



Controlling Your Thoughts Can Translate To How Well You Do On The Ice

By Emily Wright

In hockey, mentally tough players like Patrick Kane or Joe Pavelski have the ability to believe in themselves from the minute the puck drops right on through to the final seconds of the game.

This does not mean they never have self-doubts. They have, however, learned how to deal with such feelings and remain calm under pressure, persistent when things aren't going their way, and always playing to win (instead of playing to avoid losing).

We want to develop confident players like Kane and Pavelski who believe they can bounce back from mistakes and deal with

any adversity and self-doubts they have, regardless of the situation.

Having Self-Confidence

When we think about how athletes respond to adversity in sport, self-confidence is a factor that is often mentioned. Sports psychology research shows that confidence impacts performance in a variety of ways. Self-confidence is the belief in your ability to be successful. Importantly, a player can be confident in one situation but not another.

For example, a player may have self-confidence in her ability to win a faceoff because she has a history of winning faceoffs

against opponents. That same player, however, may not have the same level of self-confidence in executing a one-timer when the game is on the line.

Self-Talk Strategies

Every player has self-doubts from time to time. Providing them with what sports psychology specialists call self-talk strategies can help them take ownership of their confidence and overcome any self-doubts they may have. In essence, the goal is to show players that confidence is something they can control.

Self-talk involves all internal thoughts and spoken words that individuals think



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or say to themselves. It can be positive and productive, instructional or even negative and unproductive.

Positive and productive self-talk increases confidence, motivation and concentration on appropriate cues.

In contrast, negative and unproductive self-talk decreases confidence, motivation and concentration. Negative self-talk from a goalie after the opposing team scores the first goal of the game may sound something like, "Great, here we go. I can't stop anything today."

Thought Stopping And Replacement

The bottom line is how do we help players stop negative thoughts and utilize more positive productive thinking? An excellent technique for doing this is thought stopping and replacement.

This three-step skill involves: (1) identifying negative or unproductive thoughts; (2) stopping those thoughts; and (3) replacing the negative thoughts with more productive ones.

Step 1: Negative Thought Identification

In order to eliminate negative thinking, players need to become aware of their negative self-talk patterns. Some strategies that might help players recognize their negative self-talk include setting goals

to be positive and productive in one's thinking and keeping a journal of their daily negative thoughts.

Setting goals to use positive productive thinking and keeping track of negative unproductive thoughts (both on and off the ice) can help players identify the frequency at which they engage in negative self-talk. Accordingly, these strategies can help spark a player's desire to change his self-talk patterns.

Step 2: Thought Stopping

Once players become aware of their negative thoughts, we can teach them thought stopping, a mental strategy used to get rid of them. Thought stopping uses a cue word, phrase or image that stops a negative thought and clear one's mind.

A thought stopping cue word could be as simple as "confident" or "reset," or even a phrase such as "keep your focus." An image cue might involve visualization of a stop sign or a red traffic light. Thought stopping could also involve a physical behavior such as hitting your hand against your thigh or clenching your fist.

For thought stopping cues to be effective, they must be brief, powerful and relevant. Players must choose an effective cue that works for them. Once an effective cue is chosen, players should practice their cue

consistently, just as they would practice their (on- and off-ice) physical skills.

One strategy to help with practice is to have players place their cue somewhere they will see it every day (e.g., taped to their stick). After players become aware of their thoughts and consistently practice their cues during performance, they can work towards replacing their negative thoughts with positive and productive thoughts.

Step 3: Thought Replacement

The use of thought stopping alone does not always ensure positive, productive thinking. While a player may effectively stop negative thoughts with a cue, these thoughts can continue to come back and mentally drain the player during performance. The key is to help players stop the negative thought and replace it with a productive one.

When developing a replacement thought, players should avoid using statements that start with the word "don't" (e.g., "don't miss the open man on your next shift") as these types of statements can put those exact negative images into one's mind. Instead, players should focus on using positive, productive replacement thoughts (e.g., "you've got this, you'll hit the open man on your next shift") that replace the unproductive, negative thoughts to enhance performance.

Finally

Thought stopping and thought replacement are valuable tools that can help hockey players manage their negative thoughts and shift their mindsets to more positive and productive thinking during a practice or game.

This shift in mindset can in turn enhance a player's confidence to bounce back from mistakes or manage tough moments so they can be successful on and/or off the ice. ★

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Get after it!



→ Mentally tough players like Meghan Duggan, top, and Zach Parise, left, have excelled in the game because of their ability to believe in themselves no matter what's happening on the ice.