Brief Contact Interventions in Sport Psychology

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The sport psychology literature provides many examples of the use of mental skills training with athletes. Little attention, however, has been given to those brief interventions that occur frequently when working with athletes in the field. Such interventions are time limited, action oriented, and present focused. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of the use of brief contact interventions with athletes in field settings. In particular, we provide a short introduction to such interventions, describe a framework for their use, and present several case examples. We believe that brief contact interventions can be made more effective by following the principles described in this article.

Although the sport psychology literature is filled with case examples using various techniques to help athletes improve their performances, little attention has been paid to managing the brief interactions that occur frequently when working with athletes in the field. Unlike traditional counseling interventions that are typically scheduled for a set period of time, sport psychology interventions in the field are often brief and action oriented. Ravizza (as cited in Simons & Andersen, 1995) describes some of the differences between scheduled and brief sport psychology interactions in the following:

The ideal situation is to be in your office and have the athlete come in, and you’ve got two hours together, and you really get into it. But a lot of the work is when you’re traveling with the team. It’s in a hotel lobby, it’s on a bus, it’s five minutes here, six minutes there, and in these little blocks of time you can do a lot. I’ve really seen that in five minutes you can impact a person by getting them thinking and getting their thought processes going so then they can think clearly about things. (p. 459)

In the present article, brief contact refers to a single interaction of short duration (15-20 min) that takes place within the course of an ongoing consulting...
relationship. These single interactions have a lot in common with several brief therapy models, but differ in terms of the length of contact and the structure of the intervention strategies employed. Brief therapies typically range from five to 15 sessions and follow a circumscribed set of procedures (Pinkerton & Rockwell, 1994; Reich & Neenan, 1986). Brief contact interventions, however, are unplanned interactions that take place between clients and practitioners that involve “teachable moments” where clients are able to gain new perspectives on their present situations. In both brief therapy and brief contact interventions, practitioners operate within the boundaries of their clients’ presenting situations and are willing to allow other important psychological issues to remain unexplored (Kottler, 1999; Talmon, 1990). In sport settings, brief contact interactions are normally focused on performance enhancement and not inter- and intrapersonal issues, psychopathology, or early childhood experience (Giges, 1998). The purpose of this article is to open discussion about the role of brief contact interventions in sport psychology consultations. In particular, we provide a short overview of brief contact interventions, describe a framework for their use, and present four case examples.

**Brief Contact Interventions**

Brief therapy models have a long history in both traditional and strategic therapeutic approaches. From traditional psychotherapy, brief interventions are described as strategies that are active, focused, goal-oriented, circumscribed, warmly supportive, action-oriented, and concerned with present adaptation (Barten, 1971; Talmon, 1990). A practitioner using brief strategies offers small interventions, observes the client’s responses, makes adjustments to include those responses, and intervenes again (Rosenbaum, Hoyt, & Talmon, 1990). These small interventions commonly focus on one problem, use the client’s strength, and maintain a present and solution-focused mind-set (Bloom, 1981). Hoyt (1995) provided an illustration of this process in his discussion of the central question in Goulding and Goulding’s (1979) redecision therapy, “What are you willing to change today?”

- **What**—specificity, target, focus
- **Are**—active verbs, present tense
- **You**—self as agent, personal functioning
- **Willing**—choice, responsibility, initiative
- **To change**—alter, not just “work on” or “explore”
- **Today**—now, in the moment
- **?**—inquiry, open field, therapist receptive (p. 84-85)

Hoyt’s (1995) expansion of this basic question captures the key elements that form the framework of brief contact interventions. Practitioners involved in these brief interactions are likely to benefit from the principles presented in such a parsimonious fashion. In addition, Wells (1993) suggests that by staying within the context of identifying and understanding the problem, the therapist creates a collaborative basis for interventions that are already under way. The guiding principles involve starting with the client’s definition of the problem, concentrating the focus on this definition, working on it from the beginning, and continuing
to refine the services delivered through evaluating the client’s response to those interventions already made.

The theoretical basis for the interventions described in the present article also borrows substantially from a synthesis of principles in counseling psychology, gestalt therapy, and cognitive therapy. From counseling psychology comes an emphasis on growth and development and using the strengths of the client to learn more effective ways to deal with challenges (Sexton & Whiston, 1994). Gestalt therapy focuses on present functioning (the “here and now”), on what is happening (rather than why), and on personal choice and responsibility (Perls, 1969). In addition to asking questions about an athlete’s current experience (thoughts, feelings, wants, and behavior), gestalt therapists often use guided imagery to bring past experience into the present. Cognitive therapy gives primary importance to thoughts as the major determinant of feelings and behavior (Beck, 1967). Because maladaptive thoughts derive from one’s viewpoint or perspective, an important technique in cognitive therapy is reframing. This intervention consists of helping the athlete consider alternative meanings and interpretations to given situations. Therefore, in brief interventions in sport psychology, the consultant follows the athlete’s lead, builds on what is presented, stays focused on the athlete’s abilities and options in the present, and assists in creating a shift in the athlete’s perception of a situation.

Brief contact interventions also have much in common with the strategic, interactional approaches developed from family systems research centers such as the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto and Family Therapy Institute in Washington, DC (e.g., Fisch, Weakland, & Segal, 1982; Watzlawick, 1983; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). For example, strategic interactional approaches work from a “nonpathology” orientation, start with what the client brings as a presenting problem, deal with the here and now, emphasize what rather than why, use the person’s own language, clearly define the problem and the goal, and frequently use reframing as a significant component of the interventions. Practitioners using brief contact interventions strive to initiate some type of change in behavior or perception because they believe that even a very small change may be all that is needed to bring about an alteration of an entire non-productive pattern of thinking or behavior (Erickson, 1974). This theoretical perspective is a systems model in which an appreciation of different levels of information and communication is necessary to understand and resolve problems that are believed to be maintained by the client’s attempts at problem solving that have become repetitive and ineffective (Watzlawick, et al., 1974).

A Framework for Brief Contact Interventions

Brief contact interventions may be effective because small changes in just a single session can have a snowballing effect that can initiate significant improvements in a person’s functioning (Erickson, 1974; Kottler, 1999). Nonetheless, these brief interventions should take place within the context of an ongoing consulting relationship. Kivlghan and Schmitz (1992) have argued that attempts to offer encouragement or to reframe the way a person looks at a situation can have a negative impact on adherence to treatment goals if offered before a working alliance has been established between the practitioner and the client.
Brief contact interventions in sport psychology consultations should be grounded within the context of an established working alliance (Bordin, 1979). Sport psychology consultants who have established rapport with their athlete-clients and who have a good understanding of the nature and history of their performance problems are in the best position to intervene by taking advantage of “teachable moments” (Petitpas, Danish, & Giges, 1999). These interventions do not rely on the intuition of the practitioner, but are guided by the basic principle, follow the athlete (Orlick, 1989). By pursuing the athlete’s stated goals and by following and using the athlete’s specific language, the consultant demonstrates an understanding of the situation and is well positioned to facilitate the small changes that can lead to performance improvements. The goal of the consultant’s interventions in such an approach is to initiate a shift in the athlete’s perception of the situation, which may then lead to a change in the athlete’s experience and help remove any psychological barriers to optimal performance.

Brief contact interactions follow a set of guiding principles (Giges, in press): (a) Present experience is given priority; (b) the athlete’s words, gestures, facial expressions, and body posture are carefully observed; and (c) the consultant listens for “entry points.” Athletes will often say something that the consultant hears as an opportunity for more in-depth exploration. Such opportunities are entry points, openings that can be used to help increase athletes’ understanding of their experiences. These entry points may consist of an unexpressed feeling, an unrecognized want, or an underlying judgment or self-criticism, and can be observed in the following case examples.

Case Examples

The following examples of brief interventions are drawn from the first author’s experiences with members of two track and field teams. Except for one example, these contacts occurred at track meets, prior to the athletes’ events, and were each approximately 15-20 min in duration. The consultations described were initiated by the specific runner, the coach, or by the first author. In each case, the first author had an established relationship with the athlete in question. The athletes were also observed by the consultant in the course of their training and competition, and general impressions of how they functioned were formed from these observations. Although some consultants have recommended that sport psychology consultants should avoid game day or race day interventions, especially during major competitions (Henschen, 1991), the examples given here suggest that under certain circumstances such involvement may be helpful.

Runner F

F is a young woman who has been running competitively for a few years. It was always important to her to do well each time she raced, and for her this meant “finishing strong” even if she did not win. Previously, all her races were at outdoor track meets. The coach knew that this first indoor meet presented a new challenge for her, and that she was afraid of not doing well. Therefore, he suggested I talk with her. She usually sat with her teammates, but when I noticed her sitting by herself, I walked over to talk with her.
B. Hi, how are you doing?
F. I’m very nervous today.
B. Do you want to talk about it?
F. I don’t know. Yeah, I guess.
B. So, what do you think is going on?
F. Well, this is my first indoor race. I’m afraid of dying out there.

In a longer interview, I might ask her more about her feelings. In this brief contact, I thought that helping her focus on what she can control would be more useful.

B. How do you think that would happen?
F. I know me. If I’m not doing well in the race I’m afraid I’ll give up.
B. What would make you give up?
F. I’ve done it before. I can’t stand the idea of not doing well.
B. What would make not doing well today so terrible?
F. I don’t know. Yes I do. It would show that I’m no good.

In this brief prerace work, I would not address any underlying difficulty, such as equating her self-worth with her performance. I kept the focus on what she could control in the present.

B. Does doing well have to do with what you’re doing or what somebody else is doing?

F. I never thought about that. I guess it has more to do with what I’m doing.
B. So what would it take for you to do well?

F. Well, I think that if I could just finish the race without dying out there, I’d be OK.
B. Are you capable of doing that?

F. I don’t know ... Yeah, I guess. I do it most of the time outdoors.
B. How do you do it?

F. How do I do it? I don’t know. I guess if I don’t give up on myself ... if I believe in myself and keep going, I can do it.
B. Does being indoors really change that?

F. Probably not. It shouldn’t, although this is my first indoor meet. No, I guess it really doesn’t have to.

I sensed a shift in her feeling about herself regarding the race that day and decide to check whether that was her experience.
B. How do you feel right now?
F. Well, I still felt pretty nervous, but I kind of think I’ll be able to finish.
B. Do you want to talk any more about it?
F. No, Thanks. I’ll let you know what happens after the race.
B. Talk to you later.

She did finish. What happened in our discussion was apparently enough of a shift in her perception of herself racing indoors to allow her to run with the anxiety, and to allow the identity issue to recede for the time being. This brief contact would not be sufficient in the long term if any underlying problem persisted and caused her difficulty in the future.

**Runner M**

M is a middle distance runner who has been running for several years and has recently been improving her times and her race results. She is generally optimistic, and her confidence in her ability as a runner has been increasing. On this occasion, however, she seemed a bit down when she came over to talk with me before her race.

B. Hi. How are things going?
M. Well, I thought they were going well, but the last time I did a 3000 it was a disaster.
B. Is that having an effect on you now?
M. Yeah. I’m worried the same thing is going to happen today.
B. Tell me what happened last time?

Although this is a question about an event in the past, it addresses her present worry.

M. Well, I didn’t go out fast enough. The lead runner got so far ahead of me, I got discouraged.
B. What were you thinking?
M. I was going, “I’ll never catch her. I should have gone out faster.”
B. Anything else?
M. Well, it got worse. I began to feel like I shouldn’t be competing against these women, that I’m really not good enough.

This runner was not usually pessimistic or negative in her thinking. I suspected something had triggered her negative thinking about not running well.

B. You’re not usually this negative. What do you think might be going on?
M. I don’t really know. All I know is that since that time my hamstring tightened up, I haven’t been running well.
B. Did the hamstring pull have any other effect on you?
M. Yeah... I guess. I started losing my confidence. I began to doubt whether I’m as good as the other runners.
In this brief contact, instead of exploring the self-doubt and loss of confidence, I decided to limit the questioning to her current physical condition and its effect on her performance.

B. Is your hamstring healed now?
M. I thought so, but I’m afraid to go all out.
B. In the past, when you did go all out, how did that feel?
M. Great! I don’t even have to win, as long as I don’t quit inside.

The shift from comparing herself to others to getting satisfaction from her own effort is important. I decided to pick up on it.

B. So when you give it all you got, it’s very satisfying.
M. And how! You know, as I look back on that last race, I think I was afraid of pulling my hamstring again, and I didn’t even realize it.
B. What do you think about that now?
M. Wow! There I was thinking I’m out of my league running against them, and what was really going on was that I was holding back. I’ll bet if I didn’t hold back, I could run with them.
B. Do you think you will run with them this time?
M. Well, I’m not sure . . . I hope so. I’m definitely going to give it a try. I’ll let you know.

In the race, caution again led her to go out slowly, and she was almost a half lap behind the leader after the first 1000. In the remaining five laps, she began to close on the leader bit by bit. With less than a lap to go, she caught her, and to her delight (and mine too, I confess), she passed her and won the race. Our brief talk helped her remember that her own determination was an important source of satisfaction for her. She also realized as we spoke that she had previously been holding herself back without being aware of it, and was now able to go all out. No further interventions were necessary at that time.

**Runner C**

C had taken a year off from running to pursue his studies. Prior to his first mile race after returning, he was extremely nervous about how he would look if he did not do well. I asked him if he would like to talk with me about decreasing his anxiety. He welcomed the idea and, with the coach’s help, we were able to use an available room in the hotel adjacent to the track. He began without waiting for any questions from me.

C. I am so nervous I’m jumping out of my skin.
B. I can see that.
C. I haven’t raced in over a year. I could go out there and end up looking like an idiot. I don’t think I trained enough. I don’t really feel ready to race. The coach thought it would be okay if I wanted to. I really do want to, but maybe it’s too soon.
He spoke rapidly, without pausing between his comments. For this brief contact, I decided not to explore his feelings further and not to ask him what he thought was making him so nervous. My approach was to help him regain some sense of control. I decided to ask him to look at what he could do even though he felt nervous and unsure.

B. Let’s assume you didn’t train enough, and that you’re not quite ready to race. Could you imagine going out on the track and doing a hard practice run?
C. Sure, but it’s not the same.
B. I know, but you might be able to make it similar.
C. How?
B. Would you be willing to do an exercise that I would guide you through?
C. Yeah, if you think it would help.
B. Okay. Get yourself into a comfortable position and close your eyes (there was a short relaxation introduction using awareness of breathing). Now, imagine you’re at the track before the other runners and audience arrive. Take a couple of warm-up laps in your sweats. Can you do that?
C. [nods]
B. [slowly] While no one is around, get ready to do a hard practice run, something almost as hard as if you were racing, maybe 90% of maximum effort. Remove your sweats, and I’ll start you off. Ready, Go! After the first lap, as you continue running, notice that a couple of other runners are deciding to do the same thing—to go out on the track and do a hard run. You see them and keep running, and as you’re continuing, you notice some spectators beginning to trickle into the seats. About halfway through, you see that there are several others on the track, and the stands are pretty full. You notice it, and don’t give it much thought. You’re into your own run. As you approach the end, you decide to give it all you got, and have a strong finish.
C. [takes some deep breaths]
B. What are you feeling right now?
C. Energized . . . up. That was good. My nervousness feels different. I mean, it’s there, but it’s nowhere near as bad as it was before.
B. Do you think you want to go ahead with the race?
C. Sure!
B. Okay. Go to it.

In this case, it is difficult to know what part of the change in his nervousness was due to the relaxation brought on by the breathing exercise, what part was the fantasy experience, and what part came from the idea of running his own race. My intent was to help him see the possibility of running his own race, focus on his own participation, apart from the other runners or the spectators, and thereby decrease his preoccupation with what others might think. Even though the causal factor in the brief contact is debatable, the intervention seemed to have a beneficial effect.
Because he was out of shape, he finished dead last. Instead of his anticipated shame or self-criticism, however, he seemed satisfied that he was able to give it what he had and to finish the race. He was neither irritable or depressed, as he had been after previous races in which he had done poorly. In fact, he was able to join his teammates in the stands to support other members of the team in their races.

**Runner E**

E was formerly a member of the track team until she moved to another city. We had been keeping in touch with each other since her move, and the following session was conducted on the telephone prior to one of her races. She did not have a coach at the present time. Her confidence was slipping, and she had reverted to the negative thinking that usually occurred whenever she was not running well.

B. Hi, how are things going?
E. I'm not doing so hot. I'm afraid I'm not going to do well again today.

In our correspondence, she often wrote about losing interest in running, feeling pessimistic about her ability, and discouraged about her future as a runner. In this conversation prior to her race, it seemed more helpful to stay focused on her racing than on her feelings.

B. During a race, do you know when you begin to believe you're not going to do well?
E. Yeah, actually... when somebody passes me, it's like the race is over.
B. How does that work?
E. I start to think I don't belong here. Who am I kidding? These people are all better than I am. I get so discouraged. I literally lose my courage! The word that popped into my head about what I am was "FAILURE!"

In this brief contact, discussion about what she thinks causes her to lose courage or to see herself as a failure would not be practical. Because it is important to keep a narrow focus, I decided to use her experience of the word that "popped into her head."

B. That sounds like an important moment.
E. What do you mean?
B. I mean the moment when someone passes you.
E. And how?
B. Maybe you can use it to your advantage.
E. How?
B. Well, until now it triggers off a loss of courage and a judgment of failure.
E. It's scary. If I fail, everyone will be very disappointed, including me. I'm also being cut down to size. I start thinking I'll have to start all over. I'll never get anywhere.
B. That’s what usually goes with the idea of “failure.” Suppose you took
being passed as a signal, like a red flag, a wake-up call that says, “Hey,
someone just passed you! What are you going to do about it?”
E. What could I do about it?
B. You do surges at different times during the race?
E. Yeah, I kind of think of it as stepping on the peddle and giving it more gas.
But I’ve never done it when someone’s passed me.
B. When you have done it, how have you felt?
E. Free!
B. How about replacing “Failure” with “Free,” and using it as a time to
surge?
E. That would be great if I could do it.
B. Would you like to do it in the race coming up later today?
E. Yeah. I think I would. I’m going to give it a try.

I felt comfortable giving her what amounted to a racing strategy because she did
not have a coach at the time. If she had had a coach, then I would have suggested
that she and the coach talk over such a strategy before trying it out in a race. Sport
psychologists need to be mindful of when their interventions begin to cross profes-
sional boundaries.

She called later to tell me about the race. During the race, she did not exactly
carry out the plan. When someone passed her, she did not think of the word “Free”
and surge at that moment, but she also did not lose courage or think “Failure.”
Later in the race, she did initiate a surge with the new cue word “Free,” and felt
good about that. After that day, being passed did not have quite the same negative
effect on her as it did before. Sometimes talking about a problem initiates a change,
even if the intervention is not carried out exactly as intended.

Conclusions

Instead of regularly scheduled hourly appointments, many sport performance en-
hancement interventions take place in field settings that allow only time limited
contacts. The purpose of this article was to describe several of these brief field
interventions and provide a simple framework for structuring these contacts to
keep them focused, active, goal-oriented, and concerned with present adaptation.
Our goal was to begin an exchange of information about other frameworks that are
used to structure brief contact interventions. With the ever-increasing travel re-
quirements faced by elite athletes, more sport psychology consultations are taking
place via E-mail, telephone, or intermittent brief contacts, and there is little em-
pirical evidence to support the efficacy of these modes of service delivery. We
hope this article will bring attention to brief contact interventions, and spawn fu-
ture outcome research and new frameworks for practice.
References


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