

Self-Actualization and Performance Excellence

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Introduction

Understanding the features that surround an individual's ability and propensity to achieve optimal performance is of relevance in sport and performance settings (Weinberg & Gould, 2015; Perera, 2020). One of these defining features is the phenomena of self-actualization (Weinberg & Gould, 2015; Perera, 2020). Maslow defines self-actualization (i.e., self-realization or self-cultivation), as the complete realization of one's potential as manifest in peak experiences which involve the full development of one's abilities and appreciation for life; Goldstein defines self-actualization as not necessarily a goal to be reached in the future, but an organism's innate propensity to realize its potential at any moment under the given circumstances; and Rogers emphasized that the human organism has an underlying "actualizing tendency", which aims to develop all capacities in ways that maintain or enhance the organism and move it toward autonomy (Perera, 2020).

Self-Actualization and Performance Excellence

Individuals who have self-actualized are distinguished from the rest of the human population, according to Maslow, by several defining characteristics (Perera, 2020). Self-actualized people are accepting of others as well as themselves, often with humor and tolerance (i.e., not only do self-actualized people fully accept others, they are also true to themselves rather than pretending in order to impress others); independent and resourceful (i.e., they are less likely to rely upon external authorities to direct their lives); cultivate deep and loving relationships with others; exude gratitude and maintain a deep appreciation even for the commonplace blessings in life; discern between the superficial and the real when judging situations; seldom depend upon their

environment or culture to form their opinions; and often view life as a mission which calls them to a purpose beyond themselves (Perera, 2020).

According to Biswas-Diener (2010), Maslow emphasized that people who have self-actualized, are the human development equivalent of Olympic athletes (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Self-actualizers possess the following criterion behaviors: “Experiences of flow states that represent total absorption and selflessness; make daily choices that move one toward growth and away from defensiveness; have knowledge of and the ability to listen to one’s true self; honesty; a deep sense of understanding of one’s mission, destiny, and primary relationships; an ongoing dedication to personal growth even if this means difficult practices and choices; setting up peak experiences, in part by understanding what to avoid in one’s weaknesses and lack of potential; engaging in self-reflection to better understand one’s preferences, identity, behavioral leanings, bad habits, and other aspects of the self; breathing a sense of wonder, sacredness, and true understandings into one’s perceptions of the world, into one’s relationships, and into one’s actions” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 78).

Understanding self-actualization, including the defining features of this phenomena, provides coaches and consultants the platform to support their athletes and performers in establishing the factors to support the achievement of self-actualization, where they can experience their greatest capacities, resulting in optimal performances (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Perera, 2020; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). The following chapters illustrate the many techniques and strategies that can assist athletes and performers with self-actualization that will support them in sports, performances, and life (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Perera, 2020; Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

Mechanisms for Achieving Self-Actualization and Performance Excellence

Applying the understandings of gratitude can support optimal states of mind and performance (Chowdhury, 2020). According to Chowdhury (2020), gratitude can act as a ‘natural antidepressant.’ The effects of gratitude, when practiced daily, produces a feeling of long-lasting happiness and contentment, the physiological basis of which lies at the neurotransmitter level (Chowdhury, 2020). When individuals express gratitude and receive the same, their brain releases dopamine and serotonin, the two crucial neurotransmitters responsible for our emotions, that make us feel ‘good,’ enhancing our mood immediately, making us feel happy from the inside, and fosters adaptive coping mechanisms (Chowdhury, 2020). Gratitude can build emotional resilience that can support optimal performance, by helping individuals to see the positive things in life; fighting the negative ruminations and rebuilding pessimistic thoughts with optimistic ones; staying grounded and accepting the present situations; identifying and focusing only on solutions; maintaining good health by regulating their metabolic functioning and by controlling the hormonal imbalances; and sustaining relationships and appreciation for people who are there for them (Chowdhury, 2020).

When working with a client, there is value in looking at the past, experiencing the present, and considering the future at the specific times to support optimal performance (Biswas-Diener, 2010). For example, reflecting on the past provides perspectives on traditions and identity, experiencing the present helps an individual practice mindfulness and awareness to experience flow, and planning for the future helps individuals set the appropriate goals to support optimal performance up (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

Looking to the past allows individuals to recognize different values that they have, their strengths that can empower them, and experiences and accomplishments that they have achieved that can support them in moving towards the future that they would like (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Focusing on the present allows the client to practice mindfulness, awareness, and gratitude, all of which support the client in experiencing greater value, meaning, and happiness, and increases their ability to accomplish all that they desire (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Focusing on the future allows the client to have more clarity on what they desire for their future accomplishments, to develop the appropriate goals and plans to achieve their desired future (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). Therefore, with respect to each individual client, approximately 20% of the time and resources should be spent in the past, 45% in the present, and 35% in future (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008). During performance an individual's focus should be 100% in the present moment (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

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