

Session One

Introducing Athletes to *The Flexible Mind* Approach



This session will focus on developing the athlete's understanding of what the *Flexible Mind* approach is, and what it can offer. For further information see Chapter 4 of the '*Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*'.

This session can address some of the following challenges:

- An athlete who may be sceptical about psychological support and unsure of how it can support them in achieving what they want to achieve.
- An athlete who is open to the support, but is struggling to fully appreciate how *the Flexible Mind* approach can allow them to have moments of *WExceLLence*; both inside and outside of their sporting life.

1. Overview of the Session

The aim of this session is to provide a guided tour of how to get up and running with the *Flexible Mind* approach. Specifically, the session will support the practitioner to: 1) assess the athlete's background and current situation, 2) outline how the *Flexible Mind* approach can support the athlete to have a richer and more meaningful life, and 3) develop a psychological formulation that will guide intervention delivery. Importantly, the session will also help practitioners to develop a rapport with the athlete that will stand the work together in good stead.

2. Assessment: “So... how are things with you?”

It is important to start the support off on the right foot. Here are some key points to cover at the outset:

- Understand the athlete’s ‘why’. Getting to know the athlete is crucial - in the first instance this may involve not talking about psychological support at all. Instead early discussions may center on the athlete’s interests outside of sport, what key events have been important in shaping how their career has developed to date, who within their social networks (including family pets!) they spend a lot of time with etc. All of these insights into the athlete’s background will cultivate a stronger understanding of why they have committed to being an athlete.
- Find out what matters to them. Much of the work conducted within the *Flexible Mind* model centers on doing more of the things that bring purpose to an athlete’s life. Thus it is important to explore what particular ‘causes’ fire the athlete’s inner furnace. What is it that they truly and authentically wish to invest their time and effort in working towards? What change do they want to bring into the world?
- Now explore the athlete’s perceptions of their strengths. What are their strong suits? What resources can *they* bring to the table? What can *they* draw upon during the support?
- Then move to understand what the athlete is struggling with at the moment - what are the main problems that they would like support with? How are these difficulties impacting their life inside and outside of sport? If the athlete had a magic wand what changes would they make that would help improve their situation?
- Particular attention should be paid to difficult thoughts and feelings that the athlete may be struggling with, and strategies that they may be using to suppress or avoid these thoughts and feelings. Take time to check in with the athlete about whether these strategies have been helpful - not just in the short-term, but the long-term also! It may be that the athlete’s coping strategies are serving to increase the adverse impact of the thoughts and feelings that the athlete is experiencing.
- Consider the use of standardised assessment instruments to assess wellbeing.

Held within the *Flexible Mind* approach is a certain amount of knowledge transfer, just as athletes may have the opportunity to learn new concepts and strategies, the practitioner is always learning from the athlete about his/her situation. The process of assessment should therefore be considered to be ongoing throughout the intervention - new information will inevitably come to light as the work progresses and a sense of trust and psychological safety builds. So, practitioners should be open to new learning throughout. Athletes do not care what you know, until they know you care - this is a helpful reminder that speaks to the importance of developing relationships in this phase of the support.

3. Introducing the *Flexible Mind* approach

It is important to discuss what the support you will be providing will look like, so that the athlete has a sense of what to expect. Check in with the athlete and get an understanding of their views on psychological support. Have they received psychological support previously? What have they made of other people who have received psychological support? What potentially unhelpful thoughts about support are they potentially wrestling with? Being cognisant from the outset of any challenging views that are present, will allow for a basic appraisal of the athlete's readiness to engage. Unhelpful views about the efficacy of psychological support may be one of the most important forms of *psychological inflexibility* that needs to be addressed! Perhaps you can invite the athlete to suspend their disbelief just for a little while?

If the athlete is ready to engage, it is now time to outline the *Flexible Mind* approach, below are some key points to get across:

- This work won't involve laying on a couch talking lots about their childhood. It will be predominantly focused on the here-and-now. It is about understanding the athlete's current difficulties and what is keeping these difficulties going.
- The athlete will be developing skills, tools that they can use to manage their difficult thoughts and feelings - so that they can do more of what matters to them. The support will seek to increase not only the quality of the 'tools' (i.e. strategies and techniques) in the athlete's 'tool box', it will also aim to develop the athlete's understanding of what tools work best in which contexts - different horses for different courses!
- Athlete's will leave sessions with 'work ons' - things to do and practice between each session. The sessions are not a downhill, free-wheel ride. It is not about just turning up to the sessions and reaping the rewards. Practitioners need to ensure there is an understanding on the athlete's part, that they will have to commit energy and effort to this approach - they will have to do a fair amount of pedaling.
- The *Flexible Mind* approach doesn't seek to change, or get rid of difficult thoughts and feelings. Instead, it aims to build an athlete's preparedness to experience the difficult thoughts and feelings that can inevitably arise in their pursuit of *Doing What Matters*. The 'preparedness to experience' is the *Acceptance* component, the *Doing What Matters* is the *Commitment* component.

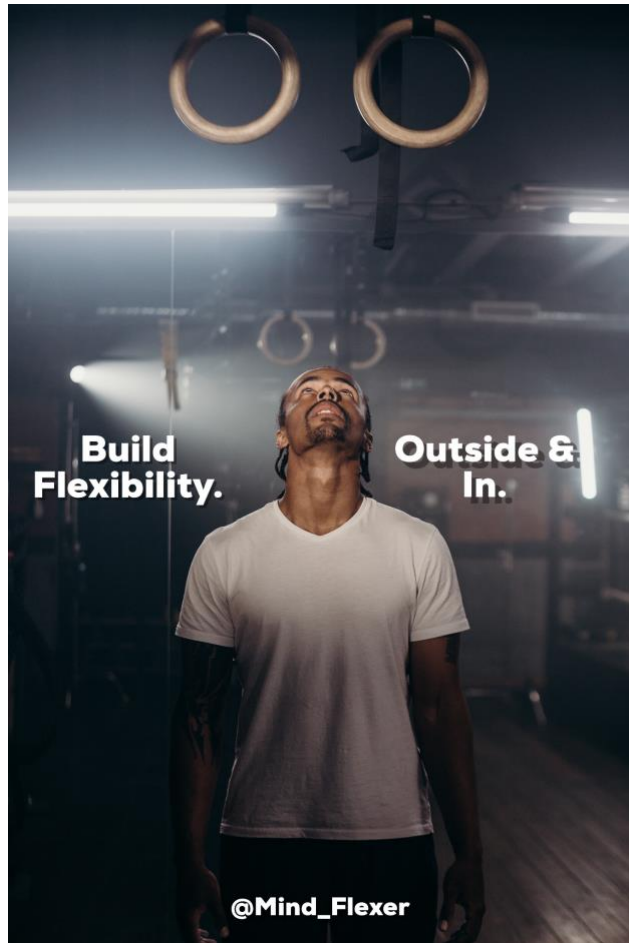
The term *acceptance* can cause some confusion for people, especially athletes. They like to fight and compete, so they are often motivated to wrestle and overcome difficult thoughts and feelings.

This is not the *Flexible Mind* way, instead it is about ensuring the athlete understands *acceptance* as an active, courageous, willingness to experience difficult thoughts and feelings, as a way of then committing to *Doing What Matters*.

The practitioner should consider inviting the athlete to provide their own definition of what they think it means to be 'psychologically flexible'. The practitioner can then clarify what *psychological flexibility* means from the *Flexible Mind* perspective e.g. 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' (Hayes et al., 2019 P5).

Present the athlete with a copy of the 'P.O.D. of *psychological flexibility*' (downloadable from www.flexiblemind.co.uk) and take time to ensure that the athlete understands each corner aspect of the P.O.D. (i.e. Being **P**resent, Being **O**pen and **D**oing What Matters) and how gains made across these different aspects can lead to an increase in their *psychological flexibility*:

- *Being Present*: This aspect of psychological flexibility relates to an athletes' ability to appreciate the richness of their present moment experiences, and his/her ability to notice that thoughts and feelings can come and go.
- *Being Open*: This aspect of *psychological flexibility* relates to an athletes' ability to get untangled from his/her mind's 'stories' about his/her life, and their willingness to create space for difficult thoughts and emotions.
- *Doing What Matters*: This aspect of *psychological flexibility* relates to an athletes' ability to be clear about what matters to them in life, and whether they are committing to actions that are in keeping with his/her values.



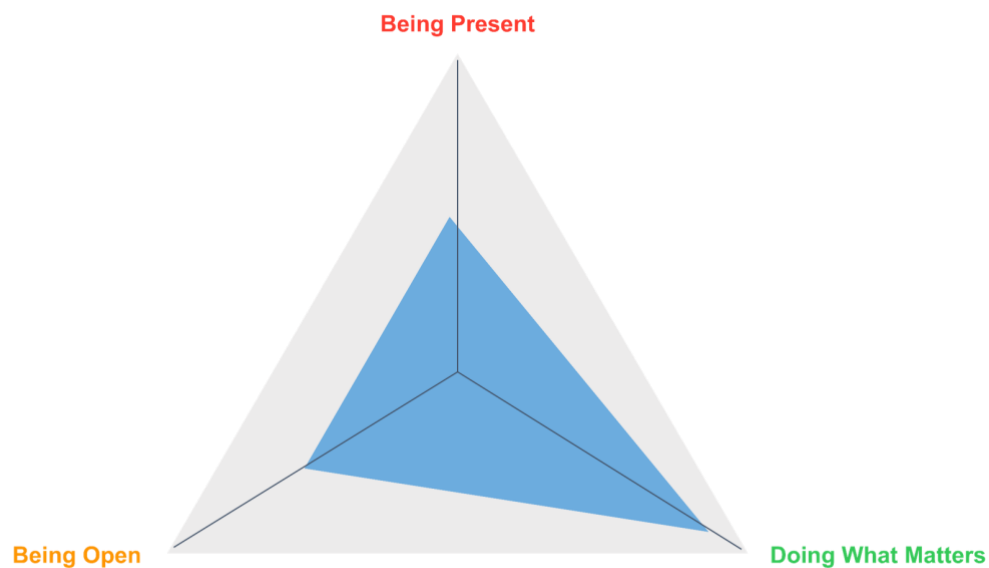
Session Insight 1

Session Insight 1 can be used to highlight that flexibility can be both physical and psychological.

4. Formulation: Developing a shared understanding of the athlete's level of *psychological flexibility*

Through discussion with the athlete and the information gathered during assessment, the practitioner can use the 'P.O.D. Formulation Table' (downloadable from www.flexiblemind.co.uk) to collaboratively build a shared understanding of which aspects of psychological flexibility may require strengthening. This shared formulation can be added to and refined in subsequent sessions. The formulation should be understood as an evolving understanding of the athlete's situation that helps to guide the support that will be provided.

It can be helpful to draw out a triangle with each of the corners of the P.O.D. represented and 3 lines from the centre of the triangle to each of the corners (see below). The athlete can then be invited to plot how high they think they score on each of the *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters* axes - minimum levels being the centre of the triangle, maximum levels being the respective corners of the triangle. The athlete can then join these three plotted points on each of the axes to create a smaller triangle set within the P.O.D. The closer the athlete judges themselves to be to each corner, the stronger they are on that aspect of psychological flexibility. The stronger they are on each aspect the greater the area of the inner triangle (and the greater the athlete's *psychological flexibility*). This informal way of representing the formulation can offer a helpful visualisation of the athlete's overall level of *psychological flexibility* and provide a direction of travel for future sessions.

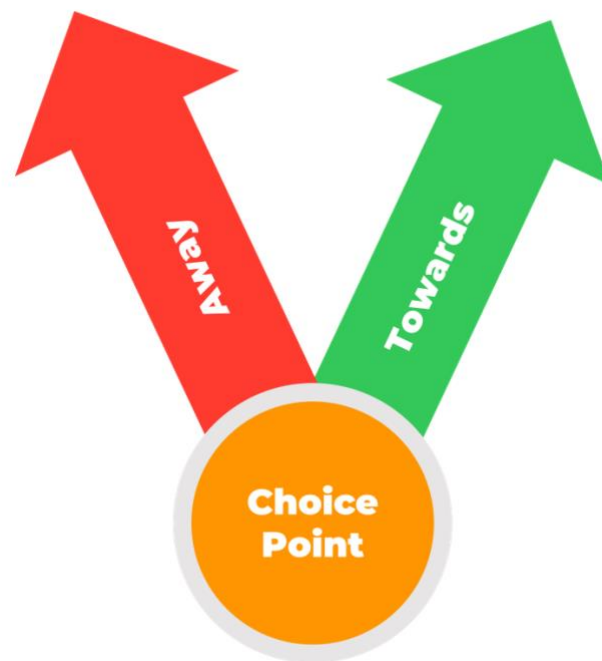


Visually representing the formulation

5. Bringing the *Flexible Mind* into the choices we make

To help athlete's navigate the *Flexible Mind* approach and see how they can use it in their daily life, the concept of the 'Choice Point' (Bailey, Ciarrochi & Harris, 2014) can be really helpful.

Athletes will be faced with thousands of choices throughout their day and these choices present the athlete with a decision to make. Within the *Flexible Mind* approach, there are two directions of travel that athletes can move in when faced with these decisions. They can choose to move 'Towards' their values (even if this means being present and open to difficult thoughts or emotions). Or they can find themselves choosing to move 'Away' from their values in an effort to avoid or suppress difficult thoughts, feelings and/or sensations that may show up. Examples of these choices include choosing not to have an open and frank conversation with a coach for fear it might count against them, choosing to train on through injury to avoid the risk of deselection and the uncertainty that would bring, or choosing to use alcohol as a way of dulling down feelings of sadness or disappointment. The accumulative effect of 'Away' moves is that the athlete starts to become distant from their values and their life may start to lack a sense of fulfilment and vitality.



The *Flexible Mind* approach uses each of the three aspects of the P.O.D. of *psychological flexibility* to equip athletes to make more 'Towards' choices. Session Insight 2 below can be used to help capture this key aspect of the *Flexible Mind* approach.

To check for understanding, discuss some of the difficulties that the athletes described earlier and assess how the athlete usually responds in terms of 'Away' vs. 'Towards' moves.



Session Insight 2

Of course, life is not as simple as 'Just make towards moves'. We can all get hooked again from being true to what matters to us - the key is to notice if and when this has happened. Practitioners should be alert to the possibility that the athlete may judge themselves when they recognise that they have engaged in 'away' moves. Support the athlete to adopt a more compassionate response, one that comes with less judgement. The Choice Point is not intended to be a metaphorical stick for athletes to beat themselves with!

6. Working with the Athlete's Goals and Objectives

With a better understanding of what's going on for the athlete and how they could employ the *Flexible Mind* approach, it is time to develop some goals and objectives for the support that is being provided - what is it that the athlete really wants to achieve from the work?

The *Flexible Mind* approach recommends encouraging athletes to identify goals and objectives for the support that will be provided, here are some aspects to consider:

- The athlete's goals should be SMART (Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-limited), vague goals do not sit well within the *Flexible Mind* approach. If an athlete shares the goal of 'wanting to spend more time talking with their family', this can be made more SMART by amending it to 'spending one hour every evening video calling my partner and children when I have finished training.'
- Their goals should be consistent with their values. Problems can arise when the athlete's goals are not aligned with their values - values based living makes for more meaningful goals. The athlete should be guided by their heart as well as their head. Practitioners should be vigilant to the possibility that the athlete identifies goals for the support that seem to lack substance or resonance. Subsequent sessions will focus more on values.
- These goals should be behavioural in nature, goals that are grounded in an aspiration to 'feel' a certain way need to be avoided. Remember, one of the aims of this work is to help people to accept their difficult thoughts and feelings, not to get rid of them, and so working on feeling a certain way undermines the *Flexible Mind* approach.
- Care should be taken to ensure that the expectations set for the work are reasonable. The *Flexible Mind* will not be capable of working miracles, but it should at least build a shared understanding about the types of miracles that matter to the athlete.

7. Summary of Session

Is it nearing the time for kick off? Although described as a 'session', like all of the sessions detailed within this guide, they may take multiple meetings to complete. This session guide stressed the importance of cultivating a strong relationship with the athlete and understanding them as a person. By doing this, practitioners can be better placed to deliver high quality support that will be more effective in enhancing the athlete's *psychological flexibility*. Of course, the systems that exist around the athlete and the practitioner will also be important - the context matters massively. The importance of these points is emphasized in Chapter 11 of '*Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*'.

If the athlete is ready to proceed, then subsequent sessions will allow you to focus on different aspects of the P.O.D. At times the work may challenge the athlete, but developing their understanding of *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters* will help them to see how they can integrate the approach into their lives. It is important to stress that the *Flexible Mind* approach can apply to many facets of the athlete's life - not just sport. The *Flexible Mind* approach is about working with the person - not just the athlete.

References

Bailey, A., Ciarrochi, J., & Harris, R. (2014). *The weight escape: How to stop dieting and start living*. Shambhala Publications.

Hayes, S. (2019). *A Liberated Mind: The essential guide to ACT*. Random House.

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