Case Study 7 - Relaxing & Energizing Our Way to Success

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Introduction

Psyched Out Runner -- George is a collegiate distance runner who has problems practicing and competing at his best because he is often under or over aroused. George has trouble getting psyched up effectively for workouts, particularly when he knows that the coach has a tough workout planned, because he feels lethargic and flat. Conversely, he is often too psyched up for races, wasting a lot of energy worrying about how he'll perform, and getting so nervous at the start of races that he often goes out at too fast a pace and has no energy left to finish the race. George has no idea why his energy level is so different from practices to races, but he sees this problem as a major obstacle to developing as a runner and performing to his potential.

Cindy Frederickson, George's coach thinks he needs to develop relaxation and energizing skills to control his level of arousal during practice and competition. The following case study will highlight the relevant mental skills training that will support George in his performance. The rationale behind each mental skills training tool will be mentioned thoroughly.

Case Study

The mental training tool that George should use to lower his arousal level when he gets nervous is diaphragmatic breathing, imagery relaxation, and cued relaxation. Imagery relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing would support him in lowering his arousal level by helping to achieve deep relaxation. Once George becomes proficient with applying diaphragmatic breathing and imagery relaxation, he can develop an appropriate cue word association with the deep relaxation state, providing him the benefits of Cued relaxation as well. Cued relaxation would offer George the opportunity to achieve deep relaxation more efficiently. Cued relaxation supports an individual in achieving deep relaxation using a cue word and diaphragmatic

breathing to achieve deep relaxation that has been consistently established with the use of imagery relaxation and other total relaxation techniques.

These strategies were chosen for lowering George's arousal level when he gets nervous for the following reasons. According to Burton & Raedeke (2008):

> "Imagery relaxation has athletes imagine taking a minivacation to a place where they feel relaxed and comfortable (e.g., strolling through a peaceful wood, sitting by a fire in a remote cabin, lying on a beach under the warm sun as a cool breeze blows and waves rhythmically lap the shore). They can go anywhere they find relaxing, including their bed at home. What is important is imagining a place that they already find deeply relaxing…Athletes can think of their relaxation, place the spot where they always feel comfortable and safe, to trigger deep relaxation. Athletes should picture themselves in their relaxation place as vividly as possible, hear the sounds, smell the air, feel the sand, use all their senses to envision the place. The more they can feel themselves to be in this relaxation place, the more relaxing it will be. They should regularly practice imagining this place until they create it in their mind's eye quickly and feel the associated relaxation" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 87-88).

Imagery relaxation is one of the most effective strategies for achieving desirable relaxation levels in combination with diaphragmatic breathing.

According to Burton & Raedeke (2008), "Diaphragmatic breathing, involves fully filling the lungs by expanding the diaphragm, the thin muscle that separates the lungs from the abdominal cavity. Inhaling through the nose causes the diaphragm to move down slightly, pushing the abdomen out and creating a vacuum that allows the lungs to be filled from the

bottom up in three distinct phases…Diaphragmatic breathing should be used in combination with an athlete's preferred relaxation strategy" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 87). Imagery relaxation in combination with diaphragmatic breathing creates a deep relaxation state that lays the foundation for cued relaxation.

In Cued Relaxation, "athletes develop a strong association with a chosen cue word and deep levels of relaxation, with sufficient practice, the cue word triggers a relaxation response. To develop this skill, performers first get deeply relaxed by using a total relaxation technique such as imagery relaxation. On a 10-point scale (1 indicating most tense, 10 indicating most relaxed), your athletes need to reach a level 8 or above. Second, a relaxation cue word (e.g., relax, calm, peaceful, or chill) is selected and paired with feelings of deep relaxation for 15-20 repetitions. Each time they exhale, athletes repeat the cue word. Then, when needed athletes use cued relaxation to stimulate rapid relaxation by taking 1-2 diaphragmic breaths and repeating their cue word with each exhalation. Cued relaxation works within 3-5 seconds and allows performer to relax and to perform at their best" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 90). To effectively develop cued relaxation, deep and total relaxation must first be established with techniques, such as imagery relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing. Once athletes establish their deep relaxation athletes can develop their cue word association with that deep relaxation state.

Imagery relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, and cued relaxation are all effective methods for lowering arousal levels. After George lowers his arousal levels, he has the opportunity to decide his optimal arousal level for performance with the use of different energization techniques to support his performance. In addition to controlling his arousal level for performance, George would benefit from using energizing techniques to psych himself up for practice when he is feeling unmotivated (Burton & Raedeke, 2008).

The energizing strategies that George should use to energize himself for practice when he is feeling unmotivated would include, Psych-up breathing, imagery energization, and music. These different strategies will elevate George's arousal level, allowing him to feel more energized to participate in practice and put forth more effort. According to Burton & Raedeke (2008), "Psych-up breathing involves quick, shallow breathing to rapidly transport as much oxygen as possible to the working muscles" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 90). Rapidly transporting oxygen to the working muscles energizes the individual and supports them in applying maximum effort.

In addition to psych-up breathing, imagery energization would effectively support George in energizing himself up for practice. "Imagery energization involves athletes imagining themselves reliving a competitive experience in which they were highly energized, experience little fatigue, and demonstrated great stamina while performing successfully. To promote total energization, athlete must vividly recall what they saw, felt, tasted, smelled, and touched, as well as their predominant mood and emotions" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 93). By reliving a previously energizing experience as vividly as possible in the mind's eye, it can evoke the same or similar arousal level that was present in the previous experience.

George should first identify his different arousal levels, with this imagery energization, in order to recognize the different arousal levels in different settings that best serves specific performances. For instance, by practicing this imagery energization and rating each experience on a 10-point scale (1 least energized and 10 most energized) he can identify how to apply this strategy most effectively before any performance that he needs a specific arousal level. By using imagery energization George would be able to raise his arousal level and allow him to feel more motivated to put forth more effort.

In addition to psych-up breathing and imagery energization, music also is an effective strategy for energization. “The beat of up-tempo music provides an energizing effect regardless of the song’s lyrics. Rhythm and tempo work on a subconscious level to enhance energy levels and a particular rhythm or beat may be used as a cue to trigger energization at key points of a competition as an athlete plays the song mentally” (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 93). Music would help George feel more energized to participate in practice by influencing him on a subconscious level to feel more energized.

The different techniques defined in the preceding would effectively energize George for his practice. The reasons for choosing each strategy were illustrated by the examples and definitions that were provided in the preceding.

As highlighted in Burton & Raedeke (2008), relaxation involves decreasing unwanted tension, reducing excessive activation of the sympathetic nervous system, and calming the mind by keeping productively occupied, and slowing the heart rate and respiration. “Total relaxation is essential in developing rapid relaxation skills…Athletes must first learn what complete relaxation feels like in order to trigger optimal relaxation when needed during competition. Rapid relaxation is an abbreviated technique designed to help performers relax optimally in a few seconds. The practical technique enhances performance by reducing tension, promoting better arousal control, breaking the stress spiral, promoting an unconscious trusting attitude, conserving energy, and increasing enjoyment” (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 86).

In contrast, Energization is the opposite of relaxation. Energization involves activation of the body to help prepare for optimal performance. It requires that athletes learn how to speed up heart rate and respiration, stimulate greater blood flow to the muscles, and enhance brain activity. Low arousal, which can occur from total relaxation, can reduce concentration and

motivation, whereas total Energization elevates an athletes' energy and helps them to get the most out of practice, and improve concentration and confidence.

George can use each of the preceding techniques in the following ways. When George is preparing for a competition and he begins to feel anxious he can apply different total relaxation strategies, such as imagery relaxation with diaphragmatic breathing, to lower his arousal level and achieve his deep relaxation state. George should identify his level of relaxation on a 10-point scale (1-least relaxed; 10-most relaxed). Once George has achieved and identified his desired relaxation state, he can develop his rapid relaxation techniques with his chosen cue word, (e.g., relax, calm) and breathing cues. After George has established his rapid relaxation technique, he can practice this cued relaxation prior to competition to ensure that he can trigger that desired arousal level and deep relaxation within a couple seconds. Once George has confirmed that he can appropriately trigger this deep relaxation from his cued relaxation, George can use his Cued relaxation before any competition or practice to effectively lower his arousal level if he ever starts to feel anxious or nervous. George can use energization techniques to raise his arousal level and improve his motivation to perform in practice when his arousal level is too low, and he is feeling unmotivated to perform. Energization techniques such as psych-up breathing and imagery energization, defined in the preceding, will effectively elevate George's arousal level to achieve optimal performance.

The benefits that George can get from developing total relaxation skills, according to Burton & Raedeke (2008) include "alleviating chronic stress to help him to enjoy life more fully, promoting recovery from workouts and injuries, improving sleep, and developing rapid relaxation skills" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 86). In addition, George will experience less

anxiety, less muscle tension, and more awareness to support him in identifying his optimal arousal levels.

The benefits that George can get from Rapid relaxation skills, according to Burton & Raedeke (2008), include "reducing tension in antagonistic muscles, giving athletes a greater range of motion and better rhythm, timing, and feel…control over his arousal level, breaks the stress spiral, promotes an unconscious trusting attitude, conserves energy, and increases enjoyment" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 86-87). George would be able to run better due to the released tension in any antagonistic muscles, which would improve his rhythm in his striding as he runs. He would be able to control his arousal level, trust in his ability to perform, conserve his energy as he ran his long distances, and improve his chances of experiencing enjoyment in his sport.

The benefits that George can get from developing Rapid energization skills, as highlighted in Burton & Raedeke (2008) "rapid energization, energizes an athlete effectively to achieve arousal levels that are optimal for performance in just a few seconds" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 93). Rapid energization would allow George to energize to his optimal arousal level within seconds before practice or any competition he is feeling unmotivated. As mentioned in Burton & Raedeke (2008), "the recommended primary energization strategy is cued energization, because it works with any total energization technique, is easily learned by most performers, and it works in a wide range of sport settings. Cued energization repeatedly pairs a cue word with high energy levels in order to develop a strong association between the two. The cue word can then be used with psych up breaths to trigger a rapid energization response" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 93). George could benefit from using cued energization on one of his long runs when he is starting to feel tired, and he needs an extra boost of energy and motivation.

The best process for helping George to develop total relaxation would be using diaphragmatic breathing and imagery relaxation. As defined previously from Burton & Raedeke (2008),

> "Diaphragmatic Breathing-involves fully filling the lungs by expanding the diaphragm, the thin muscle that separates the lungs from the abdominal cavity. Inhaling through the nose causes the diaphragm to move down slightly, pushing the abdomen out and creating a vacuum that allows the lungs to be filled from the bottom up in three distinct phases. First, as your diaphragm expands and your abdomen is pushed outward, you can feel the area under your belly button enlarge as your lower lungs are filled. Next, the middle portion of your lungs is filled by allowing your rib cage to expand. Finally, your chest and shoulders are raised slightly and the upper third of your lungs are filled. The inhalation should be followed by a healthy pause, then a slow and complete exhalation through the mouth. The inhalation should be slow and deliberate, taking about as long as the exhalation. Some experts recommend a slight sigh at the end of the exhalation to maximize the amount of air expired. Diaphragmatic breathing should be used in combination with an athlete's preferred relaxation strategy" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 87).

Diaphragmatic breathing would be beneficial to incorporate with imagery relaxation to help George to achieve total relaxation.

Imagery relaxation is a very effective strategy achieve desirable relaxation levels. According to Burton & Raedeke (2008):

> "Imagery relaxation has athletes imagine taking a minivacation to a place where they feel relaxed and comfortable (e.g., strolling through a peaceful wood, sitting by a fire in a remote cabin, lying on a beach under the warm sun as a cool breeze blows and waves rhythmically lap the shore). They can go anywhere they find relaxing, including their bed at home. What is important is imagining a place that they already find deeply relaxing…Athletes can think of their relaxation, place the spot where they always feel comfortable and safe, to trigger deep relaxation. Athletes should picture themselves in their relaxation place as vividly as possible, hear the sounds, smell the air, feel the sand, use all their senses to envision the place. The more they can feel themselves to be in this relaxation place, the more relaxing it will be. They should regularly practice imagining this place until they create it in their mind's eye quickly and feel the associated relaxation" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 87-88).

Imagery relaxation is one of the most effective strategies for achieving desirable relaxation levels in combination with diaphragmatic breathing. Imagery relaxation in combination with diaphragmatic breathing creates a deep relaxation state that lays the foundation for developing rapid relaxation strategies, such as cued relaxation. After developing a total relaxation from imagery relaxation and diaphragmic breathing, George can develop rapid relaxations strategies such as cued relaxation.

It is important to achieve that deep relaxation state prior to attempting to develop the association of a specific cue word in order to effectively apply and maximally benefit from cued relaxation. For instance, if George has not effectively established a deep relaxation state prior to attempting to attach a cue word, he will have trouble achieving the benefits from the cue word to

any specific deep relaxation state because no deep relaxation state was ever consistently established prior to attaching a cue word.

Once George has effectively established his total relaxation and deep relaxation state, he can develop his rapid relaxation technique. As mentioned in Burton & Raedeke (2008), in Cued Relaxation, "athletes develop a strong association with a chosen cue word and deep levels of relaxation, with sufficient practice, the cue word triggers a relaxation response. To develop this skill, performers first get deeply relaxed by using a total relaxation technique such as imagery relaxation. On a 10-point scale (1 indicating most tense, 10 indicating most relaxed), your athletes need to reach a level 8 or above. Second, a relaxation cue word (e.g. relax, calm, peaceful, or chill) is selected and paired with feelings of deep relaxation for 15-20 repetitions. Each time they exhale, athletes repeat the cue word. Then, when needed athletes use cued relaxation to stimulate rapid relaxation by taking 1-2 diaphragmic breaths and repeating their cue word with each exhalation. Cued relaxation works within 3-5 seconds and allows performer to relax and to perform at their best" (Burton & Raedeke, 2008, p. 90). George should practice this rapid relaxation state consistently to ensure that he can effectively trigger his deep relaxation state with his associated cue word prior to competition.

There are several effective techniques that could effectively lower George's arousal level when he is feeling nervous, including imagery relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing. In addition, there are numerous strategies such as psych-up breathing and imagery energization that can elevate George's arousal level when he is feeling unmotivated before practice. Understanding the difference between relaxation and energization and total versus rapid relaxation and energization gives George the opportunity to recognize when each technique can most effectively support him. Recognizing the benefits of using total relaxation, energization and

rapid relaxation and energization can remind George of the value that he can achieve from applying these different techniques. Following the preceding processes will allow George to effectively develop total relaxation, energization, and rapid relaxation and energization, so he can apply them each effectively to support him in optimal performance in each respective task and environment.

References

Burton, D. & Raedeke, T. D. (2008). Sport psychology for coaches. Human Kinetics. ISBN: 978-0-7360-3986-4.