

Personal Performance Enhancement Project

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Section 1: Introduction

For my Personal Performance Enhancement Project (PPEP), I focused on my cardiovascular fitness, specifically, my running fitness. My goal is to train for a half-marathon in April. I love exercising and running, but recently, my exercise routine has lacked focus and goals. I want to reintroduce these aspects into my fitness routine to be more intentional with my training. I have a history of long-distance running and understand the commitment expected for quality training. Training and progressing in this way have been very fulfilling. Through applying mental skills training, I feel confident in my half-marathon training progress.

Personal History Related to Half-Marathons

I ran my first half-marathon in January 2011. Before committing and training for this race, I had never run over three miles. Running was new to me because I had grown up doing water sports exclusively. But I loved the challenge of running longer distances. Training runs would bring a sense of accomplishment. Since then, I have completed many half marathons and triathlons. I had strong training partners and groups that helped me progress. Due to the time commitment expected from triathlon training, I chose to focus my goal on half marathon training because it uses less equipment, takes less time, and the race is close to my home.

During 2019 and 2020, I faced many challenges that changed my focus and approach to this type of training. First, my family faced some serious health problems. This took much energy and time that I would typically spend on training. At the time, I was already committed to and training for my first full marathon. Completing that race was a product of determination and grit. But it left me feeling guilty due to the time I took away from supporting my family. Soon after, my training groups stopped or paused gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I

attempted to train by myself, but the quality of training lessened. Since then, I have only run one more half-marathon and moved to a new city. I have not found any training groups in this new city that fit my current work schedule. However, this project forced me to look for more social opportunities through my training. I reached out to friends, planned running sessions with my kids, and joined some groups on social media for support.

Although much of my running has been alone, my overall fitness has become more balanced. Through this project, I increased my weekly mileage from ten weekly miles to twenty weekly miles. I still attend strength and conditioning classes 3-4 times weekly. I have a strong support group at the gym, and I occasionally meet up with a weekly hiking group. This half marathon has been a goal for over a year. I feel very satisfied with my progress in my training.

Impact on Myself and Others

When I started running, I aimed to improve my fitness, manage my weight, and achieve something new. My life is different now. My fitness is not based solely on cardiovascular fitness. My weight is not too different from where I would like it to be. I have already finished half-marathons. But I remember the impact that these races had on me. Increasing my running will benefit my cardiovascular health again. Training for a specific event creates a kinship with others working toward races. Based on my current state of physical fitness, the training and completion of this race will be an appropriate challenge for me.

Earlier this year, my family and I wrote goals together. Two of my children expressed interest in running more this year. During my training, I used some of my running to help them with their goals. Creating this bond with my kids has been exciting opportunity for me. I loved spending time with them. I let them choose which day and distance that they wanted to run with me. Sometimes this was the entire session and other times, my kids met me for the last mile or

two of my longer runs. I often used these moments as my recovery because the intensity and focus were lower than others. Creating social interactions with others has helped my consistency and enjoyment throughout my training.

In this paper, I plan to show how my Personal Performance Enhancement Project has helped me experience new mental skills, increase my personal development, and develop my professional philosophy.

Section 2: Mental Skills

Self-Talk

I used self-talk before and during my training runs. When I hesitated or procrastinated my runs, I would use self-talk to help me get out the door. Before most runs, I reviewed the self-talk script I developed from my Self Talk Development worksheet from week 3. I also attempted to use positive self-talk phrases throughout my runs.

During the first week, I noticed a difference in my confidence when I used positive self-talk. The frequency of intentional positive self-talk phrases was high. I believe that I would use them every 4-5 minutes. During the second week, I felt more confident before each run, resulting in a lower frequency of intentional use. During the checkpoint #2, I hoped to increase the amount of positive self-talk and record specific, helpful phrases. After 3 weeks of consistent practice, positive self-talk became part of my routine before running. I also used it in other types of training sessions to manage anxiety. My favorite phrases recognized my capacity and encouraged me to keep going. I liked saying phrases like, "Look how far I've come!"

Through positive self-talk, I focused on my strengths and felt empowered to face my challenges. Not only did I find this mental skill helpful, but I have also encouraged me athletes to

identify helpful self-talk. As I learn more, I hope to train them how to create better self-talk habits.

Goal Setting

Initially, I used the Goal Setting worksheet from Week 3's Learning Materials and a SMART goal worksheet. My overall goal is the completion of my Half-Marathon. I picked which race and added a date. My short-term goals correlate with the specific training runs and behaviors needed for progress. I also told my family and friends about my goals. This helped me feel supported and accountable.

This part went well because I kept it simple. When I've set goals in the past, I have made them complicated by adding several elements. Following the SMART goal structure also helped. The framework simplified the process, and it felt easy. I have been able to increase my weekly run mileage reasonably. As the weeks and mileage progressed, I noticed this skill required diligence. If I failed to make and update the small goals, the larger goals faded into wishful thinking. I combatted this challenge by completing the tracking worksheets and writing my small goals in my weekly planner. My planner includes appointments, schoolwork, and my schedule. This method helped keep my goals visible each day and enabled mindful scheduling. This skill helped me monitor my progress of weekly goals and keep me focused on helpful tasks.

Focus/Concentration

Although I scored well on my focus and concentration assessments, I noticed room for improvement during training sessions. In Checkpoint #2, I described a focus exercise that I tried to use before training runs. In my training logs, I wrote down specific phrases and words that helped me remember my breathing exercises. As I practiced this skill, I recognized how the breathing helped my focus. Consequently, I used more breathing exercises before training.

After using breathing exercises to focus for a few weeks, I had a breakthrough during a run. The focus and concentration felt smooth not force. Increasing my focus and concentration has helped me control my self-talk. I like this skill for short, intense training sessions. However, I think that it lacks usefulness for me during longer training sessions. I am not an elite runner. I am not the type of runner who will *race* a half marathon. I like running because I can enjoy the scenery and be outside. Sometimes, I felt that *focus* turned into *hyper-focus*, which took some enjoyment from this goal. Regardless, I believe that the benefits in my shorter runs and strength training sessions were profound.

Stress Management

During week 5, I completed Cox's Competitive State Anxiety Inventory 2R (CSAI-2R). I scored and interpreted the results. This assessment showed me that I may experience some anxiety regarding performance or competition. After some self-reflection, I realized that some of my anxiety may come from fears that I may not be able to complete a half marathon and fear of judgment from others. To combat these fears, I combined positive self-talk exercises and deep breathing techniques. These techniques helped my stress management.

The results of my CSAI-2R suggested that I generally feel pre-competition worries or negative performance expectations, despite having strong confidence. Some suggestions included developing a consistent pre-competition routine, positive self-talk, and using concentration drills. Since I had practiced positive self-talk and concentration drills for other mental skills, I decided to develop a pre-competition routine. After trying some different methods, I found a routine that has worked well for me. The most effective routine consisted of laying out my clothes the night before, preparing nutrition (electrolytes and gels), breakfast, and breathing exercises.

Imagery

During week 5, I also completed the Sport Imagery Questionnaire (SIQ). My SIQ results showed I have many strengths with imagery and some areas where I could improve. One area was Cognitive General. This implied that I may struggle with decision-making during competitions. I have had a lot of time in endurance sports to analyze and overanalyze decisions. It can be difficult to keep your mind from wandering during 2-hour races.

The results of my assessment also suggested that I should practice decision-making during competition. I decided to try mental race-day walkthroughs and cognitive imagery development. To develop my mental walkthroughs, I asked runners who had done this race before. I asked them about the course, particularly the challenging parts. I also looked at the course maps to help me mentally prepare for the route. The preparation and development of the mental walkthrough made this skill more effective. My efforts to develop cognitive general imagery were not as effective. I tried to imagine smooth running, fast running, and even fun running before long runs. After each run, I recorded my reactions during and after my session in my training logs. As I visualized my race day and plan, I experienced some anxiety, and my imagery efforts felt forced. This skill was not as effective as I had hoped.

Mindfulness

After finishing my Five Facets Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), I felt encouraged that I have a strong understanding of mindfulness. I believe that I have used this mental skill for a long time and that I have developed its use in competitions and training. My assessment results suggested that I should develop my nonreactivity skills. While I typically allow experiences to pass without immediate reaction, I can struggle in highly emotional situations. I used mindfulness techniques such as body scans, breathing exercises, and meditation. Since some of

these skills overlapped with other mental skills, I tried body scans. I added a quick body scan before training sessions.

Despite my consistent efforts, I felt that this mental skill was less effective than others. If anything, I felt that a body scan only increased my awareness of sore muscles, fatigue, and hunger. The resulting feelings showed my deficiency in understanding mindfulness and its techniques.

Section 3: Personal Reflection

Some of the skills felt natural and helpful. Others felt forced. I surmise my success and struggles with each skill correlate with my life experience. Since I have used and taught about goal-setting, this mental skill felt natural and easy for me. In contrast, I have less experience with imagery in performance situations and struggled. Regardless, I found that this project helped me see which mental skills I understood the most and which ones I need more training and understanding.

Goal-setting, positive self-talk, and stress management felt easier for me to incorporate and integrate into my training. Like I stated before, I have a lot of experience with goal-setting. Therefore, I was confident when creating well-formulated goals with smaller, productive steps. Positive self-talk was a somewhat new concept for me. I knew about the consequences of self-talk, but lacked the guidance on how to create a help self-talk script. The worksheets, assessments, and activities from class helped me develop this skill. The foundational knowledge enabled an easier application of positive self-talk. Stress management has been a challenge for me for a long time. I have diligently worked on this challenge in my personal life. When I assessed the results of my CSAI-2R, I looked forward to the suggestions because I knew that this

was a skill that I needed. My attitude helped this skill become easier for me. Each of these mental skills were easier because of my background, needs, and attitude.

The hardest skill for me was mindfulness. I struggled with this skill because it felt redundant at times and invoked anxiety at other times. The principle behind mindfulness seems to align with the principles of self-awareness, stress management, and imagery. The helpful techniques used for mindfulness were techniques that I had already been using for other skills. Therefore, mindfulness felt redundant. On the other hand, when I tried new techniques, I experienced increased stress and nervousness. This result showed me that I should learn more about this mental skill and techniques that support performance.

This project helped me learn about my strengths and weaknesses as an athlete, student, and aspiring SPP consultant. I recognized that I had intuitively worked on many mental skills through my life. This idea is important because I need to recognize that each client will have a life experience that influences how they approach certain mental skills. I learned that I should deepen my understanding of all mental skills so I could understand the techniques and apply them in an effective way.

I also discovered a habit that should be addressed in my personal development. When I learn new things, I often try to adopt many new skills within a short amount of time. I do this because I am excited for the growth opportunities. When we were learning and integrating mental skills into our project, I tried to be actively mindful of each skill. However, this habit led to overwhelm and could have affected the usefulness of imagery and mindfulness. A more sustainable course of action would involve one or two skills at a time.

Once I noticed this problem, I decided to adjust my approach. For the last two weeks of the quarter, I simplified my approach. I only tracked my progress for one mental skill each week.

That was my focus, and my activities surrounded that particular skill. This adjustment helped me get back on track for the remainder of my project, and helped me with my emotional management.

Section 4: Professional Philosophy

My professional philosophy has been impacted through this project and strengthened my resolve to provide quality services to my future clients. Working through each mental skill reminds me of studying different psychological theories and orientations. Every theory can be useful if applied with competency in the right context. Mental skills training and performance enhancement can be similar. Each mental skill is useful if applied with competency in the right context. As I mentioned before, the usefulness of a performance enhancement technique may rely on the client's background, needs, and attitude. This principle carries a challenge and responsibility for sport and performance psychology consultants. First, a consultant must be competent with performance enhancement. Next, a consultant should understand the client's background and context for intervention. Then, a consultant can better assess the client's needs.

We must understand a variety of mental skills well enough to teach, train and adjust interventions with clients. The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code supports this concept. Section 2.01 charges professionals to "provide services, teach, and conduct research with populations and in areas only within the boundaries of their competence" (American Psychological Association, 2017). The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) code of ethics suggests that competence comes from actions such as "education, training, supervised experience, mentoring, consultation, and study" (Association of Applied Sport Psychology, 2024). With these parameters in mind, I have not gained enough competence to provide mental skills training yet. I am currently building my competence through my education. By the end of

this program, I will have increased my understanding through more education and started training and mentorship. But currently, I do not consider myself competent in mental skills training.

When working with clients, a consultant should understand an athlete's background and context. An athlete's background can include her performance area, goals, personal identity, and previous experience with mental skills training. These answers can dictate whether an intervention plan is effective. The AASP Code of Ethics Standard 4 explains "that differences such as age, biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, marital status, immigration status, mental or physical ability, political beliefs, language, educational level, employment status, and/or socioeconomic status, among others, can significantly affect their work" (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, 2024). When choosing mental skills and techniques, consultants should be mindful of these differences. For example, in my checkpoint I mentioned hesitation for certain focus and concentration techniques. Since I am a woman who often trains alone, I cannot always be fully present during training runs because I must prioritize my safety. When I mentioned this to a male friend, he simply said, "These are things that I have never had to worry about as a man. I'm sorry." Also, certain cultural backgrounds may respond differently to mental skills techniques. For example, many studies regarding self-talk are conducted with athletes from individualistic cultures. "Some research suggests that the relationship of self-talk to performance may be different for individuals from different cultures and, if true, self-talk interventions such as stopping negative thoughts or changing them to positive thoughts may not be appropriate for all" (Williams & Krane, 2021). Understanding cultural differences with clients can help a consultant create an effective performance enhancement plan.

Another important step is assessing and addressing a client's needs. Many times, this step will consist of developing intentional intervention plans with skills and techniques that fit the athlete's goals. Occasionally, I may encounter a client that requires a referral to a clinical therapist. This does not end my relationship or work with the athlete. But it expands the support network for the athlete. In regard to referrals, a consultant should "consider and arrange for referrals based on the best interests of their client(s)" (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, 2024). Consultants may want to refer clients due to competency, location, or personal conflicts. Referrals require a consultant and client to meet the situation with humility, sensitivity, and honesty.

Using these steps will help me be an effective sport and performance psychology consultant. I appreciated the opportunity to learn and apply mental skills training to a meaningful personal goal. I reconnected with my love for running, made connections with others, and overcame mental challenges. I look forward to further developing these skills in myself and helping athletes do the same.

Conclusion

My Personal Performance Enhancement Project centered around my goal to run a half marathon in April. Through applying and integrating mental skills, I improved my cardiovascular fitness. I feel prepared to run this race in April. This performance enhancement experience also helped me understand many weaknesses and strengths. Moving forward, I understand where I should progress as an athlete, student, and aspiring sport and performance psychology consultant.

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