



Building A Mental Toolbox

# 3: SELF TALK

Our year-round, multi-level aquatic programs emphasize  
**Personal Achievement, Team Unity & Competitive Excellence**

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## SELF-TALK

### Learning to Be Your Own Best Friend

*It is mental discipline to keep certain thoughts out of your head and put certain thoughts in your head. You have conscious control over that. It takes practice and repetition. Pretty soon, it's where it is almost habitual to keep negative thoughts out or identify negative thoughts and keep positive ones in.*

*1996 Gold Medal Swimmer*

*Whether you think you can or think you can't,  
Either one is probably true.*

*Anonymous*



Robert, an 18-year-old swimmer, is extremely frustrated. He has the physical and technical tools to be a great swimmer but fails to demonstrate this on a consistent basis in competition. His performances in practice indicate that he should finish at Summer Nationals but he has yet to make it out of prelims. When probed further about what goes on prior to and during competition, Robert reveals that in meets where he “has to swim well” all he thinks about is that he can not fail and that he must swim fast. By the time he gets to the blocks for his prelim swim, he is so anxious and feels so much pressure that he can’t “just swim” but rather tries to force it to happen. And, we all know what happens when we try to force a performance.

This scenario illustrates the impact **self-talk** can have on performance. In this case, the athlete’s self-talk seems to have a negative effect on performance. Performance is not random; it is related to thoughts, expectations, and self-talk as well as physical and technical preparation. Learning to control self-talk can help athletes manage the information they are feeding themselves on a regular basis. Athletes need to make sure self-talk is directed toward improving performance. Just as athletes regularly train their body to execute precise skills or maintain a certain pace, they need to regularly train the mind to think precise thoughts and focus on specific things. Read this chapter and practice the exercises to begin to take control of self-talk.



## What is Self-Talk?

Self-talk includes all the purposeful and random thoughts that run through an athlete's mind, it includes all the things said both silently and out loud. Self-talk can be positive, it can tell an athlete what to do, where to focus, and get one motivated ("You can do it") Unfortunately, self talk can also be negative ("You stink so just give it up"), pessimistic, and critical. Such internal talk definitely does not help performance and, in most cases, probably hurts performance. Recognize that negative self talk is going to occur; the key is to not focus on the negatives and instead focus on the positives.

## When Self-Talk goes Awry

There seem to be common self-talk errors swimmers make that tend to have a negative influence on performance. Read through each of these and assess if any of these errors plague you.

**Focusing on the past or future:** "I raced so bad last time I swam here." "I can't believe I missed that turn." Not 'letting go' of mistakes or poor performances takes thoughts and focus away from where they should be--on the present. A similar situation occurs when athletes worry about what **may** happen. All athletes have control over is **right now**, that is where thoughts need to be.

**Focusing on weaknesses during competition:** "I should scratch from the IM because my fly has been horrible lately." "My start is so slow." To improve as a swimmer, it is necessary to identify and work on weaknesses . . . but only during practice. During competition, dwelling on weaknesses will erode confidence. Ideally, competition is where athletes should focus on strengths as a swimmer by using positive and informative thoughts.

**Focusing only on outcome:** "I must win" or, "I have to make Junior cuts" such thoughts direct athletes to the outcome of the competition, something they have little control over. What athletes do have control over is performance. Therefore, direct self-talk towards what needs to be done to be successful . . . and trust that the outcome will take care of itself.

**Focusing on uncontrollable factors:** "I hate swimming in cold weather." "This delay in the start is going to mess up my preparation." "I never swim well in lane 8." Statements such as these are a waste of mental energy. Not only are they out of one's control but they also distract thoughts from where they should be. Keep thoughts on controllable factors.

**Demanding perfection:** "I better swim a PR." "My turns have to be perfect." Athletes train their physical skills for years, trying to achieve the perfect performance. It is appropriate to work towards perfection but unrealistic to expect a perfect performance every competition.

## “Stopping” Negative Self-Talk



Just like the physical skills that swimmers train on a daily basis, controlling self-talk is also a skill. For some swimmers who have fallen into a pattern of negative, defeating self-talk, learning to gain control can be hard. Negative internal talk is something swimmers are often no longer aware of, it seems to happen automatically. Therefore before changing self-talk, it is necessary to take a step back and become aware of what is being said. It is necessary to identify both beneficial thoughts and harmful thoughts. Once this is accomplished it is important to make a conscious effort to **purposely** include those thoughts that seem to help performance.

*Thought Stopping* is the most common technique used to introduce positive thoughts and eliminate the negative thoughts.

**1. Become Aware of Self-Talk.** As already noted, the first step in gaining control of self-talk is by increasing awareness of what athletes tend to say to themselves both in practice and competition and the **situations** in which these thoughts typically occur.

For example, it may be that at the start of a competition when Kelly feels fresh and strong, she tends to have positive, confident thoughts (“I’m gonna crush everyone today”). But, toward the end of the competition when she is feeling fatigued she questions her ability (“There is no way I can maintain this pace”).

A good way to become more aware of self-talk is by recording thoughts in a workout logbook. For two to three days keep a record of self talk during different parts of the practice. Is your self-talk helpful or harmful?

**2. Stop the Negative.** Once negative self-talk is identified, the athlete needs to learn to “park it” or stop it--which is easier said than done! Saying “park it” or visualizing a big, red **stop** sign are good cues to use to help halt negative thought.

**3. Replace with Positive.** Imagine that the mind is like a cup--if it is filled to the top with positive thoughts, there will be no room for negative self-talk. Athletes need to identify positive self-talk **in advance** and replace the negative thoughts with identified positive ones.

**4. Practice Thought Stopping.** A final step is to practice, practice, practice stopping and replacing negative talk. For a while, athletes will need to be very conscious of their internal self-talk as the thought stopping technique will not occur automatically. With enough practice, positive self-talk will become second nature. Exercise 1 will take swimmers step by step through the technique of thought stopping. Complete the exercise several times to take into account all the situations in which negative self-talk creeps in.

## ***Additional Tips***

### ***Tell yourself what you CAN do.***

Here is a quick exercise . . . Picture your home pool in your mind. See the surroundings. Now, the challenge is for you to tell yourself to NOT think about a jellyfish floating in the middle of the pool and to actually NOT think about it. Chances are the first thing that popped into your were thoughts of the jellyfish, right?

Guess what typically happens when you tell yourself not to do something like “don’t miss the turn”, “don’t focus on the competitors” and “don’t breathe coming into the wall”? You guessed right! You think about what you are NOT supposed to do or think and often times then do those things. A more effective strategy is to direct your self-talk so you are telling yourself what to do instead of what not to do.

### ***Plant Positives***

Instead of waiting until self-talk starts spiraling downward, purposefully “plant” positive thoughts and comments in your mind so there is no room for negatives.

For example, Nicole dreads doing repeat 800’s in practice; she struggles dealing with the discomfort and fatigue for such an extended period of time. She wants to avoid allowing negative comments to creep in during the workout (i.e., “I can’t hold this interval” or “I don’t care if I don’t finish this set”). So, before starting the set Nicole can plant in her mind the things she needs to say to herself to have a good workout (“Hold a consistent stroke rate” and “This is going to give you the endurance needed to race fast”).

### ***Develop a Competition Self-Talk Plan.***

Another helpful technique that promotes beneficial self-talk is related to competition preparation (Exercise 3). Just as an athlete develops a competition plan or strategy and reviews this using mental rehearsal, he can also develop a competition self-talk plan. Athletes should prepare in advance what they want to say to themselves and what needs to be reinforced in order to perform well; part of competition preparation should involve mentally rehearsing this strategy until it is second nature.