Psychological Skills Training Plan: Two Case Studies

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Psychological skills are important and relevant to optimal performance across multiple domains beyond sports. Psychological skills are also useful in interpersonal relationships. Almost anyone can benefit from putting a few mental tools into practice. The two case studies presented both utilized self-talk skills, journaling for greater self-awareness, imagery, and relaxation as a foundational basis for further psychological skills training (PST). The individuals in both cases have never engaged in any formal practice of PST. The overall goals for both individuals were: introduce the aforementioned foundational mental skills; create a plan with SMART goals in mind; establish consistent, regular practice that did not disrupt too much of their already-busy schedule; and assess the utility of this basic plan (before progressing further) in a real situation (MacLeod, 2012).

Part I: PST for Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) Volunteer

Brief History

Shirley Chung is a 44-year-old single (no dependents), over-fat, endomorphic, deconditioned female in otherwise relatively good health. In addition to intermittent dominant hand/wrist/arm overuse pain (extensive, daily, job-related fine motor skills), Chung has a history of pes planus and lower limb injuries including left anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction, left ankle avulsion fracture, bilateral shin splints, and multiple bilateral ankle sprains resulting in chronic bilateral ankle instability. Chung is currently self-employed as an artist (photography, illustration, media production), and is pursuing a dual-career in health-wellness (part-time student at two schools). Most of Chung's 12-14 hour work-day is sedentary and unstructured; she also reported chronic poor sleep quality (some insomnia), job/relationship stress; time-management challenges; and haphazard nutrition habits.

Performance Domain: CERT Volunteer

Chung is a CERT volunteer, and may be deployed at any time as part of an emergency/disaster response to support administration; logistics; fire safety/suppression; light search and rescue; and disaster medical operations (FEMA, 2011). CERT volunteers are presented with unpredictable physical (e.g. strength, endurance, limited food/water/hygiene resources, personal safety, stress, fatigue, long working hours) and environmental (e.g. inclement weather, exposure, debris, man-made hazards, air quality, loud noises/sounds) challenges. Physical, emotional, and cognitive (knowledge, skill, ability/attitude or KSA) readiness are required for successful high-level functioning in unpredictable situational/environmental challenges under duress (Grier, 2012). CERT volunteers engage on strategic (preparedness for a broad range of potential scenarios), operational (preparedness to engage when deployed for a variety of situations), and tactical levels (preparedness for a specific mission which may be in support of a larger operation) as individuals and as a team (Grier, 2012).

Assessment

Chung's inventory of mental/emotional/psychological challenges in CERT include (but are not limited to): coping with confusion/uncertainty/panic/disorientation/grief in oneself and others; coping and navigating death/victims/survivors; functioning in an emotional/chaotic climate; stress management; demonstrating leadership and assertiveness; working with strangers and chain-of-command; working effectively as an individual and as a team member; transitioning from "good of the individual" to "greater good" mentality; adaptive and effective communication; disaster trauma/mass-casualty setting; isolation or lack of privacy; maintaining mental acuity, high-level functioning/decision-making; creative problem-solving; critical thinking skills and analysis under duress; multitasking; enforcing responsibility and

accountability measures; activation/arousal control; attentional (attentional control, attention shifting, concentration); maintaining objectivity for functionality; situational awareness; self-awareness; mental toughness; hardiness; maintaining confidence and competency; ability to compartmentalize; ability to convey empathy and sympathy in working with survivors (survivors' psychological trauma); post-traumatic stress (FEMA, 2011; Tedesqui & Glynn, 2013).

Chung's weakest performance was during a 6-hour long disaster simulation (threat assessment, fire control, search/rescue, disaster medical). Chung admitted that it was difficult to put all the classroom learning into application under pressure/stress (e.g. noise distractions, responding to victims portrayed by actors, not being able to hear well enough in triage under the simulated noise distractions, maintaining focus). Upon reflection, Chung stated that she had not been fully mentally/emotionally prepared for so much chaos and distractions plus the underlying fear of potentially gruesome rescue/medical work. Chung is a novice in mental skills strategies for CERT operations. Chung described the three most relevant/representative psychological attributes (Chung's weakest areas) for CERT success as mental toughness (MT), hardiness, and resilience. Ideally, Chung would be formally assessed using Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) and questionnaires for (but not limited to) MT, hardiness, resilience, and confidence.

Evidence-Based

Mental toughness. Mental toughness (MT) is a multidimensional "trait-like" construct characterized by: focus/attention regulation; maintaining composure and confidence under pressure-situations; an "unshakeable" self-efficacy; strong self-belief/confidence; superior coping skills as compared to others under stress/duress; thriving under pressure; self-awareness; self-

regulation; sustained motivation; and maintaining control (Connaughton, Hanton, & Jones, 2010; DeWiggins, Hite, & Alston, 2010; Krane & Williams, 2010; Mattie, & Munroe-Chandler, 2012; Weinberg, Butt, & Culp, 2011). Clough, Earle and Sewall (as cited in Weinberg et al., 2011, p. 157) presented the 4C model of MT: control, commitment, challenge, and confidence. The first three C's came from Kobassa's model of hardiness (as cited in Godlewski & Kline, 2012). MT is generally accepted as describing individuals who are capable of exceptional performances under stress (Godlewski & Kline, 2012). Dimensions of MT may vary depending on context, environment, and experience level of the participant(s) (Connaughton et al., 2010; Weinberg et al., 2011).

Hammermeister, Pickering, McGraw, & Ohlson (2010) noted that soldiers and athletes shared similar physical and psychological performance attributes; many mental techniques that benefitted athletes were also beneficial to the military and those occupations requiring strategic, operational, and tacitical tasks. Walker, Lennemann, McGregor, Mauzy, and Zupan's (2011) physiological and psychological measurements study of 109 United States Air Force Combat Controller (CCT) trainees found that successful trainees possessed high levels of MT in the Mental Toughness Questionnaire-48; high MT was indicative of high-level cognitive and physical performance under challenging conditions. Successful trainees also demonstrated high hardiness scores (Walker et al., 2011). Godlewski and Kline's (2012) study of turnover in 462 male Canadian Forces recruits found that MT positively predicted affective commitment (belongingness) and newcomer (recruit) adjustment (socialization, integration). MT is not only a key factor in [elite] athletic performances, but also in real-world strategic, operational, tactical, and emergency services tasks such as those encountered by CERT (Connaughton et al., 2010; DeWiggins et al., 2010).

Hardiness. Hardiness (or dispositional resilience) describes people who stay physically and mentally healthy thriving under duress. Hardiness (higher-order trait) is similar to MT in concept, and is characterized by an individual's perception of control (internal locus of control or LOC, able to influence); commitment (active engagement with the world as opposed to retreating in isolation under stress) to tasks/goals, and a "sense of meaning in life" (Bartone, Kelly, & Matthews, 2013, p. 201); and viewing stressors as challenges (growth opportunity, receptivity to change/adaptations) (Godlewski & Kline, 2012; Taylor, Pietrobon, Taverniers, Leon, & Fern, 2013). Bartone et al. (2013) noted that hardiness is protective of stress (and the physical/mental consequences of stress); hardiness acts as a significant stress buffer/moderator particularly in combat/traumatic exposure; and hardiness is a predictor of success in military training (Bartone, 2006). Hardiness is also an important factor in the successful completion of tasks by CERT.

Resilience. Griffith and West (2013) defined resilience as "the process of adapting to adversities" (stress adaptation) (p. 141); resiliency describes one's attributes "facilitating effective coping under stressful circumstances" (p. 141). Luther (as cited in Griffith & West, 2013, p. 141) described resilience as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity". One way to increase resiliency is stress-management. Besides physiological (e.g. reduced heart rate variability or HRV, increased heart rate, breathing, lack of focus, confusion, depressed energy levels, depressed immune response, migraines, stomach problems) and psychological maladaptations (e.g. depression, anxiety, substance abuse, aggression), "bad" and chronic stressors may increase the individual's risk of injury (stress-injury model) or cause other health incidence(s) by eroding away at his/her resilience/energy management (Lewis et al., 2015; NCCOSC, n.d.a.; Smith-Forbes, Najera, & Hawkins, 2014; Williams & Scherzer, 2010; Zinsser, Perkins, Gervais, & Burbelo, 2004).

Mindfulness and self-awareness particularly of one's stress level (optimally in the green zone or yellow zone for "normal" life stressors) are imperative for effective stress management, stress recovery, and self-regulation (Griffith & West, 2013; Kadziolka, Di Pierdomenico, & Miller, 2016; NCCOSC, n.d.b.). Stress inoculation training (SIT) is a way to increase an individual's stress-preparedness by gradual and controlled exposure to stressful conditions (e.g. operational, trauma) in an attempt to increase an individual's coping skills (and resistence to stress) (Hourani et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2015; Oded, 2011). Stress-preparedness and management would help CERT volunteers maintain a high level of function which is critical in disaster operations (FEMA, 2011).

Psychological Skills Training Plan

Chung's novice-level (level 1, foundational skills) PST will consist of 4 phases respective of CERT activity adapted from DeWiggins' et al. (2010) Personal Performance Plan (PPP): phase 1 for CERT inactive (planning and education); phase 2 for pre-deployment (preparation for imminent deployment); phase 3 for deployment; and phase 4 for egress/recovery (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Skills for all 4 phases should be mastered over the course of 4 months. Before scaling Chung's PPP to level 2 (foundational), Chung must engage in a CERT (simulation or otherwise) deployment successfully utilizing phases 1-4 of her PPP. At the completion of a CERT mission, Chung must evaluate the effectiveness (dose-response) of the current PPP with a sport psychologist consultant before scaling/planning the PPP for level 2.

Through each phase, MT, hardiness, and resilience will be augmented by utilizing imagery, self-talk , and self-awareness skills; relaxation breath control will be an underlying factor as a combination (dual-task) of relaxation and cognitive training increases effectiveness (DeWiggins et al., 2010; Vealy & Greenleaf, 2010; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 2010).

Phase 1 (planning and education). This phase is 1 month long—15 minutes per day for 5 days per week. The objective is to increase self-awareness by identifying stressors, stress-response, and changes in energy levels. Chung will be educated on the tools/terminology (imagery, self-talk, self-awareness journaling, and relaxation through breath control) in a 4-hour weekend seminar. During the day, keep a small notepad on person. Jot down brief notes about the stressors (and context) and your stress-response. At night, select one of the stress-events during your day. Spend 12 minutes closing your eyes, and using imagery to recreate the event in your mind. Pay attention to how your body felt at the time. Play the stress-event in your mind like a movie, except you create an alternative (more positive) ending (i.e. stress-reactions). Keeping your eyes closed, breath diaphragmatically—slowly and deeply (do not be afraid to blow out air counting backwards from five). Note any areas of tension starting from the top of your head and downwards (do this for 3 minutes).

Phase 2 (pre-deployment). This phase is 1 month long—15 minutes per day for 5 days per week. The objective is: to continue identifying stressors; and to identify and examine negative thoughts/self-talk. During the day, keep a small notepad on person. Jot down brief notes about: the stressors (and context) and your stress-response; and negative thoughts/self-talk (note the context). Pay special attention to negative thoughts/self-talk related to a CERT task/skill that you might be apprehensive about. At night, spend 12 minutes closing your eyes. Select one of the negative thoughts/self-talk, and use imagery to refresh your memory regarding the context/situation. Try to remember what happened moments leading up to that point. How did you feel before? After? Was that negative thought/self-talk warranted? Was it a realistic/fair assessment or could it have been just a "perception"? Identify self-defeating thoughts, and thoughts that get in your way of what you know you need to do. Think of ways you can counter

or reframe your thoughts (write those down). With your eyes closed, breath diaphragmatically—slowly and deeply (do not be afraid to blow out air counting backwards from five). Note any areas of tension starting from the top of your head and downwards (do this for 3 minutes).

Phase 3 (deployment). This phase is 1 month long—15 minutes per day for 5 days per week. The objective is to keep negative thoughts/self-talk from affecting Chung's active work in CERT. For practice, keep taking notes in a notepad. When active in CERT, you will not have time to take notes. It is good practice to wean yourself away from the notepad. Develop more awareness of your negative thoughts/self-talk. Practice thought stoppage; create and use your trigger word to help you stop negativity. If you feel comfortable with stopping the thoughts, then progress to "stop, cope, and take control" (SCC). Cope by acknowledging your negative feelings, thoughts, insecurities, etc. Take control by countering/reframing. Say an affirmation to yourself. Keeping your eyes closed, breath diaphragmatically—slowly and deeply (do not be afraid to blow out air counting backwards from five). Note any areas of tension starting from the top of your head and downwards (do this for 3 minutes).

Phase 4 (egress/recovery). This phase is 1 month long—15 minutes per day for 5 days per week. The objective is to assess thoughts/self-talk. Continue to be aware of negative thoughts/self-talk, particularly ones that are task-oriented. Assess those negative thoughts/self-talk/feelings. Are they warranted? Use imagery to help you reconnect with the context in which those thoughts/self-talk took place. Practice ABC cognitive restructuring. Keeping your eyes closed, breath diaphragmatically—slowly and deeply (do not be afraid to blow out air counting backwards from five). Note any areas of tension starting from the top of your head and downwards (do this for 3 minutes).

Part II: PST for Competitive Martial Artist

Brief History

RAV (friend of Chung) is a 36-year-old athletic, mesomorphic male in good health (complains of chronic insomnia and lack of flexibility/mobility for martial arts). He is divorced and is the guardian of two boys (one in middle school, one in elementary school). He recently had a baby with his girlfriend. RAV works long 12+ hour days as a sous chef at a retirement home. RAV is also a double-black belt instructor in karate, and a decorated white-belt athlete in Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ). RAV admitted to the challenges of his schedule, time-management, long hours/double-shifts, job stress (difficult supervisor and high turn-over rate in staff), and relationship/family stress (from not having enough time to spend with family and girlfriend). RAV is constantly frustrated and discouraged with his BJJ progress.

Performance Domain: Competitive Martial Arts

RAV is a competitive BJJ athlete. Besides the physical preparation (strength and conditioning, BJJ technical and sparring skills), a BJJ athlete must also be very clear about the rules, regulations, and the scoring system (e.g. target-points awarded, submissions). At an event, the "unknowns" athletes face include (but are not limited to): the number of competitors they will face (dependent on weight class); the number of 5-minute rounds they will fight in; the order of fights; the duration of the event; who their competitors are (plus any biographic/statistical information); and how much rest time they will have.

Assessment

In an interview, RAV explained that in order to compete with one's best effort, the martial arts athlete must (in addition to physical/skill preparation): be mentally tough; be self-aware; be able to regulate activation/arousal; manage attention; maintain competitive mindset; be

confident; effectively set goals; constantly evaluate oneself and the situation; stay positive; stay motivated; be able to strategize and adapt; be able to manage "bad" stress effectively and use eustress as a source of motivation. RAV noted that the "mental game" was equally if not more important than the "physical game".

RAV admitted struggling with negative thoughts, negative self-talk, maintaining confidence levels throughout the game-day, staying focused and goal-oriented for the length of competition day (4-10 hours), and stress management. RAV noted that often, he would let self-doubts and negative self-talk gain momentum during the competition day to a point where they became fatiguing and distracting.

RAV described the three most relevant/representative psychological attributes for competitive martial arts (that would be helpful to him) as mental toughness, self-awareness (e.g. able to regulate activation/arousal), and confidence. RAV has never practiced formal mental training before (novice level). Ideally, RAV would be formally assessed using Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) and questionnaires for (but not limited to) MT, self-awareness, and confidence.

Evidence-Based

Mental toughness. Mental toughness (MT) is a key factor in combat sports when competition is 90% mental and 10% physical as MT allows an athlete to overcome and respond to pressures positively—maintaining the highest-level of performance under extreme physical and mental duress (Chen & Cheesman, 2013; Harpold, 2011; Kuan & Roy, 2007; Mînjină, 2014). MT in combat sports overlaps with hardiness, but the distinguishing factor is confidence—confidence to compete, dominate, and overcome "the threat" (opponent and bodily harm) (Chen & Cheesman, 2013). Professional/elite mixed martial arts (MMA) competitors

demonstrated 9.8% higher MT scores on average as compared to semi-professional/amateur MMA athletes (Chen & Cheesman, 2013). Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2007) surveyed and interviewed international super-elite athletes, coaches and sports psychologists in order to refine the concept of MT. Important MT elements most relevant to MMA were: superior coping skills as compared to other competitors and lower-levels of competition; coping (and balance) skills in all areas of life that attenuated stress in order to allow for superior consistent, high-level functioning/performance; superior outcome-orientation allowing for goal-attainment; control under pressure; self-efficacy; and perseverance (Connaughton, Wadey, Hanton, & Jones, 2008; Jones et al., 2007). Jones et al. (2007) defined an MT framework of 4 dimensions: attitude/mindset, training (e.g. discipline, perseverance, personal sacrifice), competition, and post-competition (e.g coping with loss).

Self-awareness. Self-awareness is "the first step to gaining control of any pressure situation" (Ravizza, 2010, p. 189). Mînjină (2014) noted that the mind controlled the body, and the mind needed to be trained in order not to adversely affect the body. The athlete must be aware of his/her physical, mental, and emotional state in order to manage their activation/arousal, energy, and attention through on-going evaluation—"managed intensity" in competitive martial arts (Harpold, 2011, p. 25; Massey, Meyer, & Naylor, 2013). The athlete needs to be aware of their current state in order to identify and strive towards their optimal state. Self-awareness is an important component of the five interrelated mental skills model of mixed martial arts by Harpold (2011): confidence, visualization/mental rehearsal, arousal regulation, discipline/mental toughness, and motivation. Mînjină's (2014) model included thoughts control, attention control, competition mental skills, and managing psychological injuries.

Confidence. High-confidence, an attribute of MT, was consistently described as an element of optimal states in Ruiz and Hanin's (2004) study interviewing 63 competitive karate athletes' self-perceptions and application of the Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF). Jensen, Roman, Shaft, and Wrisberg (2013) noted that in their grounded theory study of 7 MMA competitive fighters, self-confidence was key and more experienced fighters' demeanor was that of "quietly confident"—without excessive posturing.

Psychological Skills Training Plan

RAV's novice-level (level 1, foundational skills) PST will utilize the tools of self-talk skills, imagery, and relaxation. Before continuing (past the initial 8 weeks) or scaling RAV's PPP to level 2 (foundational), RAV must participate in a BJJ competition and successfully utilize the skills learned in his level 1 PPP. RAV must evaluate the effectiveness of the current PPP (post-competition) with a sport psychologist consultant before continuing. The PST is 8 weeks long, 12 minutes per day for 5-7 days per week. The overall objective is learning to consistently incorporate some effective psychological skills into his regular training and competition plan. RAV will be educated on the tools/terminology: imagery, self-talk, self-awareness journaling, and relaxation through breath control. Regular practice will be his greatest challenge.

Activity (week 1-2). Identify stressors and your stress-reaction. Use your cell phone to take notes (or send a text message to yourself) throughout the day whenever you feel stressed/frustrated or when your energy level drops. If it is BJJ lesson/training day, then pay close attention to the times you feel stressed/frustrated/discouraged. What skills were you practicing? What were your self-efficacy and confidence levels during sparring? Note any self-doubt thoughts. Incorporate this exercise gradually (do as much as you can) and increase your

sensitivity (awareness) levels about your mental/emotional state. Consider using a 1-10 (1 poor, 10 excellent/strong) scale to describe self-efficacy/confidence about aspects of your training.

Activity (week 3-4). Continue to use your cell phone to take notes (or send a text message to yourself) throughout the day whenever you feel stressed/frustrated/discouraged, particularly related to training/sparring. Note your energy levels. At the end of the day, spend 10 minutes to reflect. Go through your notes. Pick one event/incident. Close your eyes and imagine (like a movie) the context/situation that was the most stressful/discouraging. What skills were you practicing? What were your self-efficacy and confidence levels during sparring? Note any self-doubt thoughts. Reflecting back, come up with another option you could have used as your response to the situation. Spend 2 minutes taking slow, deep diaphragmatic breaths. As you do so, think of an image (e.g. vacation spot, hiking spot) that brings you a feeling of calm, serenity, balance, peace, clarity, and "inner quiet".

Activity (week 5-6). Continue to use your cell phone to take notes (or send a text message to yourself) throughout the day whenever you feel stressed/frustrated/discouraged, particularly related to training/sparring. Note your energy levels. Especially pay attention to negative self-talk, because those tend to snowball quickly for you, interfering with your training. Practice thought stoppage. At the end of the day, spend 10 minutes to reflect. Go through your notes. Pick one negative self-talk incident. Close your eyes and imagine (like a movie) the context/situation that was the most stressful/discouraging. If the incident was training-related, take the time to put on your Gi top. Feel free to get into the training position. What skills were you practicing? What were your self-efficacy and confidence levels during sparring? What positive self-talk could you have used instead. Practice countering/reframing. Spend 2 minutes

taking slow, deep diaphragmatic breaths. As you do so, think of an image (e.g. vacation spot, hiking spot) that brings you a feeling of calm, serenity, balance, peace, clarity, and "inner quiet".

Activity (week 7-8). Continue to use your cell phone to take notes (or send a text message to yourself) throughout the day whenever you feel stressed/frustrated/discouraged, particularly related to training/sparring. Note your energy levels. Maintain the skills you have learned thus far. The aim is to incorporate the skills you have learned thus far into your training. Arrive at your training early enough so that you can spend 10-15 minutes mentally preparing before your session. Reserve 10-15 minutes after your session as well for reflection. During your preparation, close your eyes and use imagery techniques.

See yourself skillfully and successfully demonstrating techniques. Perhaps focus on just one new technique you learned last week in your training. Review the details of how it works. See yourself confidently executing the BJJ technique. After your training session, spend a few minutes to reflect on your performance and training effort. What kind of self-talk did you engage in? Was it helpful in your task? If it was not, then what can you do? Create a focus-word that will remind you to stop negative self-talk. Every time you catch yourself falling into negative self-talk, say the focus-word to yourself. Spend 2 minutes taking slow, deep diaphragmatic breaths. As you do so, think of an image (e.g. vacation spot, hiking spot) that brings you a feeling of calm, serenity, balance, peace, clarity, and "inner quiet".

Conclusion

The psychological tools of self-talk, self-awareness journaling, imagery, and relaxation (breath control) were utilized in both a sport performance and emergency-services context. The mental practices presented form the basis for developing mental toughness, hardiness, resilience, awareness, attention (including focus and concentration) control, and high-confidence.

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