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'They know they're human'

Martin Turner and Andrew Wood with a rational approach to performing under pressure, ahead of Saturday's Rugby Union World Cup Final.

Many would consider what England Rugby are facing on Saturday as a high-pressure situation. Whilst pressure is very much in the eye of the beholder, the event importance, public scrutiny, requirement for effort, and inherent uncertainty of competition supplies the ingredients for intense acute stress. Indeed, prior to the New Zealand semi-final, England player George Ford said, 'Of course it's a pressurised situation, it's a pressurised game, but we enjoy the pressure, we want to embrace it and I think we will do'. This was reaffirmed by head coach Eddie Jones, now approaching the final, who has challenged his England team to 'play with no fear'.

Whether and to what extent the acute stress of the final against South Africa can be enjoyed, with little fear, or whether the stress will be adaptive or maladaptive for player performance, could in part depend on players' ability to approach the final with a *rational mindset*.

Rationality is a foundational principle of rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), a cognitive-behavioural approach that is being applied within sport more frequently. In 2014, I (MT) wrote a piece for The Psychologist on the application of REBT within sport settings. Since then, a programme of research has shed light on the effects of REBT across a range of important athletic outcomes.

Across 50+ empirical papers and book chapters, the theory and application of REBT has been tested in sport, revealing that irrational beliefs are deleterious for athlete psychological distress and burnout, and are related to maladaptive psychological approaches to performance. The research has also demonstrated that athletes who undergo REBT show reductions in competitive anxiety, social anxiety, and resting Systolic Blood Pressure, and improvements in resilient qualities, self-determined motivation, vitality and sleep quality, and athletic performance.

Drawing on REBT, we offer one particularly powerful way in which athletes can approach pressure situations rationally and functionally.

Unconditional Self-Acceptance

There is a tendency, when the stakes are high and the situation is important to us, to wrap our self-worth up with the results of our endeavours. The global evaluation of the self on the basis of our behaviours ('I failed, and therefore I am a failure'), is known in REBT parlance as self-depreciation.

High self-depreciation beliefs are related to greater anxiety in athletes, and we have written in the past about the mental health dangers of attaching one's self-worth to one's goal pursuits. REBT has been shown to be effective in reducing self-depreciation beliefs, and increasing contrasting unconditional self-acceptance in athletes. In opposition to self-depreciation, unconditional self-acceptance (USA; admittedly an unfortunate acronym in the context of national sports), is a core rational belief within REBT, and reflects the tendency to rate one's behaviour and *not* the self as a whole (Ellis, 1977). USA is rational, because it is consistent with reality – athletes are *in fact* fallible human beings that cannot simply be defined by what they do because they are too complex – as we all are.

Because as human beings we are limited and fallible, our successes are all the more impressive. When we do fail, we can choose to accept ourselves unconditionally by untethering our self-worth from our actions, successes, and failures.

This has nothing to do with rolling over and accepting defeat. This is about fully accepting *the self* no matter what we achieve, or fail to achieve, reflecting a self-worth that is not contingent on the results of our goal pursuits. Liverpool FC manager Jurgen Klopp, writing for the Players Tribune, explains that, 'This is what actually happens in life. We are human beings. Sometimes, we embarrass ourselves. That's how it is.' He goes on to say, 'Even after we lose a match, sometimes I'm still smiling. It's because when my son was born, I realised that football is not life or death. We're not saving lives.'

The notion that athletes, even highly skilled athletes, like all of us are fallible human beings is not a perspective readily accepted by many. Perhaps this is because this level of realism contrasts with the 'bravado' and 'superhuman' narrative (Howells, 2016; Ong et al. 2018; Souter et al., 2018) that surrounds elite athletes. So, when an athlete steps forward with a balanced view of performance, it is notable. Recently, in the lead up to the New Zealand match, Anthony Watson, said on ITV "They bleed just like we bleed, there's going to be 23 of them on Saturday, there's going to be 23 of us... They're just human, aren't they?... "they're just rugby players". True, logical, pragmatic. Head Coach Eddie Jones echoed this: "They know they're human...They bleed, they drop balls, they miss tackles like every other player."

This expression of USA has some important implications for performance. If as a human being I am limited, then other human beings are limited too, including my opponents. All Blacks players are human and thus capable of error. So too are the South Africa players. It also means that win or lose, athletes can retain their sense of self-worth, because their self-worth is not, and cannot, be contingent on their performance. So, leading up to Saturday, if the England players are able to carefully and rationally detach their self-worth from their performance, they can be freer to express themselves without the severe danger to esteem that often punctuates high-pressure competition.

Just a game

Even after defeat to England in the semi-final, although citing feelings of extreme disappointment, All Blacks captain Kieran Read told of returning to his hotel room after the game and being met with birthday cards from his children. This served as a pertinent and rational nudge that reinforced his belief that although the match was important, "it is just a game of rugby". Sensibly, his self-worth was not contingent on the outcome of the game. As journalist and former Olympic table tennis player Matthew Syed writes, concerning New Zealand's reaction to losing, "striving to win and graciously accepting defeat are not mutually exclusive."

The idea that sport is just a game by no means belittles sporting endeavours; it simply allows a proportionate response to the adversity and suffering the punctuates elite sport. When talking to BBC Breakfast in July 2019, Adam Peaty remarked that, "Sport is sport and it inspired people but it's not everything...Even if I did fail or I did lose, it wasn't like I was losing my life. That's how most athletes can feel that if you lose you almost lose everything".

These examples are not from underachieving and embittered athletes – they are from highly successful athletes. We should listen to them. Athletes might be better served by accepting that they are not superhuman, but are fallible human beings just like the rest of us, capable of success *and* failure. As Klopp says, "They're not gods."

In reality, athletes often fail. The more successful athletes fail less frequently, and win at the right times. Take Roger Federer for example. As of October 2019, in Grand Slam finals, Federer has lost 11 out of the 31 finals he has played in. That's a win rate of 65%, or put another way, a loss rate of 35%. Serena Williams, who has competed in two more Grand Slam finals than Federer, has an incredible win rate of 70%, or a loss rate of 30%. We can't accurately describe Federer and Williams as 'failures' – they are two of the greatest athletes of all time. But we also can't describe them as 'successes' either, because they fail repeatedly. It is not appropriate to attach globalised labels to the self, or to others, on the basis of the outcome of goal pursuits.

Epictetus, one of the more famous Ancient Stoic teachers, whose teachings inspired the inception of REBT, said it best; "These reasonings are unconnected: I am richer than you, therefore I am better"; "I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am better". The connection is rather thin: "I am richer than you, therefore my argument is greater than yours!"

therefore I am better." The connection is rather this: "I am richer than you, therefore my property is greater than yours;" "I am more eloquent than you, therefore my style is better than yours." But you, after all, are neither property nor style."

In other words, we are not what we do. We are more than our achievements and possessions. The "My Story" series created by England Rugby paints a complex picture of each player, taking us beyond the 'athlete' towards the human being. It is non-sensical to determine a person's value using a reductionistic calculation based on the outcomes of vocational goal pursuits.

Achieving a rational mindset

How can a rational philosophy be used on approach to the game on Saturday? Well, there is no special or magic elixir for this. In line with REBT and Stoicism, what we encourage athletes to do, is to strive to align their beliefs as closely as they can with reality. We encourage them to ask, 'are my beliefs consistent with reality?' (truth), 'are my beliefs sensible and reasonable?' (logic), and 'do my beliefs help me reach my goals (function)'.

With regards to USA, players can remind themselves that they are not defined by what they do. If they fail, they are not failures. If they mess-up, they are not losers. This isn't 'positive thinking' – it is reason and logic. By refusing to wrap their entire identity around their sporting profession, the significance of the event can be put into proper perspective allowing an adaptive approach to the pressure of performance at the highest level. This is not about reducing the pressure per se, it's about approaching the pressure in a balanced way; recognising the importance of the final, whilst also understanding that there is a world that exists beyond sport.

In sport, and in psychology more widely, REBT is sometimes misinterpreted. The word 'rational' is synonymous with cold logic, lack of drive, and arrogant intellect. Far from promoting unemotional indifference when faced with difficulty, REBT practitioners encourage functional and adaptive emotional responses to adversity. These emotional reactions can still be very intense and negatively valenced, but they are constructive in the pursuit of goals. Rationality is about reason and logic, not intelligence and dispassionate indifference.

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They will be running a British Psychological Society Professional Development workshop on the application of Rational Emotive Therapy (REBT) in sport on 22 April 2020, at the Society's Leicester offices.

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