



REAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
Expanding Human Performance

# PLACE A BIGGER B.E.T.T.



A focus on the importance of  
communication with the added “T”-Talk

**David Durand**

# CONTENTS

1  
TALK

2  
COACH TALK

3  
TEAMMATE TALK

4  
SELF TALK

5  
PRACTICAL TIPS & STRATEGIES

6  
REFERENCES



# B.E.T. ON IT

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO COACHING GEN Z AND BEYOND

This bonus booklet adds to the content found in B.E.T. On It: A Psychological Approach to Coaching Gen Z and Beyond. It addresses three types of talk (Coach Talk, Teammate Talk, and Self-Talk) and how they interact with our nervous systems to impact players' performance.

Like the book, this booklet's approach is based on polyvagal theory, and I would like to give specific acknowledgments to Dr. Stephen Porges and Deb Dana for their research, ideas, and work. I plan to add to their efforts by showing the importance of nervous system regulation in sports and sports coaching.

This booklet is not exhaustive but seeks to give coaches (and others) some helpful information and tips to improve the communication, health, and performance of their players/teams.

As always, if you would like to discuss using these tools, please reach out for a free consultation with Coach David at [david@realdevelopment.org](mailto:david@realdevelopment.org).

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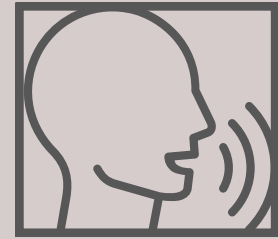


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# 1

## TALK

# TALK



## Introduction

*The coach yells to fire up the players, but they don't respond. They stare back blankly like nothing makes sense. The coach tries harder.*

*The game goes on, and players continue to make mistakes. The coach criticizes what is going wrong and tries to fix it. They make adjustments, instruct players, and try to get their bench involved. The coach feels like they are working harder than the players.*

*Players stop talking. One key player shuts down. Others appear frustrated when things don't go their way. They try harder to do things by themselves. They get closed off, defensive, and are quick to blame.*

*Some players are going through the motions. It's like they are there but not really there. Some players are taking their anger out on their teammates. Teammates get tighter and more nervous.*

*Some players get stuck in their heads. They are worried about making mistakes, upsetting others, not playing to their full potential, or embarrassing themselves. They are quick to beat themselves up. Their negative thoughts multiply and run in circles. They try to avoid doing something wrong. Their brains get clogged, and they can't keep up with what's happening in the game. They get stuck in themselves and disconnect from the game and their team.*

These situations are familiar to coaches. Previous chapters have covered a framework for understanding players and their nervous systems (brains and bodies) and provided practical tools to help them better control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is what the B.E.T. method does.

However, there is an essential component inside these interactions: the interactions between the coach and players, the interactions between the teammates, and the interactions inside their heads. TALK!

The way coaches talk to their players (Coach Talk), the way players talk to each other (Teammate Talk), and the way players talk to themselves inside their heads (Self-Talk) matters. This communication shapes the nervous system and influences its modes (ACTION, SHUTDOWN, or CONNECTION).

This bonus booklet explores how talk influences our nervous system. Then, it specifically dives into these three types of talk (Coach Talk, Teammate Talk, and Self-Talk) to help coaches and athletes improve their performance and development.

Let's look generally at how talking is connected to our brains and bodies (nervous system).

# TALK & OUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS



Talking is tied to our nervous systems. How someone speaks to us sends signals of safety (welcoming) or threat (warning). And the mode of our nervous system impacts how we perceive these signals. For instance, if someone is yelling at us, this might put us in ACTION mode. And if we are already in ACTION mode, we might shift to SHUTDOWN mode. When someone is yelling at us, we feel threatened. It becomes a sign of warning. It creates urgency in our brains and bodies. It's a warning to fight or flight. It makes sense why players might fight back by resisting the coach's instructions or escape responsibility for the situation by blaming others.

This way of communicating (e.g., yelling) might induce fear, and it could also lead individuals to feel blamed. This could lead to guilt or shame, and then players become tight and afraid to make a mistake because they want to avoid punishment. This style of communication results in players focusing on not messing up. And focusing on not messing up leads to messing up more often. This activates a vicious cycle of trying to do good by not doing bad, and performance worsens.

However, by understanding how talk (Coach Talk, Teammate Talk, and Self-Talk) impacts the nervous system and its different modes (ACTION, SHUTDOWN, CONNECTION), we can help regulate ourselves, our players, and our teams. This will lead to better overall development and improved performance.

It starts with understanding the CONNECTION mode and its role in communication.



## EVOLUTION OF CONNECTION MODE



The CONNECTION mode evolved for communication. We needed a system to deal with friends, apart from dealing with danger. The CONNECTION mode helps us do this. It allows us to be socially available to others by sharing information, building trust, and working together.

The vagus nerve forms the CONNECTION mode. And the vagus nerve runs throughout our bodies and attaches to our major organs. It also plays a critical role in modulating our facial expressions and sound of voice. These two things help send signals of safety when people are communicating with each other. If a coach's eyebrows are pinched, their face is stern, and their voice is deep and loud, your nervous system will feel threatened. But if the coach's face is gentler with softer eyes and perhaps a genuine smile, and their voice is rhythmic and calm, your nervous system will feel safe and secure. The vagus nerve will activate CONNECTION mode, and the nervous system will open up to build bonds rather than get defensive and protect itself.

This shows how important it is to communicate from a place of regulation to help players receive your coaching. However, the nervous system of the person talking is not the only one that matters. The nervous system of the person listening also matters because the mode of our nervous system alters our perceptions. We see things differently when we are in a survival mode (ACTION or SHUTDOWN) than when we are in CONNECTION mode. We also hear things differently. Literally.

## **HOW OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM MODE ALTERS OUR PERCEPTION**

The structure of mammals' ears and auditory processing changed when they developed CONNECTION mode millions of years ago. They previously could hear lower frequency sounds because these were typically sounds of danger (e.g., predator, thunder, conflict). However, when they developed CONNECTION mode, the structure of their ears changed so they could be attuned to higher frequency sounds (e.g., friendly communication). This allowed them to communicate on a different bandwidth from reptiles and other predators to avoid being detected or harmed. This also helped them differentiate between messages of warning (threat) versus messages of welcoming (safety).

The wild thing is that their listening abilities depended on what mode their nervous systems were in. If they were in a survival mode (ACTION or SHUTDOWN), their auditory processing would bias lower-frequency sounds to be alert for danger. It would even bias neutral sounds or higher-frequency sounds to make them sound more dangerous. This still happens. When you are stressed in survival mode, your ears' biological structure and function change. You become attuned to lower-frequency sounds, lowering the frequency of higher-pitched sounds so they sound more dangerous. This leads to interpreting neutral or positive messages as dangerous or threatening.

When one is in the calm mode of CONNECTION, their auditory perception becomes biased toward higher-frequency sounds that communicate messages of welcome (safety) rather than warning (threat). In this mode, lower-frequency sounds that could signal danger become weakened.

This is important to understand because it highlights the role of verbal communication and the player's nervous system. Typically, coaches only think about the content of the message. "You need to make that pass ahead of them so they can run onto it. Stop passing it behind them! That's too late." They think about their message objectively and how it shares information. This is understandable, but players are not robots with algorithms that you punch information into and get an output. They are humans with complex nervous systems. So it matters not only what you say but, perhaps more importantly, how you say it. And let's take that a step further. It also matters what mode the player's nervous system is in when you share the message.

So now we know that it's not only about the content of the message; it's about the context—how the message is shared (and when, where, and why) and how the message is received. Prioritizing the context of coach-athlete communication considers the athlete's nervous system and amplifies the chances of the athlete adopting and using the information.

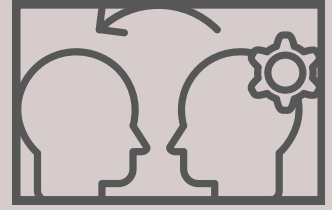


## **REGULATION > INFORMATION**

When you consider the context and prioritize the recipient's nervous system, it places regulation as the first step rather than information. As coaches, we often see what a player did wrong, something the team could do better, or how we can capitalize on the other team's mistakes. We see the tactical, strategic, and technical side of the game. We might be excited because we see something helpful. Or we might feel scared because it looks like we will lose. We want to rush in to help by giving useful feedback to the players. Or quickly alert them to what they are doing wrong because, obviously, they don't know. If they knew, then they wouldn't do it, right? We feel like we have some helpful information and want to tell them. But then it backfires. A player might get more stressed or upset. They might shutdown. Or you repeat yourself twenty times, cause yourself frustration, and drain your own energy. You wonder if anyone is listening to you. It might feel like the players don't trust you, don't care about what you have to say, or think you don't know what you are talking about.

Many times, it is not about the technical aspects of performance. That should be part two. Part one is regulation. Only then can players be truly receptive to your message and implement it into their performance. Or at least try to. And I'd be willing to bet that it's the effort you are after. It hurts the most when it seems like they aren't even trying.

This is where "connection before correction" comes into the picture.



## CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION

The first step is to regulate. Not only the athlete but also the coach. From a place of regulation, communication is better. You can send signals of welcoming rather than warning. You are inviting rather than invading. This will change not only what you say, but how, when, where, and why you say it.

You may not be as quick to motivate by fear and yelling. Or point out everything that went wrong. You may not try to fix everything in one moment or give athletes too much information to process. You might not harshly criticize a player, which makes them feel embarrassed and ashamed. You might take a pause. You might become more mindful in those moments of coaching. You might begin from the inside out. Your tone of voice will change. Your facial expressions will change. Your intention will change. You will feel more in control. You will seek to understand rather than fix. You will ask and suggest instead of demand and require. Players will be more open, more engaged, and more successful. The environment and energy will shift. It will become a place of CONNECTION where players are invited to step out of their comfort zone. And they feel safe enough to do what you ask them to do.

The vagus nerve helps control these communication cues. This is why coaches need to regulate themselves before they communicate. If they immediately try to correct before connect, then they could further stress players' nervous systems by communicating signals of danger. Then, the players will self-protect, get defensive, and retract from the coach's communication. This will aggravate the coach and push them to try harder, making the player retract more, and the cycle continues.

Place a bigger B.E.T.T.

Spending a few moments (or minutes) helping yourself and your players regulate and shift into CONNECTION mode can increase the chances of success. This is why the B.E.T. method can be so helpful for coaches and athletes. It activates our vagus nerve, which sends signals of safety to our bodies and brains. These signals are also sent to the bodies and brains of those we coach.

This is why the first step is regulation. Then communication.

# COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

**1.**

**How does communication amongst your players impact your nervous system and their nervous systems?**

**2.**

**How can you regulate your brain and body?**

**3.**

**What can you do to send signs of welcoming (safety) versus signs of warning (threat)?**



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# 2

COACH TALK



# COACH TALK



## REGULATE FIRST

When we listen to someone, we are receiving a message. This message is not solely about the information coming out of their mouths but about how it is communicated. The context of the situation helps us interpret the meaning of the message. If a player is already worried about making a mistake, and they make a mistake, then their nervous system is on edge and in ACTION mode. If a coach yells at them or berates them for making a mistake, what will happen? They sense more danger. They'll further be pushed into ACTION mode, or SHUTDOWN mode, and their listening skills, focus/concentration, fine motor skills, planning, and decision-making will worsen. This will lead to the player and coach trying way harder than they need to. And it won't be fun.

When a player in ACTION mode is already afraid of being punished and feeling insecure, they are not so much paying attention to the information. It's not that they're unwilling to listen to your brilliant coaching feedback or that they don't care about what you have to say. A lot of time, they are just trying to survive - just trying to feel safe enough to do the thing that you want them to do. So, help them become safe and secure first. Then, from that place of security and belonging, give them the information they need to solve performance problems.

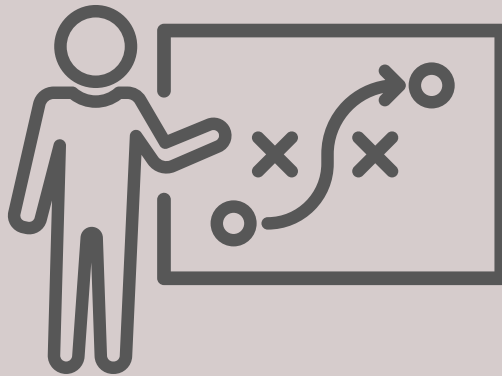
What would happen if the coach saw the mistake as an opportunity for the player, the team, and themselves to grow? When the player looks afraid of punishment, what would happen if their coach is welcoming, perhaps even giving them a warm look of encouragement? What would happen if their coach reassured them that they're with them and that making mistakes is an important part of the process?

Staying regulated and giving players signals of safety is necessary. This helps them regulate. Then, they can be open to the information. From that place of feeling safe enough to listen to you, they can hear what you have to say. You see their efforts, challenges, and circumstances and give practical, specific feedback for them to implement. This shows you understand them and want to help. From here, they know they are not alone and that you are on their team. They know they can rely on you. Not because everything you say works or because your feedback results in immediate success but because you are a steady presence that helps them regulate when things feel stressful and overwhelming.

## COACHING AHEAD

Take advantage of CONNECTION mode. When players are in a state of regulation, coach ahead. What does that mean? It means don't wait until something bad happens to point it out. If something bad happens, players will become dysregulated and will not be as receptive to feedback. They will be slower to make adjustments when they are dysregulated. So, try coaching ahead instead of trying to coach when players are dysregulated and burning 10x the energy with none of the results. Look ahead to what might happen in the game, competition, or situation with the player. This is where their IQ is built. Things might be going well right now, but what might happen in a play or two? How might the defense adjust? What could be some helpful cues to look for to help them make easier decisions down the road?

Coaching ahead is about taking advantage of CONNECTION mode and building the IQ of the player. That way, when these situations happen, they are less freaked out and more prepared, making it easier to adapt and overcome challenges. So, instead of waiting for something bad to happen, coach ahead when players are in CONNECTION mode so they are better prepared for future challenges.



## ASK AND LISTEN

Part of communication is listening. You can ask about the player's experience. You can care. You can allow yourself to be informed by what they saw, heard, felt, thought, and did. You can ask, "What did you see there?" or "When that happened, what was going through your mind?" or "Talk to me about what that looked like from your perspective." Then, listen and learn from their perspective. This helps the athlete regulate and communicate their own experiences. They are seen and heard by the coach. Their defensiveness turns into openness. And both the coach and athlete are allowing themselves to learn. The coach learns through the athlete's perspective and the athlete from the coach's perspective.

Players learn best when they are regulated, given signs of safety, and helped by supportive figures. In this mode of CONNECTION, players feel secure enough to try something new, do something differently, or take a suggestion and implement it into their style of play.



## **HOW, WHERE, WHEN, & WHY?**

As coaches, we typically focus on the what of communication. The what is what we pride ourselves on. It's the information. It's the technique. It's the strategy. It's the form. We plug our information into the equation because we always try to solve for x. And x represents how to get better, to unlock potential, to get more wins, to succeed. So we work and rework and try to crack the code. However, I think this is wrong. Yes, strategy, technique, fundamentals, and everything is needed. But at the end of the day, we aren't coaching robots. We aren't trying to program them to do certain things in specific situations. We want them to be athletes. We want them to read the circumstances, anticipate, make decisions, problem-solve, adapt, learn, and grow. We are not engineers, we are coaches. And we don't work with software and algorithms, we work with humans, emotions, and minds. So, yes the what matters. But more attention should be paid to the how, when, where, and why of our communication with our athletes.

### **How are we communicating?**

Are we communicating from a mode of ACTION or SHUTDOWN? Are we communicating from a place of insecurity, frustration, and disappointment? What is the volume of our voice like? Does our tone of voice communicate safety? Is our rate of speech rushed or slow? How is the message coming across?

### **Where are we communicating?**

Are we communicating one-on-one or are there other people around? Should we communicate this to the team, in small groups, or to individual players? Do we want to talk about this during a parent and athlete meeting? Should other players or coaches be around to share their perspectives? How does the place of communication impact its effectiveness?

## **When are we communicating?**

Are we communicating to players at a time when they can be receptive to the message? Is this helpful right now or later on? Is there already too much going on, and should we consider dropping the issue or talking at a different time? Should it be shared before a practice or after? During the game or at halftime? How does the timing of the message impact its reception?

## **Why are we communicating?**

What is our intent for communicating? Is this about our own insecurity or their improvement? Is the reason behind communicating with the player to help them grow in their journey?

Communication is more than just a *what*. It needs to consider the how, when, where, and why.



## JOURNEYING TOGETHER INTO THE UNKNOWN



Sports are a vehicle for learning and formation. Individuals are formed through their experiences in sports because they learn about life, develop skills, and discover their identity. This journey is about leading out of comfort and leading forth into discomfort. This is where we move out of the old and into the new. Where we jump from the known and familiar into the unknown and unfamiliar. This is the journey of growth. The coach and player make this journey together.

Our insecurities as coaches come from the irrational belief that we must have everything figured out. We must know everything already. We must have answers. We must know what to do and when to do it. And we feel insecure when we don't. And we typically coach from that place of insecurity. Or that fear of being found out - that someday, someone will find out that we are an imposter. And we are not "qualified" or have it all figured out.

However, setting off on this journey of ongoing learning and openness frees us from this illusion of certainty and control.

How different are players now than ten years ago? How different are sports from fifty years ago? How much more information, science, and resources do we have now than twenty years ago? So much is constantly changing. So, why do we put pressure on ourselves to know everything? And why do we get so upset when we mess up?

This journey is about being led out of ourselves - being led out of our places of insecurity and into a deeper personal transformation.

Is it fair if we expect this from players but are not doing this ourselves? Is it right that we get angry at them for not taking risks, asking questions, humbling themselves, and growing? Or are we perhaps angry with ourselves, feeling insecure because we trap ourselves in this illusion of fighting for control, certainty, and power?

We must step out. We must allow ourselves to fail and embark on this journey. This is where we invite others. We understand their fears, worries, insecurities, and doubts because we have the same ones. We are on the same journey. Side by side.



# COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

**1.**

How can you self-regulate before practices, games, and meetings?

**2.**

How can you coach ahead and take advantage of when players are in CONNECTION mode?

**3.**

Reflect on the how, when, where, and why of recent coaching communications.



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TEAMMATE TALK

# TEAMMATE TALK



## WHEN TEAMMATES DYSREGULATE EACH OTHER

*Ashley lashed out at her teammates. The volleyball was dropping in the middle of their defense and they each looked at one another, thinking the other person was going to go for it. She watched this and was livid. In anger and frustration, she hollered at them. They immediately got tighter. They were more withdrawn into themselves because Ashley was a top player on the team. Ashley tried to motivate them. It was obvious that she cared and wanted to compete. But it was also obvious that she felt entitled to lord it over her teammates. She felt like she was above the others. She wasn't understanding of the mistake. She thought it was unforgivable.*

*Ashley then tried to do too much. She took chances that weren't there, she swung too hard into the block instead of playing smarter, and she dismissed her teammate's feedback, and spent less time in the quick huddles between plays. She separated herself and became an island. And her teammates feared letting her down. They became overly worried about making another mistake. And mistakes piled up. And soon enough, the team was stressed, fragmented, and losing.*

These communication patterns keep players in survival mode. They further dysregulate nervous systems and poke the insecurities inside of them.

It would have been a very different situation if Ashley had looked at her teammates to understand them and said, “I know that happens. I’ve got the outside. Who’s got the middle when it happens again?” Then, the issue would have been cleared up. It doesn’t need to be bigger than it is. This keeps it informational while also having a positive impact on the relational component.

When we blame others and lash out in anger, it puts players on edge because it activates their survival mode. And they need the opposite, they need connection. They feel like they are on the edge of exclusion, losing out, and being punished. One more slip-up and that’s it, they think. They get scared into a shell of what they could be.

Players internalize this blame. What will happen if they make a mistake? They want to avoid the shame they might feel if they mess up, let people down, or look bad.

So, how do we, as coaches, help cultivate an environment where players feel free? Where players step off the edge by shedding the layers of guilt, embarrassment, or shame for messing up?

Creating an environment of belonging where players are encouraged to push boundaries, make mistakes, and play free begins with the coach. However, an important part is the relationships between teammates. Coaches should highlight how teammates talk to each other and understand how these social interactions shape players’ nervous systems.

Teammates act as an extension of the coach. They can multiply signs of safety (welcome) or threat (warning) depending on the circumstances and their own nervous system mode. But, if the coach can get teammates to positively impact others’ brains and bodies by offering co-regulation in their behaviors, then this makes the coach’s job easier and the team better. One important behavior is how they talk to each other.

# TEAMMATES SHOULD MULTIPLY SIGNALS OF SAFETY

Teammates can multiply signals of safety to create an environment of regulation where players more easily enter into CONNECTION mode.

B.E.T. talked about the importance of self-regulation. If players regulate their own energy, they positively impact their teammates because this helps regulate other players. It changes the atmosphere. However, players can directly co-regulate through things such as eye contact or offering a high-five. These interactions between people help offer encouragement and support that changes players' brains, bodies, and behaviors.

However, the main pathway to multiplying signals of safety in an environment is through teammate talk. Communication between players can either lead to more regulation or more dysregulation.

Here is a list of ways to multiply the signals of safety and increase the team's regulation.

## Talking Points

- **Consider HOW you communicate**
  - Pay attention to your tone of voice, volume, and style of talking.
- **Acknowledge their strengths and avoid blame.**
  - Mention their strengths and what is working well for them. After mentioning something positive, give practical feedback to help them improve and become even better. Avoid any language that blames them.
- **Give specific and practical feedback.**
  - Be helpful in the content of your message.
- **Stick to the 3:1 ratio.**
  - Give 3 positive statements to 1 criticism.

- **Take some responsibility and mention how you will help.**
  - Communicate your role as a helper and reassure them that they are not alone.
- **Set realistic expectations.**
  - Don't expect a teammate never to mess up. Be realistic in what you ask of your teammates and be ready to hold yourself to the same standard, if not higher.
- **Offer encouragement.**
  - Give supportive and motivational statements throughout the play.
- **Expect that there will be strained relationships and always work to repair them.**
  - The strength of relationships and coherence of a team rests on how willing individuals are to address their issues and repair the damage.
- **Stay present to your teammates as they get better.**
  - This is a process. Be present to teammates as they grow slowly, just as you grow slowly.

# COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

**1.**

**How is communication between teammates?**

**2.**

**What are the impacts on players' nervous systems when feedback is given or not given?**

**3.**

**Who are the key players who need to multiply their signs of safety, and how can you help them do this?**



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SELF TALK



# SELF TALK



## THE VOICE BETWEEN OUR EARS

*A player beats themselves up after a mistake. They yell at themselves inside their own head. They try to motivate themselves to do better. But they end up distracting themselves. They get worried about making another mistake, and soon enough, it's all they can think about. Lo and behold, they make another mistake. Now, they really dig into themselves. They become frustrated and angry. They start saying negative things to themselves, hoping it will make them play better. Their body gets tighter, they feel more pressure, and their performance declines. They struggle to focus and communicate. They get discouraged and begin to give up. Their self-talk activated ACTION mode, then SHUTDOWN mode.*

Looking at a common situation like the one above, it was not the mistakes that caused the performance decline. Yes, those are part of it. But those are bound to happen. And to a certain extent, those are outside of one's control. The real issue is the reaction to them. That is within one's control.

The threat is not making mistakes. The threat is what those mistakes mean. To this player, mistakes mean that they are “bad,” and they will feel embarrassed or ashamed for this. They feel alone, rejected, and insecure. This is the real threat. To avoid this from happening, they have tried to motivate themselves to play better. They thought they could improve their performance by being extra hard on themselves. However, the opposite happens. Why? Because now they have become the threat. The threat is the punishment. It’s the judgment and criticism that makes you feel insecure and anxious. It’s the harshness and negativity that puts degrading labels on your identity. This is the threat. And now, the threat is inside their own head. It is their very own self-talk that threatens them. This is why it elicits unhealthy negative emotions, tightens their muscles, and stresses their nervous system.

Eventually, they will try to escape this threat by blaming others, lashing out, or shutting down. They become discouraged because not even the voice inside their heads accepts them and gives them space to make mistakes and grow. They become defeated because they cannot even let themselves move forward. They perpetually hold themselves back.

What do players like this need? They need a healthier relationship with themselves. Yes, as coaches, we can help model this for them, hoping that their internal dialogue will copy ours. We can also help cultivate a culture of CONNECTION within teammate relationships and help them communicate signs of safety with each other. However, we can also help them inside their own heads. We can guide players to form healthier relationships with themselves through self-talk strategies and practices.

There are many great books and resources on dealing with athletes’ self-talk. I’m not trying to reinvent the wheel or cover every aspect of self-talk. Rather, I’m trying to give some helpful information on self-talk and practical steps for athletes to create a healthier headspace in performance environments.

How do they do this?

Focus on playing FREE.

## **FREE**

This is an approach to help athletes cultivate a healthy headspace during performance and ensure they do not get stuck in their heads. While self-talk is important, athletes also need to play by instinct and shut their minds off at times so they can trust what their bodies know how to do.

Common situations come up across different sports. Some situations might include making a mistake, handling spectators, having thoughts of self-doubt, getting distracted, feeling fatigued, receiving feedback, experiencing pre-performance anxiety, or any other experience you might encounter as an athlete.

No matter the situation, being FREE can help you talk with yourself and improve your performance.

### **Face It**

Players need to face reality. Not avoid it. When experiences (e.g., mistakes, self-doubts, pressure situations, etc.) happen, the answer is not to ignore them. Nor is it to blame someone else. It's to face it. Things only get better if we approach them and do something about it. So, we must face the reality that we are not perfect. Nor will we ever be. But we can be better. And this path of growth begins with awareness. So, let's face it and realize it's normal.

### **Realize It's Normal**

Normalize the process. Mistakes will happen. Disappointments will happen. Insecurities, worries, doubts, and fears will happen. These things are a natural part of the process. And the more we step out of our comfort zones, the more we face them. This is normal. It is normal not to feel sure of yourself. It is normal to feel anxious about doing something new or uncertain. It is normal to mess up. Normalize it, and you will freak out less. And you'll be able to respond better. Hopefully, to elevate your game.

## Elevate Your Game

Typically, something bothers us because it makes us feel insecure. If we miss a shot or don't get playing time. Or if we have a thought of worry run through our minds. These things lead us to feel insecure. This is normal. But, we can do something about it. We can make choices to make ourselves more secure. We can elevate our game. How?

Focus on the process rather than the result itself. Did we miss a shot? Okay, what led to that miss? We were off balance, and our eyes were not on our target for long enough. Those are things inside our control. Elevating your game is all about coaching yourself. Make the adjustments and focus on the things inside your control. Once we make these adjustments, we are ready to get back in the game.

## Exit Your Head

It is easy to get stuck in your head as an athlete. But, sports are about playing with your instincts. We rarely think our way to success. We play.

So, after we elevate our game and make adjustments, we need to re-enter the court/field. We need to exit our heads and get back in the game. How do we do this?

Externalize your attention. This means placing your attention on something outside of yourself. Use your eyes and self-talk to direct your focus and energy. Watch for helpful cues in the environment, place your eyes on your target, or look for open space to make a cut. This helps you partake in the game outside of you rather than the game in your head. So, exit your head and enter the game.



# TYPES AND PURPOSES OF SELF TALK

It is important to understand the basic types and purposes of self-talk. Coaches should try and shift their athletes into using positive/motivational and instructional self-talk. This helps them to play FREE by facing reality, realizing their experiences are normal, elevating their game, and exiting their heads.

## Negative

- Examples: “I can’t believe I missed it.” “I suck.” “That’s trash.” “The refs are horrible.”
- Purposes and Notes: This could help motivate in the short term. However, it leads to a negative effect in the long term because it fosters an unhealthy mindset and relationship with oneself and others. It might push the nervous system into ACTION mode or SHUTDOWN mode. It could impair motor performance, worsen cognitive functioning, and lead to unhealthy negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, shame, discouragement).

## Positive/Motivational

- Examples: “I’ll make the next one.” “I can do this.” “That’s better than before.” “We can win.”
- Purposes and Notes: This could improve motivation, emotion regulation, and relationships. It could also improve motor functioning and endurance, but it lacks specific instructions needed to elevate performance and avoid repeated mistakes. It can broaden focus and enhance mood, thus activating increased creativity.

## Instructional

- Examples: “I need to set my feet before I shoot.” “Lock your eyes onto the back of the rim.” “Hold your platform strong.” “Cut quickly into open space, but don’t rush.”
- Purposes and Notes: This could improve motivation, emotion regulation, motor functioning, and overall performance. It elevates your game and gives specific goals to achieve by focusing on the parts of the process inside your control.

By helping players play FREE and use positive/motivational and instructional self-talk, coaches are helping them cultivate a healthier mindset that promotes internal security.

# COACHING CONSIDERATIONS

- 1.** What is the nature of the players' self-talk?
- 2.** Do they understand the importance of self-talk and how to use it to elevate their performance?
- 3.** Do they know helpful cues to focus on to help them get out of their heads and back into the game?



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# 5

PRACTICAL TIPS  
& STRATEGIES

## **PRACTICAL TIPS & STRATEGIES**

### **Regulation > Information**

- Connection before correction
- Communication is about the context more than the content

### **Send signs of safety (welcoming)**

- Genuine smiles, words of encouragement, supportive points of contact (high fives and fist bumps), reassuring glances, and positive feedback

### **Begin feedback with player strengths**

- Always start with listing a player's strengths before giving critical feedback

### **Aim for a 3:1 ratio**

- When you reinforce the “good” stuff, it will occur more often. If you always harp on the “bad” stuff, it will become discouraging and exhausting. Things multiply when we give them our time, attention, and energy. So, point out the positives and watch the positives multiply. Aim for a ratio of 3:1, where you share 3 positive things for every 1 negative thing.

### **Get off your “buts”**

- Try not to use “but” when you are giving feedback. An example would be, “Hey, that was a great shot, *but* you could’ve held that follow-through longer.” When you say “but” in a situation like this, it tends to dismiss the first part of the sentence. So, the “good” things the player does are overshadowed by the criticisms. Let the good things be. Don’t dismiss them. Try saying, “Hey, that was a great shot. Keep it up. *And* I think one thing that might help make it even better is if you try to hold that follow through a little longer.”



## **PRACTICAL TIPS & STRATEGIES**

### **Ask questions and listen**

- Instead of always assuming you know what a player was thinking or why they made a certain decision, ask for their perspective. They may have some helpful information from their perspective.

### **Coach ahead**

- Don't wait for something bad to happen. Take advantage of CONNECTION mode and look ahead with your players. Build their IQ of the game by anticipating future possibilities and preparing for challenges.

### **Play FREE**

- Build healthier headspaces within your players by helping them face reality, normalize their experiences, elevate their game, and exit their heads.

### **Positive Talk**

- Encourage instructional and positive/motivational self-talk. Discourage negative self-talk.

### **Externalize attention**

- Help give players cues in their performance environment to attract their attention. This gets them out of their heads and into the game, and it also improves their skill development and performance, whether they are novices or experts.



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# 6

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