

Introduction

Setting the scene for the *Flexible Mind* approach



This introductory section of the *Flexible Mind Session Guides* aims to provide a rationale for the approach and highlight some important considerations to ensure that practitioners and athletes get the most from the approach.

Psychological Flexibility

The *Flexible Mind* approach is based on Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT). ACT is a form of psychological training that helps to build *psychological flexibility*. Hayes (2019, p5.) has defined psychological flexibility as 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'. The aim of the *Flexible Mind* Session Guide is to help practitioners to deliver sessions with athletes so that they can build psychological flexibility to develop and sustain an optimal balance between performance excellence and mental health and wellbeing. We call this balance *WExceLLence*. The material presented in this *Flexible Mind* Session Guide is drawn from the book *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (White et al., 2021). It is important to empathise that the *Flexible Mind* Session Guide should be used to *complement* the more detailed information presented in the book rather than to act as a substitute for it.

Who should deliver the approach?

The *Flexible Mind* approach should be delivered by practitioners who have at a minimum a postgraduate degree in a form of applied psychology (e.g. sport and exercise psychology, clinical psychology, counselling psychology etc.). This will help provide the requisite knowledge of psychological processes for intervention delivery. As such practitioner psychologists (such as sport and exercise psychologists, clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists etc.) will be well placed to deliver the intervention. We will be adopting the term 'practitioner' throughout the text, to collectively describe these various professions. It will, however, be important for these practitioners to seek appropriate supervision for delivering the intervention. There are a range of 'warning lights' that practitioners should be alert to which should signal when issues need to be escalated and specialist consultation is required. Warning lights include a sustained period of low mood, acute distress/trauma, grief, psychosis, suicidal ideation/intent, and/or addictions. If such issues arise, then urgent support should be sought from a mental health professional. Sport-specific factors that would meet criteria for 'warning lights' would include: 1) Physical injury will necessitate the involvement of experts in the physical management and rehabilitation of the injury, 2) Sustained performance decrement will require the involvement of the head/assistant, strength and conditioning coaches, 3) Weight loss/weight gain will require consultation with the nutritionist, strength and conditioning coaches, 4) Competition anxiety would benefit from specialist input from sport psychology.

Introducing the P.O.D.

The *Flexible Mind* approach is a pragmatic one - it aims to help athletes explore whether behaviours are effective (or 'workable') in the context that they occur for them enhancing *WExceLLence*. If existing strategies are serving them well in this regard, then great, they should keep doing those things. If, however, existing strategies are proving to be ineffective or counterproductive then the *Flexible Mind* approach can be helpful for informing alternative approaches. The three key processes that the *Flexible Mind* approaches draws on to build *WExceLLence* are Being **P**resent, Being **O**pen, **D**oing what matters a.k.a. the *P.O.D of psychological flexibility*.

Being Present: Is about recognizing that there is a 'you' that can notice the breadth of current moment experiences.

Being Open: Is about adopting a courageous and curious willingness to explore current experiences (even if they are difficult) and unhooking from the mind's tendency to want to define ourselves on the basis of these experiences

Doing What Matters: Is about getting clear about our values and committing to actions that are consistent with these values.

By focusing on the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility, the *Flexible Mind* approach supports athletes to choose to build repertoires of behaviour that serve the function of allowing them to move 'towards' *WExceLLence* and be less prone to engaging in behaviours that serve a more restrictive function of moving 'away' from threats; threats that can actually be understood as the 'price of admission' for doing what really counts.

How to approach the delivery of sessions

The session guide will provide detailed information about how sessions of the *Flexible Mind* approach can be structured. Guidance is provided about how the approach can be delivered to athletes across seven different sessions. In considering how to deliver the *Flexible Mind* approach, we propose that practitioners use what we refer to as the A.R.C. method to sessions:

A: Attend to key principles and new knowledge

R: Review the athletes' level of understanding

C: Consolidate learning through between session practice (a.k.a. as 'homework').

It is important for practitioners using the *Flexible Mind* approach to avoid being rigid and dogmatic in the conduct of this work. If you talk the flexible talk, it is crucial that you walk the flexible walk. Depending on the athlete, and their particular context, the relevance and utility of particular 'sessions' will vary.

Rather than having to be delivered in a particular order, the sequencing of the *Flexible Mind* approach sessions as detailed in this session guide should be tailored to the individual athlete. Important factors to consider include the: a) particular challenges that the athlete is experiencing and wishes to prioritize, and b) opportunities that exist for quickly engaging the athlete in the work - if the athlete doesn't feel the approach for them, then the work might be dead in the water. The *Flexible Mind* approach provides important opportunities to meet the athlete where they are currently, rather than where a practitioner wants them to be.

The *Flexible Mind Session Guide* is itself not intended to be prescriptive - the guidance provided about how to structure sessions is not intended as a definitive description of how things ought to be done. Instead, the guidance should be regarded as illustrative; providing an indication of how the *Flexible Mind* approach can be applied.

Some key points that practitioners should bear in mind when delivering the Flexible Mind approach:

A. *Be client-led:* Readers of this book should not determine the end-point of *Flexible Mind* 'sessions' with an athlete as being marked by the passing of arbitrarily set periods of time e.g. 60 or 90 minute meetings with athletes. Instead, the endpoint for these sessions should be determined by the progress that the athlete is making. As such, the 'sessions' presented in forthcoming chapters may require multiple meetings between the practitioner and the athlete, as well as the completion of exercises and practices between these meetings if they are to yield progress. So in your reading of our use of the word 'session' in this book, please don't think that we mean that the principles and processes covered in each of the chapters need to be covered in one meeting with the athlete.

B. *Be integrative:* The *Flexible Mind* approach, as with ACT approaches more generally, can be integrated alongside a range of other techniques and strategies (social identity approaches, mindfulness-based approaches, enhancing athletes emotional lexicon etc.) that practitioners might have experience of using to enhance performance or emotional wellbeing - provided these do not run contrary to the ethos of enhancing an active, open, courageous willingness to have difficult thoughts and feelings.

C. *Track changes across time:* Although the specific outcomes (and associated assessment instruments) will vary, practitioners using the *Flexible Mind* approach should be aware of the importance of tracking progress in the following domains which are all key to *WExceLLence*:

- Indicators of performance
- Indicators of mental health and subjective wellbeing
- Psychological flexibility and the completion of actions that are in keeping with value-consistent behaviours.

These assessments should be made at the beginning of the intervention, at regular points during the intervention, and at the end of the intervention to allow both the practitioner and the athlete to track progress across time. There are a number of well validated, free to use self-report outcome measures that can be used to monitor athletes' mental health and wellbeing. For example, the *Patient Health Questionnaire 9* (PHQ-9; Spitzer et al., 1999) is a commonly used measure of depression symptoms that can be reproduced and used with permission. Similarly, the *General Anxiety Disorder 7* (GAD-7; Spitzer et al., 2006) is a commonly used and well-validated self-report measure of anxiety symptoms. There are also well validated measures of *subjective wellbeing* such as the *Mental Health Continuum - Short Form* (Keyes et al., 2009) and the *Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale* (WEMWBS; Tennent et al., 2007) which will also be helpful for practitioners in assessing the impact of the *Flexible Mind* approach. In terms of

assessing *psychological flexibility* (the process of showing up to difficult experiences to engage in value-consistent behaviour) that the *Flexible Mind* approach aims to enhance, the Action and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II, Bond et al., 2011) is very widely used, and can be readily used in sporting contexts. Francis et al.'s (2016) *Comprehensive Assessment of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Processes* (CompACT) is a 23-item measure of psychological flexibility intended for use in different settings (that can include sport). The measure has demonstrated sound psychometric properties (Francis et al., 2016). The CompACT has three subscales: *Behavioral Awareness* (BA), *Openness to Experience* (OE) and *Valued Action* (VA). These map on respectively to the *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters* aspects of the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility that the *Flexible Mind* approach targets, and it can be a valuable tool for monitoring progress in the work that practitioners undertake with athletes.

What the *Flexible Mind* approach can and cannot achieve

It is important to emphasize that the *Flexible Mind* is not a *panacea* that will cure athletes of all ills. Nor will the approach be universally acceptable to all athletes. There are a number of indications that can help alert practitioners to when the *Flexible Mind* approach might be appropriate. These include the athlete:

- Indicating that they are open to psychological work and engaging with a practitioner in relation to this,
- Recognizing that current strategies may not be effective in enhancing performance and/or emotional wellbeing and is willing to consider alternative approaches,
- Understanding metaphors and analogies well, and showing at least a reasonably good level of abstract thinking,
- Expressing a willingness to practice techniques between sessions.

In terms of contraindications that would suggest that the *Flexible Mind* approach would not be appropriate, practitioners should exercise caution if the athlete:

- Demonstrates limited insight into there being issues that need to be addressed,
- Presents as acutely/highly distressed, and/or expressing suicidal intent,
- Is under the influence of alcohol or other substances when meeting with the practitioner,
- Seems only to be interested in quick fixes and/or expects the practitioner to assume the responsibility for bringing about change.

This is not to say that the *Flexible Mind* approach could not potentially help these athletes at some point, but it would first require that preparatory work be done to safeguard the athlete's welfare, optimize their ability to engage in the work effectively, and/or adjust their expectations around the work to locate the agency for change in the athlete.

Between session practice

The work accomplished during the sessions is the tip of a considerable iceberg of potential opportunities for instigating and sustaining change. The session material is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The aim is to enhance psychological flexibility across different contexts of the athletes' lives rather than during sessions alone. There is growing evidence to support the value of between session practice of techniques. The more that athletes engage in practices that facilitate psychological flexibility, the more psychologically flexible they will become. There are a variety of apps that can be helpful for supporting mindfulness practices (such as *Headspace*™ or *Smiling Mind*™) that are highly consistent with the *Be Present* and *Be Open* aspects of P.O.D. of psychological flexibility.

Supervision

In delivering the *Flexible Mind* approach it is important that practitioners work within the range of competencies that they have acquired through their professional training and abide by the guidelines provided by the professional and accrediting bodies that they have membership of. Practitioners should ensure that they are abiding by their professional standards at all times and doing their utmost to protect the safety and security of themselves and the athletes that they are working with. Supervision is crucially important to support practitioner development, assure the quality of the delivery of interventions, and protect the safety and security of practitioners and athletes. A variety of different models have been proposed for guiding ACT approaches. Recently, Morris and Bilich-Eric (2017) proposed the *SHAPE* framework for supervision. *SHAPE* stands for: Supervision values; Hold stories lightly; Analysis of function; Perspective-taking; and Experiential methods. The framework is based on best practices in supervision and is intended to promote experiential learning. This approach advocates for the importance of integrating psychological flexibility in how the supervision process is structured and conducted. To be effective as a practitioner of the *Flexible Mind* approach it is vital that practitioners access supervision from an experienced ACT practitioner. Although, supervision can be accessed through a variety of different sources, the *Association of Contextual Behavioral Science* (ACBS <https://contextualscience.org/>) holds a directory of practitioners who offer supervision, and a list of *ACBS Peer-reviewed ACT Trainers* (<https://contextualscience.org/civcrm/profile?gid=20&reset=1&force=1>), many of whom offer supervision.

Working with the wider context

It is important to recognize that working with athletes themselves will only be able to deliver so much. The environments in which athletes operate, and the behaviour of people close to them, will exert a powerful influence on their ability to perform well and feel well. There are all too familiar examples of athletes experiencing abuse and/or neglect at the hands of people who have a duty to care for them (Lutz, 2018). There is only so much that the athlete can take responsibility for addressing. The system that exists around athletes should be examined closely, and appropriate action taken to address incidents of abuse and/or neglect. As a wise person once warned - '*Don't be so busy mopping the floor, you forget to turn off the tap*'. In other words, we can waste time attending to consequences rather than addressing the root causes of difficulties.

Practitioners are strongly encouraged to make amendments to the *Flexible Mind* approach in an effort to tailor it to the specific context in which the athlete, or athletes, operate. Practitioners need to make time to gain a full understanding of the context, to notice the language used, the normalized behaviours on show, and understand the ways in which organizational structures might support or hinder performance and wellbeing. It is about grabbing a notepad, getting down to training sessions, attending team meetings and just being *there*.

Key Principles

The following eight principles will be helpful for practitioners wishing to adapt the *Flexible Mind* approach for the specific contexts in which athletes operate.

1. Recognize the importance of the places and spaces where action happens: Practitioners of the *Flexible Mind* approach, should pay attention to the physical spaces in which the sessions take place. When thinking about where meetings with the athletes take place, practitioners should be creative and pick places that will resonate strongly with the focus of the sessions. Having sessions in areas that have cultural significance for those taking part, will allow the sessions to be more impactful, to strike more of a chord with those present.

2. Enlist the support of allies: It is great to avail of the support of other practitioners within the sporting system to support the delivery of the aspects of the *Flexible Mind* approach. Various practitioners and stakeholders have many interactions with the athletes on a day-to-day basis, if practitioners can get these people to co-deliver and align themselves to the *Flexible Mind* approach, they give themselves the best chance of being successful in enhancing psychological flexibility and facilitating moments of *WExceLLence*. Practitioners will be required to convey some of the key components of the *Flexible Mind* approach to those people that contribute to the wider system. They will need to explain the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility development staples of

Being Present, Being Open and Doing What Matters to other staff. As a precursor to working with an athlete, practitioners should run staff sessions, to go through this content with them and discuss how they can support efforts aimed at athletes *Being Present, Being Open and Doing what matters*.

Practitioners may well need to lean into their own feelings of discomfort and step outside their comfort zone to enlist other staff in the efforts to support athletes. Working as a group can bring great benefits. Two (or more!) heads are better than one. Group discussions can generate different perspectives on the thoughts, emotions and resulting behaviours that athletes struggle with, and can also help generate *Flexible Mind* consistent approaches to address these. Practitioners should get in touch with their creative side to help with this. Putting together PowerPoint presentations, recording video tutorials, producing posters and other documents can be used to bring the *Flexible Mind* approach to life, in an authentic and genuine manner.

3. *Identify key gate-keepers:* In the delivery of the *Flexible Mind* approach, practitioners are encouraged to find key 'gatekeepers' to ensure the *Flexible Mind* message can be heard by as wide an audience as possible. Within many sporting environments, there are the people that have key relationships within the group, such that if they convey a message, it will reach the whole group. They have that level of influence. Practitioners need not carry out a social network analysis to identify who gatekeepers are. The most efficient and effective way of doing this comes back to spending time in the environment and sussing out who these key people are. Those who intend on delivering this approach effectively, should work to get these people onside with regard to the key concepts within the *Flexible Mind* approach. Why? Well they have the power, they have a lot of social clout, and whether they like it or not, practitioners should consider their opinions. If they are unhelpful opinions they may obstruct the successful delivery of this approach. If however they get onboard, then these people have the power to greatly enhance practitioners' efforts and act as informal, or formal, co-facilitator of the *Flexible Mind* approach. What matters to one person will differ to what matters to another, and within a team environment there can be marked variations in the visions and values that people hold. The *Flexible Mind* approach is based on a pragmatic recognition that it is absolutely ok for people to have different opinions, provided that people can have differences in opinions AND still fully commit to an agreed plan of action about how best to move forward together. Once everyone has signed up to a shared vision, and is singing off the same metaphorical 'hymn sheet', incredible momentum towards *WExceLLence* can be created.

4. *Get values off the changing room wall and into the athlete's lives:* Clarifying values and supporting athletes to behave in ways that are consistent with their values are important aspects of the *Flexible Mind* approach. Values should be generated by the athlete or the team, rather than imposed upon them. They should be part of the daily language when speaking with

athletes. They should be emphasised before a session, "Let's move towards *Value X* in this session", and they should be the measuring stick for a successful session, "Did we show *Value Y* today?". At the start of any given week, a practitioner could consider including an image and a quote (much like those included at the start of the chapters in this book) that embodies a value that the athlete/team has identified. Alternatively, practitioners can also invite the athlete to suggest images and quotes that fit with their values. By having values present in the sporting system, the likelihood of athletes making behavioural choices informed by these values is increased - and it's the choices that athlete's make that will move them towards *WExceLLence*. It is vital to keep conversations about values alive and kicking.

5. *Roll with the dissenting voices:* Dissenting voices that aim to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of psychological interventions are thankfully less commonplace than they used to be, but it doesn't mean that practitioners won't have to contend with them. Indeed, at times, practitioners might have to contend with dissenting voices of their own. Practitioners may have moments where they notice the thought "is this going to work?". They may feel apprehension about how the approach will be received and they might be tested at times, but by believing in the approach and embodying the principles that it espouses, practitioners will find ways through and can bring others along with them as they do so. Sport is ultimately a results driven industry. If results have not been favourable and backs are against the wall, the powers that be in an elite environment can sometimes look to *streamline* their efforts. Psychological approaches like the *Flexible Mind* can be seen by some as "wishy washy" when compared with more objective, easier to quantify sports science 'cousins'. It is arguably easier for disciplines such as sports science to prove that they *are doing their job*, and so not contributing to poor performance. For those implementing psychological approaches, it isn't as straightforward. This highlights the importance of collecting and recording data to monitor the impact of the work. Scores on standardised measures of mental health, wellbeing and psychological flexibility outcomes can be important practitioner data points, as can qualitative feedback from athletes and coaching staff. These are the forms of evidence that can highlight the positive impact that the *Flexible Mind* approach is having for performance and wellbeing.

6. *Negotiate bumps in the road - the role of psychological safety:* The concept of 'psychological safety' relates to 'removing fear from human interaction and replacing it with respect and permission' (Clark, 2020). Research evidence suggests that psychological safety can play an important role in optimising workplace effectiveness (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Just as is the case for athletes, things can go wrong at times for practitioners too. If and when this happens, practitioners can benefit from the strategies that the *Flexible Mind* approach espouses. The *Flexible Mind* approach advocates that psychological safety can be enhanced by the practitioner safely and appropriately modelling honesty, authenticity and vulnerability to athletes. Appropriate and considered self-disclosure from practitioners highlights to those in the system that

vulnerability is okay. This fosters psychological safety within the environment, as it allows space for athletes and coaches alike to share freely, to speak openly and honestly. From this can come a sense of togetherness, the idea that everyone is on a shared path to *WExceLLence* - helping athletes and practitioners to share an appreciation that you'll never walk alone!

7. Remember the importance of experiential learning: Practitioners of the *Flexible Mind* approach need to recognize that principles from behaviourism underlie the approach and that repeated rehearsal of new ways of behaving in the presence of difficult thoughts and emotions will be key to the success of the intervention. By repeatedly applying the learning and insights gained through the *Flexible Mind* approach in high pressure situations inside and outside of sport, athletes see that they can get the benefits of the approach when it counts.

8. Practitioner flexibility begets athlete flexibility: It is important to recognise that some practitioners might be working in resource-light environments that are characterised by limited finances, lack of other support staff, and limited numbers of sessions to deliver the approach. As such, potentially challenging decisions might need to be made about how practitioners apply the *Flexible Mind* approach including: which aspects should be delivered, in what form, and over what period of time? Practitioners may have to contend with uncertainty and upheaval relating to difficult to predict circumstances. For example, the COVID19 outbreak of 2020 and 2021 meant that it was not possible to have face-to-face meetings during the periods of lock-down restrictions. The risk of similar public health emergencies in the future, means that practitioners should be flexible in the methods that might be employed to deliver sessions e.g. using sufficiently secure web-based video-calling software and abiding by appropriate guidelines aimed at protecting practitioner and client safety. Impactful support is grounded in a good understanding of what is *critical* versus what might be *important*. The *Flexible Mind* approach is no different. We hope that the way that the various 'sessions' have been presented throughout the book will afford opportunities for practitioners to be sufficiently flexible in applying the approach with the athletes that they are supporting. Some closing advice for practitioners: meet the athletes where they are, dream big together, and embody the *Flexible Mind* approach by *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters*!

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Web: www.flexiblemind.co.uk



@Mind_Flexer

Email: support@flexiblemind.co.uk

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 lying 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

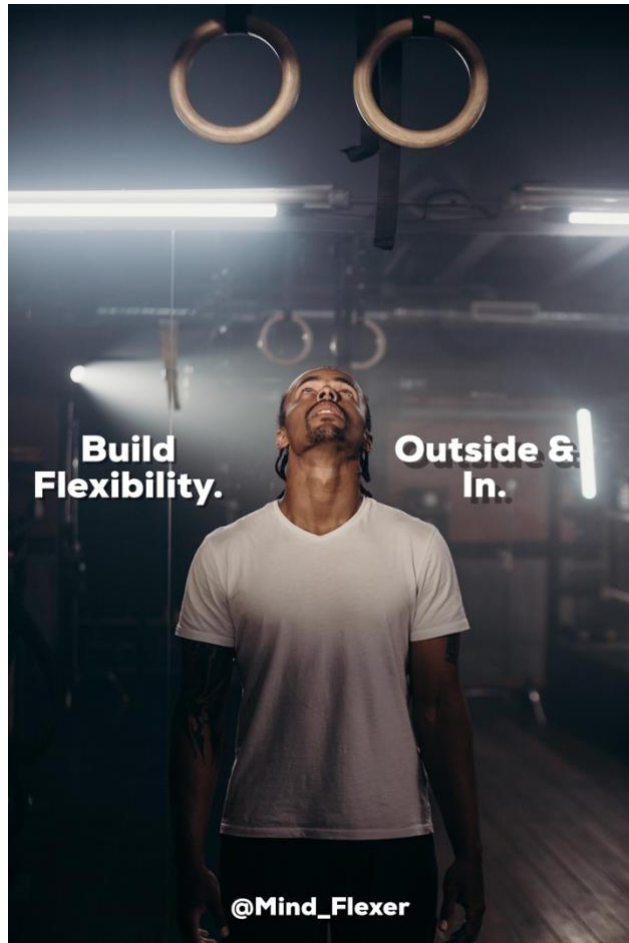
'preparedness to experience' is the *Acceptance* component, the *Doing What Matters* is the *Commitment* component.

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.



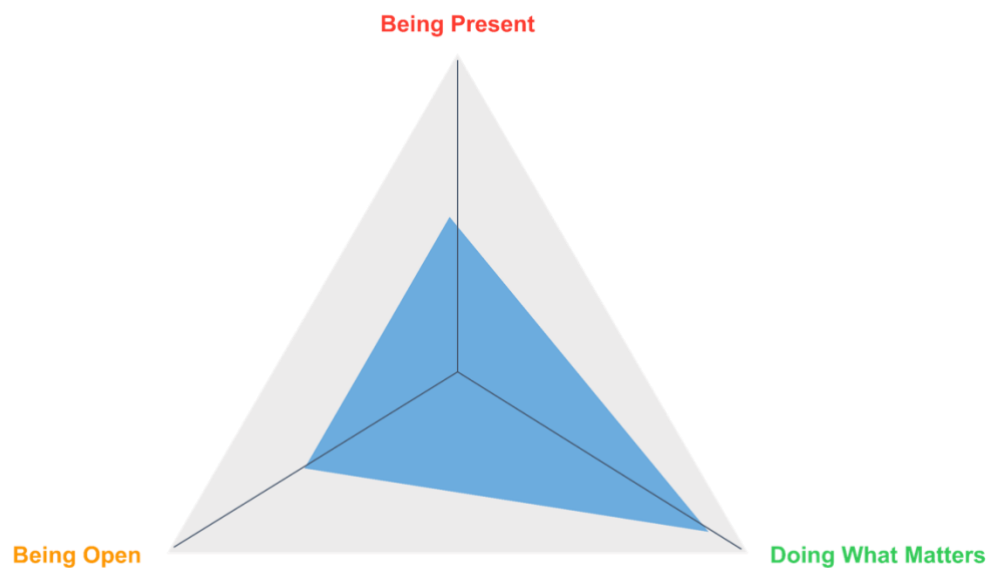
Session Insight 1

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 three 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.

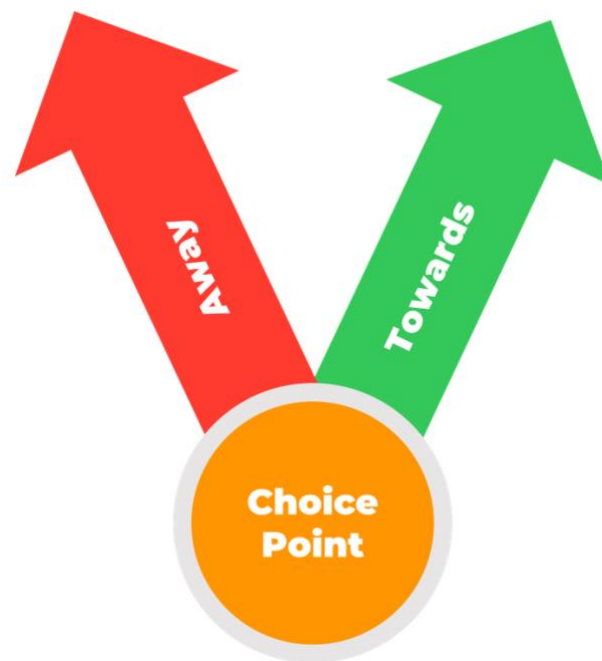


Visually representing the formulation

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

To help athletes 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.

Acknowledgement:

This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Introducing Athletes to the Flexible Mind Approach (Session One)* in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 93-114). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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Session Two

Mind full vs. Mindful



This session focuses on promoting an understanding of what mindfulness is, how it can be experienced, and what value it brings. For further information see Chapter 5 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can speak to the following types of issue:

- The athlete is spending a lot of time living in the past (i.e. ruminating about previous experiences) or in the future (i.e. worrying about upcoming experiences).
- If the athlete seems to be 'coasting' as if on autopilot and is losing out on the richness of what is happening in the here and now.
- If the athlete is tangled up with their internal experiences (i.e. thoughts and feelings) and not really connecting with the world around them.

1. Overview of session

The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help athletes to more consciously contact the breadth of their present moment experiences with an attitude of curiosity and openness. The session provides the opportunity for the practitioner to highlight that mindfulness skills involve a combination of the Being Present and Being Open aspects of the P.O.D.

2. What is mindfulness?

Key points that practitioners can share with athletes to promote a good understanding of what mindfulness is:

- Mindfulness has been defined as “*awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally*”¹
- One of the key advantages of mindfulness is that it allows us to connect openly with the richness of the present moment - helping us to really notice our experiences whilst not being swept away by them. In other words, mindfulness is about being in the ‘here and now’ - it is about being fully present with the breadth of current moment experiences.
- Although certain practices (like ‘mindfulness of breath’ exercises) can help athletes to develop their mindfulness skills it is important to emphasize that mindfulness is not something a person does per se, instead it is an attitude that they bring to how they do something - for example, a person can mindfully brush their teeth, lace their rugby boot, place a football on a penalty spot, or place a golf ball on a tee.
- Research evidence suggests that mindfulness can play an important role in improving both performance and aspects of mental health and wellbeing (See Chapter 2 of the *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athlete’s Wellbeing and Performance* for more details).
- Practicing mindfulness can help athletes to move towards *WExceLLence* - the optimal balance between promoting wellbeing and enhancing performance.

3. Creating Space

Mindfulness is a combination of the *Being Open* and *Being Present* aspects of the P.O.D of psychological flexibility

- *Being Open* is about noticing thoughts and feelings as these emerge and making space for these alongside other aspects of our experience. This attitude of openness helps to create a gap between thoughts or feelings occurring and engaging in habitual ways of responding to these experiences e.g.. futile efforts to avoid/suppress thoughts, using alcohol to dampen the feelings.
- *Being Present* is about noticing when we have been pulled away from the present by our mind’s tendency to wander and responding by anchoring ourselves back in the present.

Rather than *Being Open* and *Being Present*, it may be that athletes have fallen into well-established patterns of trying to avoid situations that cause stress and try to get rid of thoughts and feelings associated with stress. To help athletes to recognize how futile efforts to control one’s thoughts can be, guide them through the ‘Pink Elephant’ exercise below.

¹ <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness/>

The 'Pink Elephant' Exercise

"I am going to say something to you now and I don't want you to think about it. I don't want any aspect of what I say to enter your head, at any point. What I want to say is "Pink Elephant". Remember, I don't want you to think about this animal, or imagine what it looks like, or even what it sounds like. Again, don't think about it, don't let the image enter your head at any point. So... what are you thinking about?"

Now, spend time thinking about your earliest sporting memory? Spend 30 seconds going back there. Sit with this memory... Now try to delete it from your mind.... Is it gone?"

The practitioner can show the athlete the image below (Session Insight 1) to help illustrate the point.



Session Insight 1

Rather than engaging in counterproductive efforts to get rid of thoughts and emotions, mindfulness practices help athletes to recognize these experiences as momentary experiences that form part of a broader stream of experiences. Mindfulness can help athletes connect with their ability to notice this stream of experiences rather than being swept away by it. By investing

time in developing mindfulness skills, the athlete will have an increased ability to shift their attention from internal events (thoughts and feelings), to also connect with their wider present moment experience.

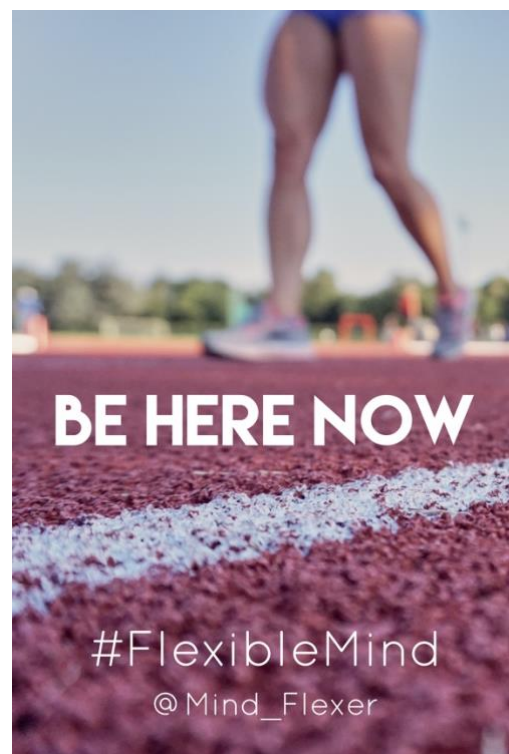
4. Bringing Mindfulness to Life

To help elaborate on this point the practitioner could use the *Introducing B.O.P.* script outlined below

"What do you think Mindfulness is? I want to ensure you have a clear understanding of what mindfulness is, as at times it can be misunderstood. It can be portrayed as meditation or relaxation exercises, but it is best understood as a heightened form of focus, it is attending to our moment-by-moment experiences with a sense of curiosity rather than judgment."

Let us think of mindfulness as 'Being Open and Present (B.O.P.)' or, if you prefer, 'Being In the Moment'. If it helps you to understand and engage with this concept, we can use terms like 'dropping the anchor' or 'getting grounded' in the place of 'mindfulness'.

There can be no room for daydreaming on life's journey, instead the aim is to connect fully with the vividness of the journey. This, in a nutshell, is mindfulness in action."



Session Insight 2

As Session Insight 2 (see above) highlights, buzz phrases like 'Be here now' can help capture the essence of mindfulness and help the athlete to reconnect with the qualities of being that mindfulness espouses. Describing to an athlete what mindfulness is will be important, however helping him/her/they experience it will be the most important form of learning.

In session, the practitioner should guide the athlete through *Practice A* and/or *Practice B*.

Practice A. Centering Practice

The following script for the *Centering Practice* will be helpful for supporting the athlete to experience mindfulness. Prior to the commencement of the practice, the athlete should be given a piece of kit that is routinely used in the course of their sport e.g. rugby ball, football boot, hockey stick, swimming goggles - whatever is appropriate and available.

"I am going to take you through a basic mindfulness practice. To do this, I want you to sit comfortably, either with your eyes closed or just focusing on a point in front of you. Now I want you to hold this piece of familiar sports equipment and use your senses to connect with this object. As you do this, I will allow you time to be present with this instruction - I want you to bring an open and curious mind to this object. What do you see... how does it feel... how does it smell? As you do this, I want you to make a comment or two aloud about the object and then allow a minute or two to pass.

(Allow the time period to elapse)

I want to know if you noticed that your mind had wandered to other things, did you think about what you were having for dinner, did you wonder why you are doing this, or maybe you remembered events associated with the object? If you did, great! Your mind is doing what minds do!!

A key takeaway from this exercise is to notice that wandering of the mind, notice when you start thinking of things other than the object in question. Noticing this, and then bringing your attention back to the object is like you flexing your mindfulness muscles. I want you to complete this exercise before a training session, simply notice what thoughts and emotions you are bringing into a session. Doing this before each session will enhance your mindfulness skills, so that you can call upon them when you are under pressure.

Take a moment to stop and notice. By any chance are you noticing thoughts of not doing this, are you noticing doubts you have about the practice and its impact on your performance? That's okay, simply notice that you have a choice to complete these exercises with whatever thoughts and feelings may arise."

In addition to the *Centering Practice*, practitioners can also consider using the following script for the *Mindful Walking* exercise to help athletes to adopt a mindful orientation to the present moment.

Practice B. Mindful Walking

"Being consistent with mindfulness practice is the key to reaping the rewards in terms of performance excellence and your own sustained wellbeing. The example I want to talk about today involves an action you do every day. Walking. When you walk, how often do you pay attention to this movement? Rarely I would suggest.

What I want you to do is to get really present with the experience of walking, what that means is bringing your attention to the sensation of the weight transfer from your heels to toes as you move. See if you can really connect with the felt experience in the soles of your feet as you walk.

As you do this, I want you to be really open to any thoughts or feelings that pop up in this moment. Remember, I don't want you to judge any thoughts or feelings that emerge. Just simply notice them and see them for what they are, then anchor yourself back in the experience of walking, through bringing your attention back to that weight transfer.

(Allow some time for the athlete to engage in the mindful walking)

This is a great exercise to practice when walking onto a training pitch or to the changing rooms. This form of mindful practice will develop your ability to notice when you are not present and give you the tools to get back there. Why not set SMART goals related to this? For example, a great weekly goal to have is: "I will mindfully walk onto the field before each session".

5. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the concept of Mindfulness. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I just can't stop thinking about my nerves and what might happen if I don't perform, it is really annoying". This athlete has work to do. They are struggling to break free from the thoughts of being nervous, which is then pulling them into the future and making them frustrated. It would not be easy to perform with thoughts and emotions like this, they need to work on their mindfulness practice and ability to be present and open to their moment-to-moment experience.

Nearly There: “Yeah I feel I can notice the bad thoughts but I’m struggling to remove them”. This response hints at some progress being made, although we would seek to continue to change this athlete’s relationship with these “bad” thoughts, encouraging them to be more non-judgmental of their thoughts. It will be important to shift away from a preoccupation with “removing” the thought. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to remove thoughts, the focus is instead on allowing thoughts to be present as one of a multitude of different aspects of present moment experiences - this can help to disrupt the endless chaining that minds can make between different thoughts. This shift in focus can allow thoughts to be part of our experience without dominating our experience.

Ready to Proceed: “I notice the thoughts that I am having, and I can also broaden my awareness to be curious about other parts of my experience in the present moment”. This athlete has developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognize what it means to be mindful.

6. Summary of session

A key point to emphasize in the session is that mindfulness is like a muscle - the more that the athlete practices mindfulness the stronger their ability to stay grounded in the moment will become. There are a multitude of apps (e.g. Smiling Mind™, Headspace™ etc.) that athletes can utilize to develop their mindfulness skills at a time and place that best suits them. In addition to the formal mindfulness practices, athletes can engage in more ‘informal’ mindfulness practices. The athlete should be encouraged to pick an activity of daily living (e.g. washing the dishes, making a cup of tea, brushing one’s teeth etc.). These can be rich sensory experiences with things to see, hear, smell, touch and taste, but often an athlete’s mind will have wandered far away from connecting in a curious way with the wealth of these sensations. Encouraging the athlete to pick an activity of daily living to be more mindful of can be a great way to develop the mindfulness muscle.

Together the practitioner and the athlete should explore the athlete’s willingness to schedule mindfulness practice into their week. The athlete should be encouraged to notice what stories show up in their mind when considering setting aside time for practice (e.g. I’ll give this a go/This isn’t for me/I’m not good at this/I’ll never be able to maintain it/I don’t do ‘meditation’ etc.). The athlete should be asked if they would be willing to have these stories show up and still commit to giving it a go - that’s psychological flexibility in action! Together, the practitioner and the athlete should agree a plan of action and review it at the next session.

Acknowledgement:

This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Mind Full Versus Mindful (Session 2)* in White et al. (2021). Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind (pp. 115-139). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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Session Three

Orientating to Our Inner Compass



This session identifies values as a motivating force, and outlines strategies for helping athletes to clarify their own values. For further information see Chapter 6 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can speak to the following types of issue:

- The athlete is reporting a loss of direction, hunger and/or direction in their efforts
- The athlete is reporting feeling 'lost' or feeling unsure of their authentic self
- The athlete is struggling to link goals and targets to the 'bigger picture'.
- The athlete is interested to understand the important messages that might sit behind their struggles and difficulties.

1. Overview of session

The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help athletes to take active, effective and committed action in line with their values (i.e. what truly matters to them) so that this can promote a rich and meaningful life. The practitioner should also highlight that there is a strong focus on the 'Doing What Matters' aspect of the P.O.D. in this session. As the *Session Insight 1* below highlights, sacrifices made in the service of doing what matters to us feel worthwhile. This can be referred to as accessing the 'Doing What Matters' mindset.



Session Insight 1

2. Defining Values

Values are qualities of action that we can bring to our everyday experience that reflect how we want to be in the world. They can be a powerful source of motivation that can help fuel our actions. Importantly, our values can influence the choices that we make, how we interact with others and how we relate to ourselves. As *Session Insight 2* below highlights, our values can be the spark that serves to light up our journey forward in life.



Session Insight 2

According to Wilson & DuFrene (2009): 'Values are freely chosen, verbally constructed consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity'. Put more simply, our values help to guide us in the choices that we make in our daily lives. They can be understood as the essence of what a person wants to be doing with his/her life; what he/she wants to stand for,

and how he/she wants to be behaving on an ongoing basis. A variety of other terms can be used to capture the spirit of what values stand for including 'chosen life directions', 'guiding principles', 'what we want to stand for' or 'our life compass'. As such, values offer possibilities to grow as a people, as well as athletes.

3. Clarifying the athlete's values

Practice A. Personal Highlight Reel (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"Let's spend some time thinking of a moment that stands out in your personal 'highlight reel'.

Grab a seat and make yourself comfortable. If you are happy to do so, close your eyes. Alternatively, you can fix your eyes in a soft stare at the ground in front of you.

Take a moment to think of a time when you were performing at a really high level. Perhaps other people remarked on how well you were performing. Or, maybe you had a sense of really being on it - really making an impact. This could be a moment during competition or in training.

Take a moment to recall your memories of that time.

What aspects of that experience were particularly sweet/vivid? For example, this might be a moment where you... (add a sport specific example e.g. ran half the pitch and scored a goal in the top corner, ran a PB etc.).

Can you describe the situation to me?

Can you recall what you were thinking in those moments?

Can you recall what you were feeling in those moments?

Take time to be really curious about those moments when you were at your best.

Notice the feelings that are showing up.

Where are you experiencing those feelings in your body?

If those feelings had a colour what colour might those feelings be?

Now, take a moment to consider this question - what was it that was so significant about that moment that meant you had those feelings?

What qualities were you demonstrating in your actions during those moments?

How would you describe those qualities in a few short words to yourself?

If you could have more of these moments in your life would you want to have them?

How might you find ways of demonstrating those qualities you demonstrated in those moments in how you move through the rest of today?

4. Suffering - a 'window of opportunity' to see values



Session Insight 3

Experiences of loss and disappointment (as per *Session Insight 3*) will ask important questions of athletes. The following script can be used to help athletes connect with how difficult emotions can provide an opportunity to understand what the athlete truly values.

Practice B. The T.E.A.M. B.U.S. (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"The acronym T.E.A.M stands for Treat Emotions As Messengers. It is important to recognise that challenging emotions (such as anxiety, frustration or anger) that sit at the heart of suffering can communicate that something important needs to be addressed.

The acronym B.U.S helps to demonstrate a three-step process that aims to help athletes to manage the emotions:

- **B**reathe – this will help your body and mind to slow down and bring you into the present moment.
- **U**nhook – recognise that thoughts are thoughts not facts.
- **S**ee what matters enough for you to have the emotion in the first place, and be proactive about attending to that area of your life.

Let's focus on Step 1 of the B.U.S. approach. 'B' stands for 'Breathe'. The use of controlled breathing can be an effective way of reducing the impact of challenging emotions that we are experiencing.

Take a seat and find a comfortable position. If you are happy to do so, close your eyes. Alternatively, fix your gaze softly at a point in front of you.

- Slow your breathing down to a slow easy pace
- Place one hand on your chest, and the other hand on your stomach
- Breathe in through your nose counting 1...2...3...slowly
- Breathe out through your mouth counting 1...2...3...slowly.

Let's see if we can do this for between 3 and 5 mins. The task is simple, try to stay with the felt experience of breathing in and out. Please don't 'beat yourself up' when your mind starts to wander, just notice that this has happened, and see if you come back to counting '1...2...3...' each time that you breathe in, and '1...2...3...' as you breathe out.

(Allow time to complete the breathing exercise)

Let's now proceed to Step 2 of the B.U.S. approach. 'U' stands for 'Unhook'. When we "unhook" ourselves, we can see our thoughts for what they really are: sounds, words, language passing through our minds that have the potential to 'hook' us, as if we are fish caught on a hook and reeled away from the direction that we want to be travelling in.

"Unhooking" skills help us to get back on track. When we unhook, we can be less inclined to see our thoughts as irrefutable facts, we can recognise that thoughts may or may not be important, and that thoughts may or may not be wise. Here is an example of one technique for unhooking, although there are many other examples also.

Take a moment to write down a thought that you can recognise shows up in the suffering you experience. Really notice the thought.

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to sit with the thought)

Now, I invite you to work through a two-stage process to help 'unhook' from the thought.

First, read the thought again but this time insert the following two-words at the beginning: 'I think...'.

Do you notice anything about how the impact of the thought might have changed?

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to notice)

Secondly, read the thought again but this time insert the following words at the beginning:

'I am noticing that I am having the thought...'.

Has the impact that the thought makes changed in any way?

(Allow sufficient time for the athlete to notice)

By working through this two-stage process of recognising that you are engaged in the process of thinking, and then recognising that you can notice you are engaged in this process of thinking, you are starting to unhook from the thought. You are starting to introduce some flexibility in how you might relate to and respond to the thought.

Finally, let's now proceed to Step 3 of the B.U.S. approach. 'S' stands for 'See' - to see what it is that matters enough for the suffering to be there in the first place. The fact that we might be suffering means that something we care about is under threat.

Take time to think about what it is that truly matters in this situation. What is it that's really important that might be under threat? Can the source of threat be addressed directly?

If so, see what steps (including seeking appropriate support) can you take to do that.

In addition, can you see any actions that you can commit to so that you can be true to your values - even in the ongoing presence of this threat?

5. *WExceLLence* As Important Direction of Travel

The practitioner should discuss *WExceLLence* as an approach to life that helps create a balance between values that can optimise the balance between performance and wellbeing. The athlete should be invited to complete the ***WExceLLence* Worksheet** (Available from www.flexiblemind.co.uk). The completion of the worksheet will provide opportunities for the

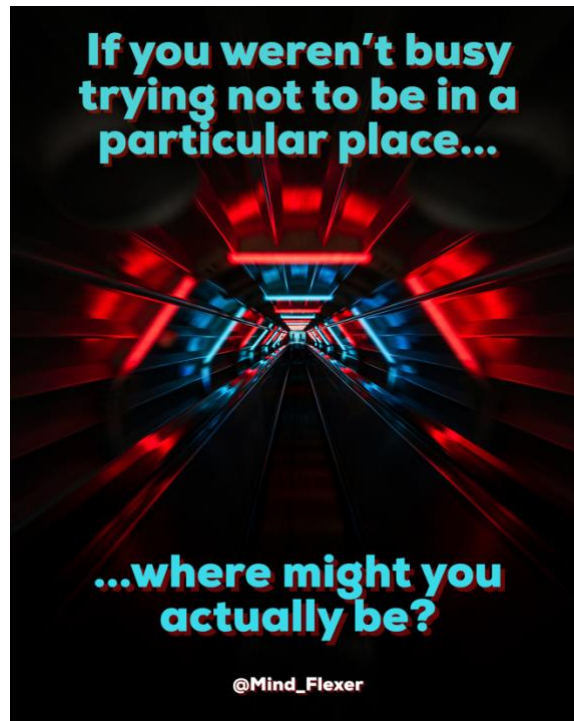
athlete and their support staff to strike a balance between optimising performance and wellbeing - what can be referred to as *WExceLLence*. The worksheet reflects on goals that are linked directly to the values that they have identified, challenges that they might face in achieving these goals, and how these challenges can be overcome.

6. The Perils of Wearing Values 'Blinkers'

The practitioner should discuss with the athlete the importance of not getting too hooked in by our mind's suggestion that we should ALWAYS act in value-consistent ways. Values should guide our choices in effective and sustainable ways – and we should be aware of the risk of wearing our values-'blinkers'. In the build up to, and during, a horse race, a racehorse can benefit from having its field of vision restricted to keep its focus on the particular direction it is intending to travel, free from distraction. 'Blinkers' are a commonly used type of horse tack that are employed for this purpose. However, there comes a point beyond the context of a race when the blinkers need to come off, when the horse needs to have a broader field of vision to safely negotiate its environment and to orientate towards the food, water, and company that will sustain it. Similarly, athletes need to find sustainable, as well as effective, ways of being true to our values. *Values-fusion* is a term that is used to capture this over-use of the values-'blinkers'.

7. Committing to action

Understanding our values and ensuring that these guide the choices that we make in life is important. The question posed in *Session Insight 4* below helps to highlight the opportunities that can arise when athletes move towards what matters rather than moving away from difficult thoughts and emotions. Converting this insight into actual changes in behaviours is a crucial next step. The athlete needs to commit to actions that will allow these values-informed goals to be achieved. In *Session 1* of the Flexible Mind approach (see Chapter 4 of the *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*) the importance of using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) criteria to guide values consistent behaviour was highlighted. SMART goals are a great way to track progress on the path to *WExceLLence*. Athletes' experience can really shift when they courageously choose to move towards what matters to us rather than rigidly choosing to avoid situations where difficult thoughts and emotions might show up.



Session Insight 4

For 'between-session' practice the athlete should be encouraged to identify SMART goals that are consistent with values that have been identified during the session and the completion of the *WExceLLence* worksheet.

8. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the ready to progress on from this initial work on values. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I have identified some values that I can now work towards completing". This athlete has work to do. They are struggling to distinguish between goals and values.

Nearly There: "Yeah I recognise that there are values that are important in my life, but I am a failure for being so distant from them". This response hints at the person being blocked in their efforts to engage in value-consistent behaviour by their mind's judgements about themselves.

Ready to Proceed: "I have greater clarity on what my values are. I know that as I move towards my values, anxiety and worry might show up. But I want to focus on achieving goals that are

informed by my values in spite of these strong emotions”. This athlete has developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognise what values are, how they are closely linked to the risk of experiencing suffering and that goals can help us chart progress in valued-life directions. We are hard-wired to experience difficult emotions - why not have them whilst you are *Doing What Matters!*

9. Summary of session

Summarize the key points covered in the session and make arrangements to meet again to review and undertake additional work.

Reference

Wilson, K. & DuFrene, T. (2009). *Mindfulness for two: An acceptance and commitment therapy approach to mindfulness in psychotherapy*. New Harbinger Publications.

Acknowledgement: This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Orientating to Our Inner Compass (Session 3)* in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 141-163). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Web: www.flexiblemind.co.uk



@Mind_Flexer

Email: support@flexiblemind.co.uk

Session Four

Being Open, Living Big



This session focuses on *Being Open* - helping athletes to develop a willingness to open up to the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings that might show up on the journey towards *WExceLLence*. For more information see Chapter 7 of the '*Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*'.

This session can speak to the following types of issue:

- Uncomfortable or distressing thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of the journey towards *WExceLLence*.
- Athlete's report struggling against uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

1. Overview of session

The aim of this session is to help the athlete to:

- Understand moments when we become hooked by our thoughts, and how this can make moving towards *WExceLLence* difficult.
- Practice some techniques that can help athletes to unhook themselves from these thoughts.
- Develop levels of acceptance that will support movement towards *WExceLLence*.

2. What do we mean by *Being Open*?

Athletes can get hooked by thoughts about:

1. **Current situational conditions (environmental and interpersonal):** e.g. the cold, dark mornings are making it hard to get out for my training runs; the coach just doesn't like me.
2. **Feared future events (for self and/or others):** e.g. I'll put all this effort in and then they will cancel the event due to a public health emergency; I'm going to fail.
3. **Personal capabilities:** e.g. When the pressure comes on, I'm not resilient enough; I am too prone to injury.
4. **Capabilities of competitors:** e.g. My competitors are better resourced than me and have better support teams than me; That athlete has always had the edge on me.
5. **Lack of meaning or coherence:** e.g. I've fallen out of love with sport; I am not sure what all these sacrifices have been for.

Struggling against such uncomfortable or distressing thoughts can deplete an athlete's ability to make the most of opportunities. *Being Open* is not about working hard to change or get rid of these experiences. It's about not getting hooked by them and developing a willingness to bring difficult thoughts along on the journey towards *WExceLLence*.

When working with the *Being Open* aspect of the P.O.D. practitioners should take care to emphasize the important difference between athletes being willing to have difficult thoughts and feelings vs. athletes wanting those difficult thoughts and feelings. *Being Open* is about having the courageous willingness to have difficult experiences - this is not the same as wanting those experiences. It's fair to say that most people would not want to have difficult thoughts and feelings, but the *Flexible Mind* approach emphasizes that having difficult thoughts and feelings is an inevitable part of what it is to be human. People are hardwired to have difficult emotional experiences, so why not have these experiences *Doing What Matters*? The willingness that *Being Open* fosters can empower athletes to make choices that are in keeping with their values. *Being Open* is about athletes holding onto unhelpful thoughts less tightly, so they are not weighed down by them. This can create space between the athletes' thoughts and responses, affording them the capacity to shift their attention back to *Doing What Matters*. Session Insight 1 overleaf can be used to help athletes that challenging thoughts that they experience need not block their progress.



Session Insight 1

3. Helping the athlete with *Being Open*

Practitioners can use the following two practices (A and B) to experience *Being Open*:

Practice A. Leaves on a stream. The aim of this practice is to invite the athlete to get some distance from their thoughts and feelings (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"We are going to work through a short exercise that will encourage you to get some distance from your thoughts and feelings. I want you to sit in a comfortable position, you can either close your eyes or just gently fix them on a spot in front of you. Now, I invite you to visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream.

You hear the birds singing. The weather is warm, and you can feel a slight breeze on your face.

As you look out from where you are sitting you can notice leaves that have fallen onto the surface of the stream that are moving gently with the flow of the river.

For the next few minutes, I invite you to notice thoughts that might experience and imagine placing each thought on a leaf... then just watch it as it floats away along the surface of the stream, until the point that it disappears from view.

See if you can repeat this process for each new thought that you notice. The thoughts could be thoughts of things that have happened, events yet to occur, judgements about yourself or of others - each and all of these thoughts can be placed on a leaf of its own and allowed to float by.

(Allow some time to pass)

 If you are struggling to notice anymore thoughts. That's okay. I want you to just go back to watching the water flow by, your thoughts will soon start up again. There is no need to try to change the speed at which the stream is flowing, so that these thoughts come into your view more quickly, or move out of view more quickly, just let them come at their own pace. Continue to notice thoughts and wait for others to float downstream.

(Allow some time to pass)

If your mind begins to tell you that "This is a waste of time," or "How will this help me?," just place these thoughts on leaves too, let them pass. If a thought comes up more than once, that is okay, just continue to place it on a leaf and watch it float by.

As you do this, difficult or painful feelings may arise. Just simply acknowledge them and say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of x,y,z", then once again, place these thoughts on a leaf and allow it to float along.

(Allow some time to pass)

If at any point during this exercise you have been distracted, this is normal and happens to everyone. As soon as you realize that you have been distracted, I invite you to bring your attention back to the stream.

(Allow some time to pass)

As we draw this exercise to a close, I invite you to acknowledge your willingness to notice your thoughts and let them pass by."

Practice B. Completing the sentences (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"I would like to introduce an exercise that I hope will help you in your quest to develop a Flexible Mind.

There is a risk that the exercise may prove a little uncomfortable at times, but that risk is in the service of something important – helping you to be more open to your experiences. If you are willing to give it a go, then let's begin...

If you are happy to do so, I invite you to close your eyes. Otherwise just fix your gaze softly on the floor in front of you.

I would like you to think of a recent time that you made a mistake, I want you to go back and relive that moment. Bring to mind what you were seeing at that time, what you might have been hearing, and what emotions you might have been feeling. If there were other people around try to bring to mind how they reacted to the mistake that you made.

As you do this, just acknowledge that there may be some difficult emotions showing up. You may feel like you want to avoid those emotions, that is understandable. But see if you can lean into the memory of that experience a bit more and make space for those emotions.

(Allow time for the memory to be elaborated)

See if you can work to bring as much of the detail of making that mistake into the room with you now.

Staying in the moment, I want you to imagine completing two sentences in the immediate aftermath of the mistake.

The first sentence starts with 'I am...', and I want you to complete this sentence with your own ending. How would you sum up what opinion you had of yourself in the aftermath of that mistake? 'I am...'

(Allow some time to pass)

The second sentence is 'Other people see me as...' and again just complete this sentence with your personal ending. How would you sum up what opinion other people had of you in the aftermath of that mistake? 'Other people see me as...'

(Allow some time to pass)

Notice the chair against your back. Notice the feeling of the ground beneath your feet.

OK, opening your eyes now, I would like you to write down the two sentences on a piece of paper. You will not be showing this to anyone else. This is just for you. So, firstly write down how you completed the sentence 'I am...', and then how you completed the sentence 'Other people see me as...'

Once you have done this, I want you to put two words at the beginning of each of the sentences. Those two words are - 'I think'. So, your sentences should now begin 'I think I am...' and 'I think other people see me as...'

Notice whether the impact of these judging statements has changed in any way. Hopefully in explicitly labelling the judgments as being thoughts (i.e. products of thinking), you will be able to see that these judgments are not facts.

Now, I invite you to read both of the sentences backwards.

Notice again whether the impact of these judging statements has changed in any way. Hopefully, this will allow you to connect with the fact that these judgments are constructed through language, and that we can also focus on how this language is constructed rather than the content/meaning of the language.

As we draw this exercise to a close, I encourage you to give yourself credit for showing up to this memory of a mistake that you made, your ability to connect with the judgments associated with that mistake, and your willingness to try shifting your relationship to those judgments.”

The two practices described above can be helpful for assisting athletes to appreciate that their thoughts and feelings are not their enemy. Developing a courageous willingness to allow space for these experiences can mean that the athletes’ life choices can be guided more by how they truly want to be in the world. *Session Insight 2* (below) can be used to help the athlete to understand the shift in focus that a *Being Open* stance can bring.



Session Insight 2

The *Flexible Mind* approach does not view the attitude of acceptance/willingness that 'Being Open' fosters as weak or passive. Acceptance is the active, courageous willingness to have difficult thoughts and feelings, and still do what matters. #DoubtButDo.

4. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the concept of *Being Open* and if they are bringing this into their sporting lives. This will assist you in determining whether the athlete is ready to progress on from this initial work on *Being Open*. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "Yeah I rarely do my injury rehabilitation exercises. I am just too tired to do them before the gym session, I don't want to be more tired for the gym session". This athlete is fixed with their thoughts and believes them to be true. They also do not have a willingness to experience more discomfort, in this case be more tired. They need to work on seeing their thoughts for what they are, just thoughts. This will create space for them to unhook and move along the *WExceLLence* path.

Nearly There: "I do my injury rehabilitation exercises, even though I have thoughts that I am too tired. But I think it's not going to do me much good." This response hints at some progress being made, as this athlete is able to notice thoughts about being too tired but still does the rehab. However, there is still evidence of them getting hooked by mind chatter relating to the rehab not doing them much good.

Ready to Proceed: "I noticed that I was pretty tired this morning and my mind was giving me the 'let's skip my injury rehabilitation exercises before the gym', but I caught myself and got them done because I know these are the hard yards that will make the difference". Lovely stuff. This athlete has clearly developed an understanding that is consistent with what this session is aiming to achieve. They now recognise what *Being Open*, living big really means.

5. Summary of session

Summarize the key points covered in the session and make arrangements to meet again to review and undertake additional work.

This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Being Open, Living Big* (Session 4) in White et al. (2021). Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind (pp. 165-185). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.



Session Five

Getting Present with the Discomfort



This aim of the fifth session is to recognise the mind's tendency to 'time-travel' away from one's ability to experience the richness of the current moment. For further information see Chapter 8 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can be particularly helpful if the athlete is:

- preoccupied by thoughts or feelings associated with past or the future events, and this is at the expense of them connecting more fully with the current moment.
- reporting difficulties tolerating the discomfort associated with challenging or difficult thoughts, feelings or sensations.
- reporting a desire to avoid or to get rid of difficult thoughts, feelings or experiences.

1. Overview of session

As Session Insight 1 illustrates, it's inevitable that athlete's concentration will wander. Their mind is doing what minds do. The trick will be to support the athlete to notice the wandering and bring their awareness back to the here and now with a sense of purpose and gratitude. This session allows the practitioner to guide the athlete through practical steps aimed at doing precisely that.



Session Insight 1

The practitioner should show the athlete the P.O.D. of *psychological flexibility* (available to download from www.flexiblemind.co.uk) and explain to them that this session attends in particular to the *Being Present* aspect of the P.O.D.

2. Practice Being Present

Practice - The EDIT Approach to Being Present (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

The practitioner can use the following script to help guide the athletes to actively notice and engage with the current moment and associated thoughts and feelings- whether pleasurable or uncomfortable. There is also an associated audio guide to this practice called 'The E.D.I.T. Approach to Being Present'. This E.D.I.T. practice encourages the athlete to not only connect to the present moment but to immerse themselves in it fully, rather than avoid or try to hide from internal experiences.

"We are going to use the E.D.I.T. Approach to help you to Be Present. E.D.I.T stands for:

- *Establish routines*
- *Drop anchor*
- *Identify Thoughts and feelings*
- *Thank your mind*

Let's break this down and focus on each of the specific components separately.



First, let's focus on 'E' for 'Establish a Routine'.

Routines are important for helping to make our lives more manageable. Establishing routines is a great way to proactively ensure that we don't get caught up in internal 'time-travel' - ruminating over things that we forgot to do, or didn't do so well, or worrying about the things that are yet to come.

Let's not forget the 7Ps - Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance.

Establishing a routine will require full consideration of various aspects of life both inside and outside sport. Consider using a diary (or calendar) to plan your week.

Consider allocating specific times to address the following life domains: maintaining friendships, nurturing relationships and family life, making time for recreation and relaxation, managing financial affairs, contributing to the community, looking after physical health (including nutrition, sleep), adhering to training schedule/regime, committing to having difficult but important conversations.

As you consider doing this, notice how your mind might resist with ideas that you aren't 'good with schedules'. Rest assured; you can establish a routine even though your mind might be suggesting you cannot. Be reasonable about what you can achieve within the time slots that you have available. Remember that you are not superhuman. Take care to prioritise what might be urgent - some things can wait. As important as 'To do' lists might be, it is also important to register what you have been able to complete - so take the time to tick off tasks that were achieved.

Secondly, let's focus on the 'D' for the 'Drop Anchor' stage of the E.D.I.T process. This is intended as a simple exercise to 'centre' and connect with the world around you. This is a technique that can be practiced throughout the day - particularly at times when you notice that you are getting hooked away from the current moment by thoughts and feelings. Drop Anchor is based on a 5-stage process:

- 1. Place your feet flat on the floor*
- 2. Push the soles of your feet into the floor and feel the solidity of the floor beneath you as it supports you.*
- 3. As you push your feet down into the floor, notice the tension in the muscles of your thighs. After holding this for 5 secs, allow that tension to release.*

4. Notice now how your body is in contact with the chair — are there parts of the chair that your body is more clearly anchored to?

5. Now use your senses to explore what you might not have noticed in the room. Notice what you can see. Notice what you can hear.

See if you can set reminders on your mobile phone to engage in this simple five step 'dropping anchor' process at particular points during your day.

Thirdly, let's turn to the 'I' for 'Identify thoughts and feelings' aspect of E.D.I.T.

Take a moment to reflect on thoughts that you are aware that you have recently been experiencing. If you were to describe the character (or nature) of these thoughts in a few words how would you do that? Perhaps these thoughts were pleasant and day-dreamy, perhaps those thoughts were more commanding and instructive, or maybe they were harsh and critical?

Now take a moment to describe the feelings (i.e. emotions) that accompanied the thoughts you recently experienced? Perhaps there were feelings of joy and excitement, perhaps feelings of stress, or perhaps feelings of sadness or fear.

If you were to set aside some time in your schedule for the coming week, what one thing could you do that would link directly to the thoughts and feelings that you have just been describing to yourself? Who might you approach to support you with undertaking this action?

Lastly, let's explore the 'T' for 'Thank your mind' part of the E.D.I.T approach. Instead of getting hooked away from the current moment by thoughts and the feelings, see if you can respond with an attitude of kindness by 'thanking your mind' for doing the job it has done to alert you to potentially important issues. Practice saying: "Thanks Mind, I understand that these are issues that need to be addressed. I choose to respond with kindness and do what I can to take good care of myself and those that matter to me at this time".

Practice - Mindfulness Practices

The practitioner can help the athlete to develop *Being Present* skills through a variety of guided Mindfulness practices that are available as MP3 recordings or as prepared scripts. The practitioner should take care to check in with how the athlete experiences these practices. Whilst mindfulness can certainly help athletes to connect with moments of calm, it's true power lies in supporting athletes to be present with the breadth of day-to-day experiences and to notice when our mind has wandered from the 'now'. Session Insight 2 neatly captures the rich opportunities that the

present moment affords. There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done: One is called Yesterday; The other is called Tomorrow. So, seize today. Seize now.



Session Insight 2

3. Engaging the *Experiencer*

It is important for athletes to enhance their ability to notice that they are engaged in *processes* of thinking and feeling (i.e. experiencing), rather than solely focusing on the *nature* of the thoughts and feelings they are having (i.e. experiences). The *Experiencer* mode of mind (also referred to as the *Noticer*) can help athletes to occupy a broader perspective on their present moment experience and the opportunities that this brings to exercise more choice and agency in what their awareness gets allocated to.

To help the athlete engage their *Experiencer* mode of mind the practitioner can use the following script with the athlete:

“Notice your right foot, notice your left foot, now notice this [insert name of readily available piece of sporting equipment relevant to the athlete]. Connect now with the part of you that is doing the noticing. Harnessing, this part of your mind will be important for our work together.”

Practice - The Arena Analogy (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

A more elaborate way of encouraging the athlete to engage the *Experiencer* is The Arena Analogy. There is also an associated audio guide to this practice called 'The Arena Analogy'. Commence this practice by showing the individual/group a photograph of a sporting arena (this can be tailored for different arenas depending on the athlete's sport), and then provide the following instructions:

"Grab a seat and make yourself comfortable – preferably with both your feet on the floor, your hands resting on your lap. Close your eyes. Or if you would prefer, fix your gaze at a point on the floor in front of you.

As I guide you through this process your task is just to follow my instructions and to notice what shows up in how you might be thinking or feeling.

The exercise should take only a few minutes.

To begin, take a couple of deep breaths. Connect with the felt experience of the air as it comes into your body as you breathe in, and as it leaves your body as you breathe out.

Relax into the chair that you're sitting in, becoming aware of the fact that it will support you throughout the exercise.

In your mind's eye imagine that you are competing in your sport. In this moment you are doing what you have rehearsed to do many times before, you are in the flow of the moment-by-moment experience.

(allow some time for the athlete to fix on this image)

Now imagine in your mind's eye that your perspective has widened - like a TV camera zooming out from where the sporting action is happening.

Connect with the perspective of a spectator sitting observing the event. Notice the distance between the action itself and the place where you are now observing from.

(allow some time for the person to fix on this image)

Now let's take the perspective wider still. I invite you to appreciate that the athletes and the spectators are all situated in the broader context of the arena or stadium.

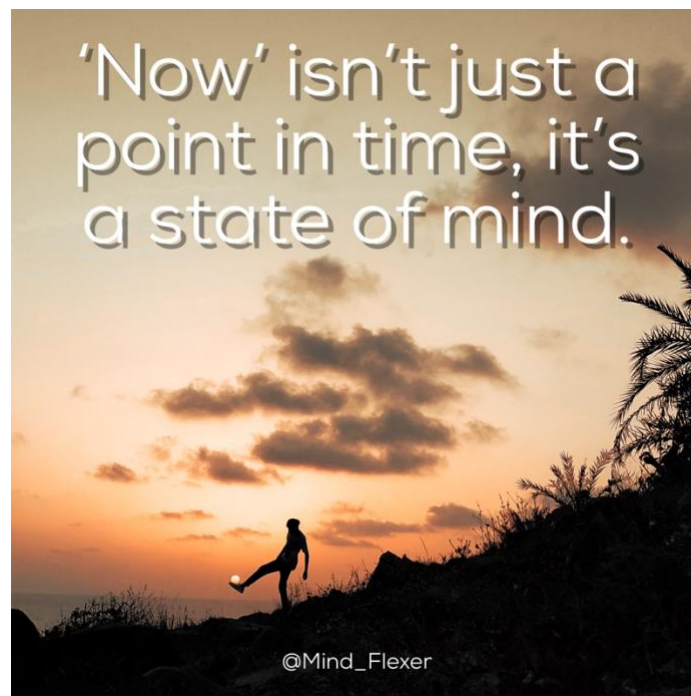
The arena existed before the action was happening. It exists during the performance we have been discussing. And the arena persists after the action has concluded.

(allow some time for the athlete to fix on this image)

The arena is the context in which the cut and thrust of the action takes place, but it is also the context in which spectators' ability to notice the action takes place.

We are like the arena. We are the context in which our thoughts/emotions take place (i.e. experiences); we are the context in which we can notice our thoughts and emotions (i.e. experiencing), and we endure beyond those moments of being able to observe our thoughts and emotion (i.e. the Experiencer).

Notice the difference between these 3 different levels – our thoughts and emotions are experiences that we can have. It is us that engages in processes of experiencing thoughts and emotions. And it is us that has the ability to notice that we are engaged in processes of thinking and feeling.”



Session Insight 3

Session Insight 3 can be used to help athletes to recognise that staying in the present moment is not just about noticing the mind's tendency to 'time travel', it's about bringing an attitude of curiosity and appreciation to what is happening in the here and now.

4. Checking in on progress

Here are some examples of how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they are understanding the concept of *Being Present* and if they are bringing this into their life. This will assist the practitioner in determining whether the athlete is ready to progress on from this initial work on *Being Present*. As with previous sessions, the following categories apply: Ready to Proceed, Nearly There, Needs More Work.

Needs More Work: "I understand that there are benefits from being more present than being caught up with the past, but I am not convinced I can do much about it". This athlete has work to do. They get the principle of the work, but they might not understand how to put it into practice

Nearly There: "OK, I can sit with difficult thoughts and feelings but that is still feeling very challenging". This response hints at the athlete making progress with the *Being Present* work, but it seems that the focus is more narrowly on inner experiences rather than incorporating a broader awareness of other aspects of present moment experiences. Engaging the five-senses, for example, can help with this. The athlete also needs to be reminded that this is challenging work.

Ready to Proceed: "I recognise that I am the context in which processes such as thoughts and feelings occur. I can be present with the breadth of my experiences in this moment and know that I am not those experiences'. The athlete is connecting with the *Experiencer* mode of mind and is ready to explore additional approaches for building psychological flexibility.

5. Summary of session

Summarize the key points covered in the session and make arrangements to meet again to review and undertake additional work.

Acknowledgement: This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Getting Present with the Discomfort* (Session 5) in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 187-208). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

Session Six

Flexibility... of the Psychological Kind



This aim of the sixth session is to appreciate how flexibly moving around the P.O.D. can benefit the practitioner and the athlete. For further information see Chapter 9 of the *'Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind'*.

This session can:

- Review the concept of psychological flexibility with the athlete and how it can support the athlete's journey towards *WExceLLence*.
- demonstrate the benefits of psychological flexibility being greater than the sum of the individual P.O.D. elements (i.e. *Being Present, Being Open, Doing What Matters*).
- explain how to move flexibly around the P.O.D. of psychological flexibility.
- help practitioners and athletes check-in with their ongoing work using the *Flexible Mind* approach.

1. Overview of session

As *Session Insight 1* below highlights, investing time and effort into developing psychological flexibility can enhance wellbeing and performance. In this session, the practitioner should review with the athlete the concept of psychological flexibility and what it means to be psychologically flexible, as well as what might be considered psychologically inflexible.

This session also helps the practitioner and athlete appreciate that the benefits of psychological flexibility, as a whole, are greater than the sum of the individual P.O.D. elements, that there are many ways in which they can engage with the *Flexible Mind* approach, and that practitioners

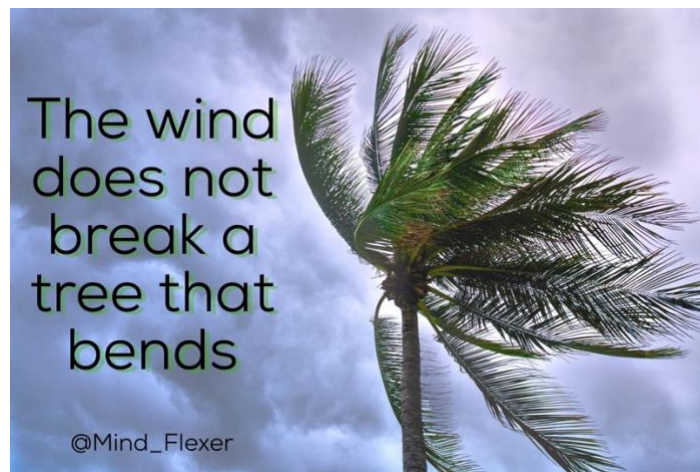
being rigid in how the P.O.D. elements are focused upon is not in the service of building psychological flexibility.



Session insight 1

2. Recognising when the mind is not flexible.

To understand *psychological flexibility*, is to also acknowledge when the mind is not flexible. As Session Insight 2 illustrates, being flexible has its advantages! The benefits of being psychologically flexible allows athletes to *be present*, *be open* to experience the inevitable challenging thoughts and feelings, and still be able to live their value-led lives, i.e. *do what matters*.



Session Insight 2

At the start of this session, practitioners should review and update the formulation table to help the athlete reflect on where challenges, in relation to being psychologically flexible, may be

persisting. Focusing in turn on *Being Present*, *Being Open* or *Doing What Matters* allows attention to be drawn to one or more of these P.O.D. elements which might be fueling rigidity in how the person relates to their thoughts and beliefs.

A. Being Present and Being Open Practice

From these initial discussions, where an athlete identifies difficulty in *Being Present*, the practitioner can use the following script for a **breathing and body scan**, to help the athlete to become more present and recognise when their mind may 'time-travel' away from being present as well as helping them *be open* to challenging or unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

Practice: Breathing and Body Scan

"Sit in a comfy chair, relax and let your eyes close if you wish. Now just begin to notice and acknowledge sensations that are occurring in your body.

Take a moment to scan yourself from head to toe and just notice, with curiosity, any sensations you may be experiencing. What does it feel like where your body contacts the chair?

Are your shoulders tight or relaxed?

After noticing any sensations that may be present from head to toe, now shift your attention towards your breathing.

Take 5 deep breaths, notice air rush in through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth, observe how your chest rises and falls.

If you begin to observe thoughts in your head, you may notice the thought 'what am I doing this for?'; simply notice it, see it pass through your mind and once again focus back on your breathing."

The practitioner should advise the athlete to do this breathing and body scan practice regularly to develop their ability to *be present* and *be open*.

B. Doing What Matters Task

If, in the initial discussion with the athlete about their *psychological flexibility*, the athlete's responses indicate to the practitioner that they are struggling with *Doing What Matters*, it may be the athlete isn't fully cognizant of what it is that matters to them. The practitioner can use the

following task to help the athlete identify and clarify their values. This will ultimately help enhance the *Doing What Matters* P.O.D. element of *psychological flexibility*.

Practice: Athlete of the Year Award (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

The following task can be used to help the athlete identify or clarify what their values are. Provide the following instructions to the athlete:

"It's the Annual World Sports Awards Ceremony. You have been nominated for the 'Athlete of the Year Award' this year, and you have been sitting excitedly at your table, eagerly waiting for the announcement of the winner.

The big moment eventually arrives, and the ceremony's host welcomes the special guest (who is immensely respected within your sport) onto the stage so that they can present the award. The special guest slowly opens the envelope and smiles before announcing your name as the winner. You have won the coveted Athlete of the Year Award. Congratulations!

You make your way on to the stage to receive your award. The audience is clapping and cheering you as you go. You're beaming from ear to ear, feeling proud and delighted with your achievement and the acknowledgement from your peers and family.

Upon receiving your award, the special guest starts to give a speech to the audience about who you are as an athlete and a person, and the qualities that make you a worthy winner of the award.

Take a moment now to think about the attributes and qualities that you hope that the guest speaker would pick up on in the speech. How would you like them to describe you as a person? As an athlete? How would you like them to describe how you treat other people? To conclude this exercise, I invite you to:

1) write down on a sheet of paper or on the Notes app of your mobile phone at least 4 key qualities that you would hope the guest speaker would comment on.

2) think about ways in which you can bring those key qualities into how you are the rest of today. What one action might you be able to commit to that would help you move more towards demonstrating one or more of those qualities.

Notice whether your mind might be casting doubt on your ability to demonstrate these qualities and commit to demonstrating them anyway.

This concludes the 'Athlete of the Year' Award Exercise."

The task above can help the athlete establish clear values that are personal to them, rather than imposed. This can further enable a discussion between the practitioner and the athlete about what behaviours and actions the athlete can carry out to align with these values and what barriers they may need to negotiate to be value-led.

3. Transitioning through the P.O.D.

As *Session Insight 3* illustrates, it is inevitable that the tides of life will present challenges to us all. Trying to fight against these tidal surges may not be best the way forward. Developing *psychological flexibility* can help negotiate the peaks and troughs that life brings.



Session insight 3

So, as well as identifying P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility* on which the athlete would benefit from working, it is important that practitioners need not be prescriptive in the order of work. *The Flexible Mind* approach affords multiple opportunities for constructive interactions with the athlete. The practitioner and athlete should note there is no fixed sequence of actions to enhance *psychological flexibility*. It is recommended that practitioners and athletes flexibly transition from one P.O.D. aspect to another when appropriate. This non-prescriptive order of

working is reflective of the ethos of the *Flexible Mind* approach to enhancing *psychological flexibility*.

It should also be noted that the athlete's responses to questions may allow the practitioner and athlete to take several different approaches to enhancing psychological flexibility during this session. The ability for the practitioner to move flexibly around the P.O.D. during a session is important for helping the athlete to realise that the focusing on *Being Present*, *Being Open*, or *Doing What Matters* skills at any particular point in the session is in the service of something greater i.e. the fostering of *psychological flexibility*.

Below are some examples of questions that practitioners can ask that can facilitate the transition from one P.O.D. aspect to another:

Transition from...	Transition to...	Practitioner Questions
Being Present	Being Open	As you notice the thoughts/feelings, what stories does your mind generate about the impact that these will have on your life?
Being Open	Doing What Matters	Now that you have been able to unhook from the difficult thoughts, what would you like to invest your time and energy in?
Doing What Matters	Being Present	As we sit here now, taking time to think about this value, and how much that matters to you, can you describe how that makes you feel?
Being Open	Being Present	Now that you have been able to let go of struggling with your mind's stories about your life, what other aspects of your present moment experience can you also connect with?

Check out Chapter 9 in *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches to Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* for other example transition questions from one P.O.D. aspect to another.

Rather than making the transitions for the sake of making them, the practitioner should make the transitions with the explicit intention to help promote the athlete's *psychological flexibility*.

4. Checking progress

Here are some examples of how an athlete's responses can provide an insight into how they understand the concepts that have been the focus of this session. These can assist the practitioner in determining if the athlete is ready to progress. The different stages of understanding are categorised as *Needs More Work*, *Nearly There* and *Ready to Proceed*.

Needs More Work: "I've practiced mindfulness a few times. I've got it. What's next on the list?" - This suggests the athlete has not fully appreciated the dynamic nature of developing P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility and the need for continued practice to support the *Flexible Mind* approach. It also suggests they don't yet appreciate the flexible nature with which you can transition around the P.O.D. rather than work in individual aspects in a systematic order.

Nearly There: "I can recognise when I'm not *Being Present* and can successfully reorientate my mind to the present moment. I'm clear on what actions I need to take to live in line with my values. So, do I really need to be open to my thoughts and emotions? For some, I'd rather just get rid of them". - The athlete is doing well to recognise the different P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility, however, needs some further help to appreciate the importance of the collective contribution of them all in the service of fostering greater psychological flexibility.

Ready to Proceed: "I enjoy working around the P.O.D. Different days may mean I need to focus more on one P.O.D. aspect over the others to help sustain my psychological flexibility. For example, on competition days, I really struggle with *Being Present* - my mind shoots forward to "Am I going to win? What if I don't perform well?", but *Being Present* is no problem for me on training days. I like that I can work with my practitioner on all aspects, or focus more energy on one aspect that needs it most". - This suggests the athlete appreciates the flexible manner in which they and their practitioner can transition between the different P.O.D. aspects of psychological flexibility, and they recognise the ongoing process of improving psychological flexibility.

5. Summary of session

An important consideration to emphasise in this session is that *psychological flexibility* is dynamic and requires ongoing practice.

The practitioner should review the formulation with the athlete to identify the P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility* with which the athlete might be having difficulty. Considerable time during this session should be given to allow the athlete to reflect upon their progress in the different P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*. This will further allow the practitioner and athlete to identify and work on one or more P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*, as required.

In this session the practitioner can also use the appropriate questions to transition the focus toward any other of the P.O.D. aspects that require enhancement.

Together the practitioner and athlete should explore opportunities for the athlete to continue to work on the different P.O.D. aspects of *psychological flexibility*, recognising the benefit is greater when considering the sum of all the P.O.D. aspects rather than each one individually.

Once the practitioner has summarized the key points covered in the session, it is advisable for the practitioner and athlete to agree a plan of action and make arrangements to meet again to review it and consider further work.

Acknowledgement: This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Flexibility ... of the Psychological Kind* (Session 6) in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 209-236). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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Session Seven

Developing the Game Plan



This session aims to help practitioners to consolidate the ability of athletes to be self-sufficient in applying the *Flexible Mind* approach.

This session can speak to the following types of situations:

- The athlete is facing a substantial critical moment in their career i.e. transition to senior sport or retirement
- The athlete has a strong athletic identity and has neglected other aspects in their life to pursue their career as an athlete.
- The athlete is experiencing high levels of self-critical thoughts in their sporting performance and wider life.
- The athlete is nearing completion of work with the practitioner and wants to be self-sufficient in promoting behaviours for sustainable performance enhancement.

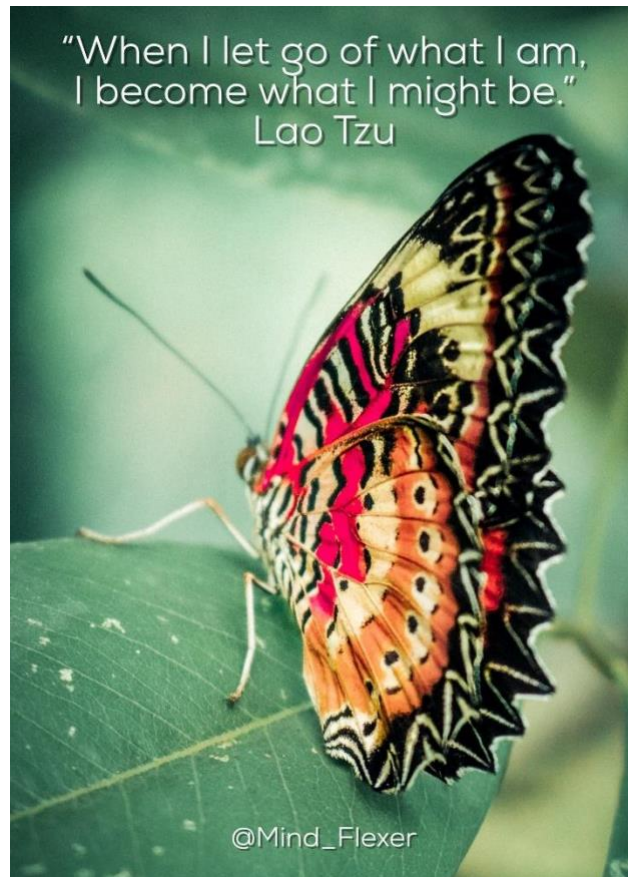
1. Overview of session

The practitioner should explain that the aim of the session is to help enhance the athlete's awareness of the lifelong nature of committed action and underline the benefits this can bring. The session provides the opportunity for the practitioner to extend the athlete's understanding of how the P.O.D aspects of *psychological flexibility* come together to optimize *WExceLLence*. The practitioner should also help the athlete explore ways in which they can develop a plan to continue moving towards *WExceLLence* beyond their work with the practitioner.

2. In Pursuit of Performance...

In the world of elite sport, the mantra of 'live, breathe, and sleep sport' is strongly advocated, even in youth development settings. As a result, athletes may begin to form what has been termed an 'athletic identity', which is when athletes begin to narrowly define their sense of self-

worth with their achievements in their chosen sport. The related concept of 'the glorified self' can arise when an athlete's sense of self stems from receiving public recognition, praise, and rewards for their sporting performances (Adler & Adler, 1989).



Session Insight 1

From a *Flexible Mind* perspective, athletes can become 'hooked' or 'entangled' with the narrative of their identity as an athlete and this can serve to stifle broader narratives about who they are, and what qualities they want to champion through their choices and their actions. The practitioner must consider the potential ramifications that may lie ahead for the athlete in their mindless pursuit of performance excellence. If the athlete suffers a dip in performance or is forced to unexpectedly retire from sport, the question has to be asked, what will the athlete base their sense on? What else does the athlete have in their life that is bringing fulfillment? The Flexible Mind approach can help athletes to appreciate the importance of investing time and energy in other life domains beyond the world of sport.

3. Helping the Athlete Make Sense of their Experiences

Consistent with the emphasis that can be placed on athletic identity, it is not uncommon for athletes to feel the need that they need to look strong from the outside, even when contending with thoughts about being weak and powerless during the many highs and lows that they can encounter during their careers. Athletes' reports about their own experiences are arguably the richest source of information for how to facilitate performance enhancement (Friesen & Orlick, 2010).

For any athlete to develop their levels of *psychological flexibility*, they must be supported to access the reports that their minds are generating about their experiences. Practitioners can use the following script for 'The Sports Correspondence' practice to help athletes to notice the mind's reports and recognize that thoughts are thoughts - not facts.

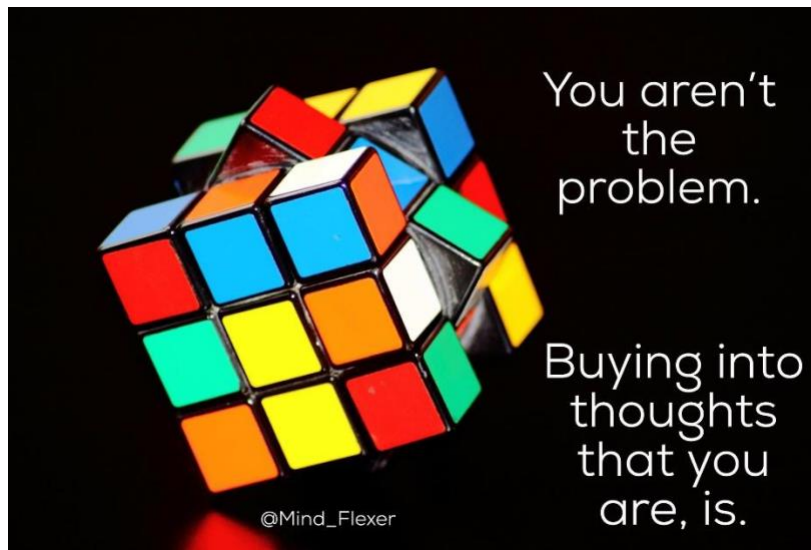
Practice A. The Sports Correspondence

"Try to imagine that you are a sports correspondent reporting from the 'scene' of your mind when difficult thoughts show up - 'Hello, my name is [insert the athlete's name] and here I am at 11:30 am on a Thursday morning at the training session. I can confirm that my mind has just given me the thought that I am not good enough'.

Ask yourself what difference the shift in perspective might have brought about in how you perceive any self-critical thoughts that you may have."

The example above isn't about dismissing or trivializing the athlete's thoughts; it is simply about helping them to notice their mind at work and to create space to choose to respond in ways that are consistent with their values.

Session Insight 2 (overleaf) can be used to help illustrate that having thoughts about being less than perfect are not the problem per se, it is the extent to which we buy into those thoughts that intensifies the impact that these thoughts can have on our ability to live a life that is characterized by meaning and vitality.



Session Insight 2

4. Asking the athletes: "What *could* you do?"

Practitioners should support the athlete to see any dilemmas that they face during their careers as opportunities to make choices that provide opportunities to move them towards their values. It is not uncommon for practitioners to field "What should I do?" questions from athletes when they are facing a dilemma. Rather than making suggestions or choices for athletes, practitioners can instead support the athletes by asking in turn "What *could* you do?" The *Flexible Mind* approach aims to empower athletes to ask themselves 'What choices can I make that will be in service of my values?' Practitioners can use the following script to help an athlete to reflect on their values and the direction that they want to move in life.

Practice B. The Birthday Party Speech (also available as a downloadable MP3 audio recording from www.flexiblemind.co.uk)

"Let's fast-forward a few years. Imagine that it's your birthday and you have reached one of those milestone birthdays like a 50th birthday.

Your friends and family have organised a surprise party at one of your favourite restaurants.

Picture yourself arriving at the venue and walking through the doors. Try to connect with the thoughts and feelings that would be associated with suddenly seeing all the important people in your life smiling back at you. Feelings of surprise but also feelings of excitement and gratitude.

Now take a moment to think about who exactly might be at the party. Who would you like to be there celebrating with you – it could be family members, friends, colleagues... Really try to picture them in your mind's eye (even if that means they'll be older, greyer and balder than they are currently!).

Now let's imagine that the evening has progressed and it's time for a toast. A dear friend (someone who you respect deeply) steps forward and raises their glass to say a few words about you. They talk about the type of person that you are, the life that you have led and what you mean to them. Now imagine what you would like them to say. Notice your mind's tendency to drift off to think about what they are likely to say. Instead, focus on what you would hope that they might say. Try hard to imagine what qualities and attributes you would want them to comment on about how you are in the world?

Okay, coming back to the present moment, reflect on how the exercise landed with you. I invite you to think now about how you can integrate the qualities and attributes that you wanted to hear in the speech into the choices you make today and the interactions that you have with others.

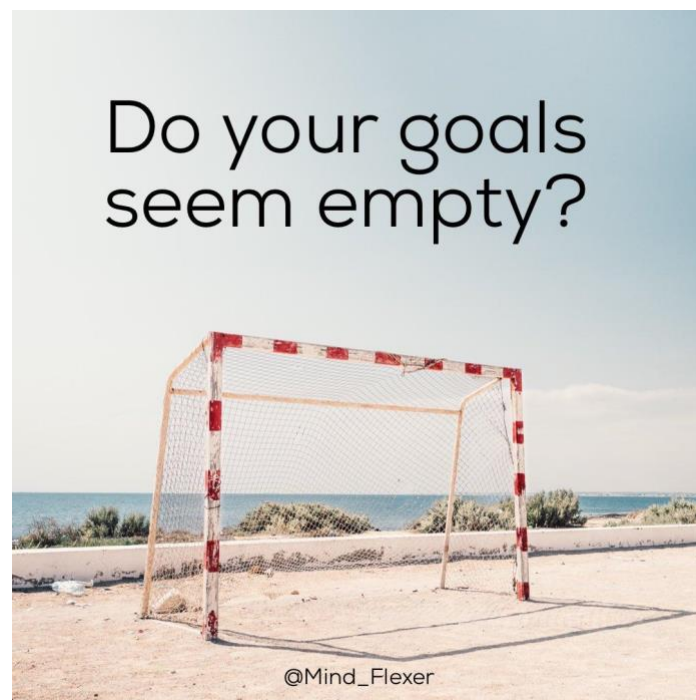
Notice whether your mind is trying to cast doubt on your ability to demonstrate these qualities. Thank your mind for that, and see if you can still commit to demonstrating those qualities anyway."

Establishing what values are important to athletes clearly matters, and supporting athletes to take committed action even in the face of pain and discomfort is crucially important to *The Flexible Mind* approach. The practitioner should encourage the athlete to repeat the above technique to help refresh their 'values playlist' periodically.

5. Maintaining Gains Beyond the Intervention

For athletes to sustain the benefits of *the Flexible Mind* approach in the longer terms, it will be important for them to engage in committed action time and time again. The practitioner should discuss how *WExceLLence* is not something that can be completed, instead it is an approach to how they live their life. In their efforts to maintain *WExceLLence* athletes will face a multitude of 'Choice Points' that arise throughout their day on and off the pitch. The practitioner should look to draw the attention of the athlete to the importance of appropriately using goal setting to commit to actions that are consistent with their values.

To ensure that athletes are making effective goals, the practitioner should support athletes to use SMART criteria. In Session One of *the Flexible Mind* approach (see Chapter 4 of the *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind*) the importance of using SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) criteria to guide values consistent behaviour was highlighted. SMART goals are a great way for athletes to monitor their progress and be self-sufficient in sustaining the *Flexible Mind* approach. Session Insight 3 can be used to help the athlete and practitioner reflect on the appropriateness and viability of particular goals and to ensure that these are in keeping with the athlete's values.



Session insight 3

6. Developing a Blueprint for the Future

At the end of the intervention, it is useful for the practitioner to encourage the athlete to reflect upon the process and the gains made during the sessions. During this reflection, the practitioner should discuss a 'blueprint for the future' in which the athlete takes time to think and identify any setbacks and/or challenges that they may encounter in the future.

Specifically, the practitioner should ensure that the blueprint draws attention to the athlete's values and barriers to their progress- for example, what situations are likely to hook the athlete

and pose a challenge to *Being Present*, *Being Open* and *Doing What Matters*? In addition, the practitioner should help the athlete to establish *early warning signs* e.g. thoughts, feelings and behaviours that might indicate that the athlete is struggling with a metaphorical steep, uphill climb - and suggest reminders of the resources that they now have at their disposal that they can use to help themselves during these times.

7. Summary of Session

Summarize the key points covered in the session. At the athlete's discretion, make arrangements for an 'extra time' follow up session 2-3 months after the final session. This potential 'extra time' session should not be about introducing new material or skills but rather providing a safe space for the athlete to reflect on their progress in sustaining the *Flexible Mind* approach long after the intervention ends. This session can also be helpful in reminding the athlete of the work completed together to help maintain the gains beyond the intervention.

Reference

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1989). The gloried self: The aggrandizement and the constriction of self. *Social psychology quarterly*, 299-310.

Acknowledgement: This is an abridged and adapted version of the following chapter: 'White, R. G., Bethell, A., Charnock, L., Leckey, S. & Penpraze, V. (2021). *Developing the Game Plan* (Session 7) in White et al. (2021). *Acceptance and Commitment Approaches for Athletes' Wellbeing and Performance: The Flexible Mind* (pp. 237-261). Palgrave Macmillan UK' reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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