor athletes' mental health and wellbeing. For example, the *Patient Health Questionnaire 9* (PHQ-9; Spitzer et al., 1999) is a commonly used measure of depression symptoms that can be reproduced and used with permission. Similarly, the *General Anxiety Disorder 7* (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) is a commonly used and well-validated self-report measure of anxiety symptoms. There are also well validated measures of *subjective wellbeing* such as the *Mental Health Continuum - Short Form* (Keyes et al., 2009) and the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale* (WEMWBS; Tennent et al., 2007) which will also be helpful for practitioners in assessing the impact of the *Flexible Mind* approach. In terms of

■ assessing *psychological flexibility* (the process of showing up to difficult experiences to engage in value-consistent behaviour) that the *Flexible Mind* approach aims to enhance, the Action and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II, Bond et al., 2011) is very widely used, and can be readily used in sporting contexts. Francis et al.'s (2016) *Comprehensive Assessment of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Processes* (CompACT) is a 23-item measure of psychological flexibility intended for use in different settings (that can include sport). The measure has demonstrated sound psychometric properties (Francis et al., 2016). The CompACT has three subscales: *Behavioral Awareness* (BA), *Openness to Experience* (OE) and *Valued Action* (VA). These map on respectively to the *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters* aspects of the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility that the *Flexible Mind* approach targets, and it can be a valuable tool for monitoring progress in the work that practitioners undertake with athletes.

## What the *Flexible Mind* approach can and cannot achieve

It is important to emphasize that the *Flexible Mind* is not a *panacea* that will cure athletes of all ills. Nor will the approach be universally acceptable to all athletes. There are a number of indications that can help alert practitioners to when the *Flexible Mind* approach might be appropriate. These include the athlete:

- Indicating that they are open to psychological work and engaging with a practitioner in relation to this,
- Recognizing that current strategies may not be effective in enhancing performance and/or emotional wellbeing and is willing to consider alternative approaches,
- Understanding metaphors and analogies well, and showing at least a reasonably good level of abstract thinking,
- Expressing a willingness to practice techniques between sessions.

In terms of contraindications that would suggest that the *Flexible Mind* approach would not be appropriate, practitioners should exercise caution if the athlete:

- Demonstrates limited insight into there being issues that need to be addressed,
- Presents as acutely/highly distressed, and/or expressing suicidal intent,
- Is under the influence of alcohol or other substances when meeting with the practitioner,
- Seems only to be interested in quick fixes and/or expects the practitioner to assume the responsibility for bringing about change.

This is not to say that the *Flexible Mind* approach could not potentially help these athletes at some point, but it would first require that preparatory work be done to safeguard the athlete's welfare, optimize their ability to engage in the work effectively, and/or adjust their expectations around the work to locate the agency for change in the athlete.

## Between session practice

The work accomplished during the sessions is the tip of a considerable iceberg of potential opportunities for instigating and sustaining change. The session material is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The aim is to enhance psychological flexibility across different contexts of the athletes' lives rather than during sessions alone. There is growing evidence to support the value of between session practice of techniques. The more that athletes engage in practices that facilitate psychological flexibility, the more psychologically flexible they will become. There are a variety of apps that can be helpful for supporting mindfulness practices (such as *Headspace*<sup>™</sup> or *Smiling Mind*<sup>™</sup>) that are highly consistent with the *Be Present* and *Be Open* aspects of P.O.D. of psychological flexibility.

## Supervision

In delivering the *Flexible Mind* approach it is important that practitioners work within the range of competencies that they have acquired through their professional training and abide by the guidelines provided by the professional and accrediting bodies that they have membership of. Practitioners should ensure that they are abiding by their professional standards at all times and doing their utmost to protect the safety and security of themselves and the athletes that they are working with. Supervision is crucially important to support practitioner development, assure the quality of the delivery of interventions, and protect the safety and security of practitioners and athletes. A variety of different models have been proposed for guiding ACT approaches. Recently, Morris and Bilich-Eric (2017) proposed the *SHAPE* framework for supervision. *SHAPE* stands for: Supervision values; Hold stories lightly; Analysis of function; Perspective-taking; and Experiential methods. The framework is based on best practices in supervision and is intended to promote experiential learning. This approach advocates for the importance of integrating psychological flexibility in how the supervision process is structured and conducted. To be effective as a practitioner of the *Flexible Mind* approach it is vital that practitioners access supervision from an experienced ACT practitioner. Although, supervision can be accessed through a variety of different sources, the *Association of Contextual Behavioral Science* (ACBS <https://contextualscience.org/>) holds a directory of practitioners who offer supervision, and a list of *ACBS Peer-reviewed ACT Trainers* (<https://contextualscience.org/civcrm/profile?gid=20&reset=1&force=1>), many of whom offer supervision.

## Working with the wider context

It is important to recognize that working with athletes themselves will only be able to deliver so much. The environments in which athletes operate, and the behaviour of people close to them, will exert a powerful influence on their ability to perform well and feel well. There are all too familiar examples of athletes experiencing abuse and/or neglect at the hands of people who have a duty to care for them (Lutz, 2018). There is only so much that the athlete can take responsibility for addressing. The system that exists around athletes should be examined closely, and appropriate action taken to address incidents of abuse and/or neglect. As a wise person once warned - '*Don't be so busy mopping the floor, you forget to turn off the tap*'. In other words, we can waste time attending to consequences rather than addressing the root causes of difficulties.

Practitioners are strongly encouraged to make amendments to the *Flexible Mind* approach in an effort to tailor it to the specific context in which the athlete, or athletes, operate. Practitioners need to make time to gain a full understanding of the context, to notice the language used, the normalized behaviours on show, and understand the ways in which organizational structures might support or hinder performance and wellbeing. It is about grabbing a notepad, getting down to training sessions, attending team meetings and just being *there*.

## Key Principles

The following eight principles will be helpful for practitioners wishing to adapt the *Flexible Mind* approach for the specific contexts in which athletes operate.

**1. Recognize the importance of the places and spaces where action happens:** Practitioners of the *Flexible Mind* approach, should pay attention to the physical spaces in which the sessions take place. When thinking about where meetings with the athletes take place, practitioners should be creative and pick places that will resonate strongly with the focus of the sessions. Having sessions in areas that have cultural significance for those taking part, will allow the sessions to be more impactful, to strike more of a chord with those present.

**2. Enlist the support of allies:** It is great to avail of the support of other practitioners within the sporting system to support the delivery of the aspects of the *Flexible Mind* approach. Various practitioners and stakeholders have many interactions with the athletes on a day-to-day basis, if practitioners can get these people to co-deliver and align themselves to the *Flexible Mind* approach, they give themselves the best chance of being successful in enhancing psychological flexibility and facilitating moments of *WExceLLence*. Practitioners will be required to convey some of the key components of the *Flexible Mind* approach to those people that contribute to the wider system. They will need to explain the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility development staples of

*Being Present, Being Open and Doing What Matters* to other staff. As a precursor to working with an athlete, practitioners should run staff sessions, to go through this content with them and discuss how they can support efforts aimed at athletes *Being Present, Being Open and Doing what matters*.

Practitioners may well need to lean into their own feelings of discomfort and step outside their comfort zone to enlist other staff in the efforts to support athletes. Working as a group can bring great benefits. Two (or more!) heads are better than one. Group discussions can generate different perspectives on the thoughts, emotions and resulting behaviours that athletes struggle with, and can also help generate *Flexible Mind* consistent approaches to address these. Practitioners should get in touch with their creative side to help with this. Putting together PowerPoint presentations, recording video tutorials, producing posters and other documents can be used to bring the *Flexible Mind* approach to life, in an authentic and genuine manner.

**3. Identify key gate-keepers:** In the delivery of the *Flexible Mind* approach, practitioners are encouraged to find key 'gatekeepers' to ensure the *Flexible Mind* message can be heard by as wide an audience as possible. Within many sporting environments, there are the people that have key relationships within the group, such that if they convey a message, it will reach the whole group. They have that level of influence. Practitioners need not carry out a social network analysis to identify who gatekeepers are. The most efficient and effective way of doing this comes back to spending time in the environment and sussing out who these key people are. Those who intend on delivering this approach effectively, should work to get these people onside with regard to the key concepts within the *Flexible Mind* approach. Why? Well they have the power, they have a lot of social clout, and whether they like it or not, practitioners should consider their opinions. If they are unhelpful opinions they may obstruct the successful delivery of this approach. If however they get onboard, then these people have the power to greatly enhance practitioners' efforts and act as informal, or formal, co-facilitator of the *Flexible Mind* approach. What matters to one person will differ to what matters to another, and within a team environment there can be marked variations in the visions and values that people hold. The *Flexible Mind* approach is based on a pragmatic recognition that it is absolutely ok for people to have different opinions, provided that people can have differences in opinions AND still fully commit to an agreed plan of action about how best to move forward together. Once everyone has signed up to a shared vision, and is singing off the same metaphorical 'hymn sheet', incredible momentum towards *WExceLLence* can be created.

**4. Get values off the changing room wall and into the athlete's lives:** Clarifying values and supporting athletes to behave in ways that are consistent with their values are important aspects of the *Flexible Mind* approach. Values should be generated by the athlete or the team, rather than imposed upon them. They should be part of the daily language when speaking with

athletes. They should be emphasised before a session, "Let's move towards *Value X* in this session", and they should be the measuring stick for a successful session, "Did we show *Value Y* today?". At the start of any given week, a practitioner could consider including an image and a quote (much like those included at the start of the chapters in this book) that embodies a value that the athlete/team has identified. Alternatively, practitioners can also invite the athlete to suggest images and quotes that fit with their values. By having values present in the sporting system, the likelihood of athletes making behavioural choices informed by these values is increased - and it's the choices that athletes make that will move them towards *WExceLLence*. It is vital to keep conversations about values alive and kicking.

**5. Roll with the dissenting voices:** Dissenting voices that aim to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of psychological interventions are thankfully less commonplace than they used to be, but it doesn't mean that practitioners won't have to contend with them. Indeed, at times, practitioners might have to contend with dissenting voices of their own. Practitioners may have moments where they notice the thought "is this going to work?". They may feel apprehension about how the approach will be received and they might be tested at times, but by believing in the approach and embodying the principles that it espouses, practitioners will find ways through and can bring others along with them as they do so. Sport is ultimately a results driven industry. If results have not been favourable and backs are against the wall, the powers that be in an elite environment can sometimes look to *streamline* their efforts. Psychological approaches like the *Flexible Mind* can be seen by some as "wishy washy" when compared with more objective, easier to quantify sports science 'cousins'. It is arguably easier for disciplines such as sports science to prove that they *are doing their job*, and so not contributing to poor performance. For those implementing psychological approaches, it isn't as straightforward. This highlights the importance of collecting and recording data to monitor the impact of the work. Scores on standardised measures of mental health, wellbeing and psychological flexibility outcomes can be important practitioner data points, as can qualitative feedback from athletes and coaching staff. These are the forms of evidence that can highlight the positive impact that the *Flexible Mind* approach is having for performance and wellbeing.

**6. Negotiate bumps in the road - the role of psychological safety:** The concept of 'psychological safety' relates to 'removing fear from human interaction and replacing it with respect and permission' (Clark, 2020). Research evidence suggests that psychological safety can play an important role in optimising workplace effectiveness (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Just as is the case for athletes, things can go wrong at times for practitioners too. If and when this happens, practitioners can benefit from the strategies that the *Flexible Mind* approach espouses. The *Flexible Mind* approach advocates that psychological safety can be enhanced by the practitioner safely and appropriately modelling honesty, authenticity and vulnerability to athletes. Appropriate and considered self-disclosure from practitioners highlights to those in the system that

vulnerability is okay. This fosters psychological safety within the environment, as it allows space for athletes and coaches alike to share freely, to speak openly and honestly. From this can come a sense of togetherness, the idea that everyone is on a shared path to *WExceLLence* - helping athletes and practitioners to share an appreciation that you'll never walk alone!

**7. Remember the importance of experiential learning:** Practitioners of the *Flexible Mind* approach need to recognize that principles from behaviourism underlie the approach and that repeated rehearsal of new ways of behaving in the presence of difficult thoughts and emotions will be key to the success of the intervention. By repeatedly applying the learning and insights gained through the *Flexible Mind* approach in high pressure situations inside and outside of sport, athletes see that they can get the benefits of the approach when it counts.

**8. Practitioner flexibility begets athlete flexibility:** It is important to recognise that some practitioners might be working in resource-light environments that are characterised by limited finances, lack of other support staff, and limited numbers of sessions to deliver the approach. As such, potentially challenging decisions might need to be made about how practitioners apply the *Flexible Mind* approach including: which aspects should be delivered, in what form, and over what period of time? Practitioners may have to contend with uncertainty and upheaval relating to difficult to predict circumstances. For example, the COVID19 outbreak of 2020 and 2021 meant that it was not possible to have face-to-face meetings during the periods of lock-down restrictions. The risk of similar public health emergencies in the future, means that practitioners should be flexible in the methods that might be employed to deliver sessions e.g. using sufficiently secure web-based video-calling software and abiding by appropriate guidelines aimed at protecting practitioner and client safety. Impactful support is grounded in a good understanding of what is *critical* versus what might be *important*. The *Flexible Mind* approach is no different. We hope that the way that the various 'sessions' have been presented throughout the book will afford opportunities for practitioners to be sufficiently flexible in applying the approach with the athletes that they are supporting. Some closing advice for practitioners: meet the athletes where they are, dream big together, and embody the *Flexible Mind* approach by *Being Present, Being Open* and *Doing What Matters!*

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