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Mission of the Journal of Excellence

Terry Orlick, PhD – Founder and Editor in Chief, the Journal of Excellence.

My mission with the Journal of Excellence is to fill some important gaps in our knowledge, actions and our lives, that are essential to the successful pursuit of personal and professional excellence. The Journal of Excellence is devoted to nurturing excellence in all human endeavors and all worthy pursuits. Our focus is centered on the pursuit of excellence in the working and performing parts of our lives, as well as our lives outside the workplace or performance domain. Our goal is to inspire excellence, provide a forum to discuss the positive pursuit of excellence, and share practical strategies and perspectives for pursuing meaningful high-level goals.

The Journal of Excellence is committed to nurturing a positive vision of education and training for better people, better performers and a better world.

There is much value in pursuing excellence, in education, sport, health, the performing arts, parenting, teaching, coaching, health care, political, government and business leadership, and every workplace. There is also much value in the pursuing excellence in quality living, quality relationships and the development of a higher level of humanity. This is the first and only journal, which has **EXCELLENCE** in multiple domains as its sole focus. The ultimate mission of the Journal of Excellence is to provide insights and strategies that will help us to collectively become more successful in the pursuit of performance excellence and more fulfilled through excellence in living.

My vision is a journal that is applied in orientation, relevant in content and wide ranging in application. We are committed to:

- 1) Learning from and sharing the experiences of exceptional performers and inspiring people.
- 2) Developing a more thorough understanding of the mental links to excellence.
- 3) Promoting excellence in performance and excellence in living.
- 4) Initiating positive real world change.

If you have experiences, applied research or meaningful insights that are relevant to the pursuit of excellence in any worthy human endeavor, for any age group, we encourage you to submit your material to the Journal of Excellence to be considered for publication.

Fully Connected Focus - Interview with Terry Orlick

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“Every meaningful action, interaction, and personal accomplishment begins with a fully connected focus” (Orlick, 2011, p. 101)

To engage in our everyday experiences and fully connect with the present moment, it is vital to examine the phenomena that may be involved in higher quality living for children, teens, and adults. It is especially important to gain a better understanding of the phenomena that are difficult to describe, yet attainable for anyone wanting to awaken and connect with his or her life. One such phenomenon is learning the skill of Focus. According to Orlick (2008, 2011), focus is the central driving force for positive living and directly influences the quality of people’s learning, performing, and overall living. Teaching the skill of Focus has been central to Orlick’s Positive Living Skills Programs for children and teens, yet this skill is attainable to anyone seeking to live a higher quality life and perform to his or her potential.

Although Focus has been acknowledged as a vital skill in domains such as education, sport psychology, and positive psychology, discrepancies exist in defining the term “focus” and what it means to focus in relation to quality living and achieving high performance outcomes. Webster’s dictionary defines focus as both a noun and a verb and accounts for the wide variations of the term with definitions such as “a point of convergence of a beam of particles (as electrons)”, “a center of activity, attraction,

or attention”, or “directed attention” (Soukhanov, 2004, p. 718). Within these definitions, focus is viewed in the realm of hard sciences, yet it also alludes to a directing of attention to a particular object. Both definitions illustrate an action of attending to one particular item. Similarly, within the sport psychology and performance enhancement literature, focus is revered as one of the most critical elements of successful performances (Abernethy, 2001; Cox, 2007) and unsuccessful performances are often attributed to a lapse in focus. However, there is still no clear definition of what it means to focus in terms of accessing an internal skill that can be readily used to enhance performances and ultimately improve quality living.

The lack of clarity in defining focus becomes more complex when similar terms (i.e., concentration and attention) are used in reference to focus, specifically where “concentration means focusing, not forcing, one’s attention on a task” (Wilson, Peper, & Schmid, 2006, p. 405) or when focus is understood as a subcategory of concentration, such that effective concentration entails focusing on relevant information (i.e., performance cues), maintaining attentional focus, and the ability to refocus during distractions (Weinberg &

Gould, 2003). Even research in developmental psychology does not provide a clear definition of focus and attempts to include focus as the ability to sustain attention. For example, Bjorklund (2000) states, “One aspect of attention involves sustaining one’s focus on a particular task – that is, paying attention” (p. 140).

Research on Positive Living Skills programs and other focus enhancement research support this complexity in defining focus. Patterson (2008) acknowledged this lack of clarity in defining focus as a single all-encompassing term. In her research implementing a focus enhancement intervention with university students, Patterson accounted for the multiple layers within focus by reporting its essential elements, as described by her participants. These essential elements of focus were not defined as single units, rather they were multi-layered and included: exclusivity (i.e., identifying specific aspects to focus on within the environment), being in the present moment, and connection with the moment or task. These components illustrated that focus in this context was not a solitary act that had a definite beginning and end. Instead, the students described focus as an ongoing cycle. Furthermore, Patterson allowed the participants to define focus for themselves, as opposed to telling the participants what it means to focus or assuming the participants shared a common definition. The participants’ overall definition of focus “included having exclusive thoughts and a sense of connection with a subject in the present moment” (p. 82).

One way to deal with the challenge of defining focus comes from Orlick (2011), who offers a holistic perspective that may be more applicable to quality living and positive living skills than the other

definitions. Orlick goes beyond simply defining the term focus to describing an approach called Fully Connected Focus (FCF). He states:

A fully connected focus is a complete, positive connection with an experience, learning opportunity, performance, action, or interaction. There is a feeling of being totally absorbed in the experience, or inseparable from it” (Orlick, 2011, p. 101).

He describes the goal in FCF as becoming one with your experience – to connect fully, and positively, with your environment and ultimately become more fully connected and more fully alive. Unlike other explanations of focus, FCF is not solely paying attention to a particular object or subject, rather it involves an ongoing connection that has no distinct end. He describes FCF as a “moving forward” phenomenon, similar to the metaphor of a flowing stream continuously flowing from experience to experience (p. 103). This multi-layered approach to focus is also demonstrated in Orlick’s description of his eight pillars of focus (i.e., Focused Listening, Focused Seeing, Focused Learning, Focused Reading, Focused Playing/Performing, Focused Feeling, Focused Love and Joy, and Focused Reflection) which may be used as a guided framework in teaching FCF. The pillars of focus create a broader picture of how focus carries into all aspects of experience. Furthermore, FCF is a key element in producing higher quality living, such that “those of us who learn to live our lives with a positive and fully connected focus are more connected, more grounded, and feel more fully alive” (Orlick, 2011, p. 105).

Orlick’s explanation of Fully Connected Focus offers a new, holistic approach to understanding focus in relation to quality living. Thus, the following interview

excerpts between Dr. Terry Orlick and doctoral student Brittany Glynn aims to clarify the dimensions of Fully Connected Focus and what it means to fully connect to our experiences. Furthermore, this interview highlights personal accounts of fully connected experiences, while also offering guidance on how to teach and live with a Fully Connected Focus for higher quality living.

Interview: March 23, 2010

Brittany: *So why is Fully Connected Focus important and why does it matter?*

Terry: *Well, I think a connected focus makes all the difference in all parts of your life. If you're connected you learn more. You experience more. You perform better. You feel better. You feel more connected in your overall being. So for everything - for learning, living, performing, relationships, interactions, consulting - every single thing in life is enhanced and more complete with a connected focus. And on the flip side of that, a disconnected focus doesn't allow you to learn what you can learn. It doesn't allow you to perform your best or it interferes with your best performances. A disconnected focus interferes with interpersonal relationships, like when you are there physically but you're not mentally there or emotionally there. If you're just skimming through life on the surface you are not embracing life's opportunities. So it's a huge factor. I think Connected Focusing is the most important factor in the key parts of life- living, learning, loving, relationships, performing, in any context. Connecting fully, what I would call pure focused connection, gives you the best chance of getting everything you can get out of yourself and that situation. It allows you to contribute your best to other people as well. A negative, disconnected focus or non focus,*

does just the opposite. It creates barriers to learning, barriers within performances and barriers within relationships...a negative or disconnected focus takes you down a path that's nothing close to your true potential. So I don't think there's anything more important as a life skill or positive living skill than the capacity to connect purely and fully with your experiences, with people and with everything.

Brittany: *Do you think anyone can learn to fully connect?*

Terry: *I think everyone can learn to fully connect. One clear example is with children. If you watch kids early on they are fully connected with their play. There's nothing that gets in the way of their connected play. You can yell, call their name, or drop things – yet they remain so connected to what they're doing. They are or become part of that performance. In their pretend play they are fully there. They are in that reality that they are creating. I think some of that pure connection drifts away when other people start to evaluate or comment on what you're doing, or what you're not doing, or what you should be doing. "You're not doing well enough." This gets people thinking about evaluation, or outcomes stuff that can distract people from what I call a pure connection. But I believe anyone is capable of developing and nurturing this pure focused connection...If you help them understand what it is, talk with them about it, challenge or encourage them in certain contexts to try to "be there" and "connect" with the performance or really be with you when they are with you...I've seen big positive changes even over the course of six weeks. When you talk about focus or pure connection and what brings out your most pure connection with people or performances or learning or creativity, dancing, or whatever it is you're doing, you*

begin to understand what you connect to and how you create that connection...You can then discuss how you can sustain that connection for a longer period of time or in different contexts where you might not be so connected.

Brittany: *So Fully Connected Focus is a skill?*

Terry: *I think it is absolutely a skill.*

Brittany: *And you can learn it and practice it?*

Terry: *Absolutely.*

Brittany: *You mentioned that with connected focus, you feel that the more you practice it the easier it is to reach that state of connection...*

Terry: *Yes it is. I think the more you understand what it is you're trying to do or where you're trying to get...the easier it is to free it to happen. Because connected focus is a freedom thing. Even with top athletes and other high level performers I'm reminding them to "just free yourself to do what you're capable of doing." It is never a forced thing. If you try to force the performance or force the pure connection you lose it. So it's...freeing yourself to be fully there - wherever you are. And sometimes distractions do come in. So if I'm working with people on this we're trying to figure out ways to do this effectively...okay so can we either prevent the distraction from coming in because you are so focused or so connected that you don't even notice the distraction. Or you might need a refocusing plan and say, "Okay, you lost it (the connection) - now you're into an outcome focus or something negative that happened yesterday. You're not where you want to be with your focus so you need a way back in to*

a fully connected focus in the present. So try to come up with a way back in - by breathing or focusing on connected feelings or experiencing what you prefer to be experiencing. For me...it's not trying to consciously pay attention to something - it's connecting with something or someone in a way that frees you to be yourself or perform freely.

Brittany: *Sure.*

Terry: *A fully connected focus can happen in any context. Say I'm working with someone or talking with someone or consulting with someone. I'm connected with not only what they are saying but what I'm feeling from them. It's another level of connection...sometimes people aren't saying anything but you're feeling a lot of things.*

Brittany: *You can feel something.*

Terry: *Yes. Sometimes they're talking – and their words and what you're feeling are not the same. My goal is just connecting with the experience or becoming the experience. It's like you're inseparable from the experience in a pure focused connection. You are the experience and that experience could be a physical experience. It could be interacting with someone. It could be anything. It could be nature. You feel that there's no separation between you and what you're experiencing. It's not just listening or looking or saying, "Oh that's nice." It's something beyond that. It's pure. It's not just a surface connection....it's another level of connection.*

Brittany: *You have mentioned that you've had certain experiences where you've felt this purely connected focus. You mentioned a couple times your experiences with nature. So to understand fully connected focus can you describe to me one of your instances in*

nature, or maybe one of your skating experiences, and how you were able to experience all of these moments of connected focus? What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel? What was your body doing? Was your body part of the movement or experience?

Terry: *Yep. Well I would say it happens every day. It's not like a sometimes thing for me.*

Brittany: *You're an expert! (Laughs)*

Terry: *Yeah...especially in nature and physical activities. It also happens in interacting with people. Not all the time, but often. One recent nature example was what we call skate skiing on cross country skis on a lake. I live on a lake and I do a lot on and around that lake in the summer, fall, winter or whenever. So the conditions...it was a beautiful day. The sun was out and when the conditions are right with skate skiing the skates are like huge long skates, and you're pushing and you're gliding far on one push like you're pushing on a skate. It's very rhythmical ...you're so connected with the experience that you're just feeling the breeze, feeling the sun, feeling the pushing and gliding forward. It's...it's just like I've been talking about - becoming the experience, becoming inseparable from the experience and nature. For those connected moments, you're part of nature. You're not just looking at it but you're part of it. You're experiencing it in every way possible. You're feeling it physically, emotionally, you're breathing it in. It's a fully connected, great experience.*

These kinds of fully connected experiences - which is exactly what they are, make you feel so alive and so good and you get so much positive energy from them even though...you're going to be going pretty

hard. Your body is working and you might be out for an hour or two. But you're not feeling fatigue. You're feeling the energy that you're getting from the connection with what you're doing. In some of these recent experiences like that, or running on trails or beaches, the environment helps.

I talk a lot about highlights and special little experiences in your day and the importance of becoming aware of things that are lifting you so you can do more of them and less things that drag you down or drain your energy from your life. I've been realizing that in a lot of these fully connected experiences it's not one highlight like I went skiing on the lake or I went for a run in the woods or had a connected interaction with a family member or friend. It's like every second that you're out there is a highlight - every stride, every step, everything that you look at or breathe in - whether it's running along an ocean or running on trails or skiing on lakes or paddling on lakes or rivers or oceans. Every second is a highlight. So literally, if I were to count highlights, I can have a thousand highlights in an hour because every second I am completely, absolutely connected and embracing the magic moments one after the other. This is the power of a fully connected focus.

Brittany: *And Fully Connecting is something that you've become better at?*

Terry: *Yes, Absolutely. Because I think there were stages where...it wasn't my goal to be fully connected with experiences or simple joys. You're just going out and doing it. For example, I was thinking "Oh I'll go for a run and get my run done"...but, over time, because I talk to people about enjoying things - speak about embracing magic moments - so I began trying to integrate that more into my own life. The more I tried to*

bring that perspective into my own life, the more I experienced moments of pure connection and joy in my own life. There are so many opportunities to connect in pure and positive ways within our lives. When you connect with an experience, activity, person or learning opportunity in a pure and positive way it lifts you. It gives you energy. You feel good or more fully alive, if you set this goal of simple healthy connectedness as a way of being in different contexts... you can free it within yourself and others.

Brittany: *So if you have an experience where you feel fully connected it seems to be a deep inner feeling state – almost a way of being. When trying to teach people how to fully connect are you trying to help them reconnect to this feeling state?*

Terry: *The ideal goal is to be fully connected with what you are doing so that you experience everything more fully, especially things that are positive, can be positive or lead to something positive. Otherwise, people just walk through their day or life without fully connecting or finding much joy or value in anything. They're in a class and they're there physically but they're not really there. You live a life but you skip through it on the surface, unless, you choose to really connect in meaningful ways with all parts of your life. There are so many ways that you can be more connected than you are...whether it's physical, emotional or intellectual.*

Brittany: *So how do you introduce someone to Fully Connected Focus, especially if someone is trying to learn this skill, which you describe as being seemingly “effortless?”*

Terry: *The first thing I try to do is ask people, can you give me some examples of*

times when you felt really connected to something or some experience? I mean when you were really, really experiencing that experience. Or you're with someone and...you feel like there is no separation between you and the person or you and the experience because you're really there. Everything else in the world just disappears. It's just you experiencing that experience fully or you becoming that performance, or that light going on when you learn something or have a new idea or...a seamless connection with nature or in any part of your life. Most people can give you an example of this kind of pure connection, like yeah, yeah, okay, well this one time I was doing this. There are times when probably everybody experiences something like that so I would try to go there and explore that connection. So what was going on then? How did that happen? Once someone has a connected experience like that, they know it's possible to have it again.

Then I think at some point, you just have to decide or decide to be where you are, or to be fully engaged with the experience or with this person. You come in, you sit down, you talk with someone or someone is talking to you and you say or think, let's really try to connect to what this person is doing or feeling, or what it feels like when I do this movement well, or when my feet are in the sand on the beach, or the waves or rolling up over my ankles...try to really hear what you are hearing or really feel what you are feeling. Feel the energy, feel the connection or feel whatever this experience can free you to feel.

Brittany: *Can you talk a little more about helping people learn to connect more fully?*

Terry: *I think in the beginning you probably have to talk to people about focus and connection and what it is - when are they*

focused, when are they not focused, can they regain their focus after losing focus, and how can they do that. Perhaps most important of all is to make a decision to live a more focused or fully connected life. If you want to live your life more fully or if you want to not waste your life or parts of it or waste experiences by being there but not being there...you can do it. It's a choice. It is just, like people sitting in a classroom. Their bodies are there in the room but many of them are not there mentally, so why bother to be there? Why be there if you are not really there? That's my view. If you are going to be there then be there fully and if you're not going to be there fully then be somewhere else.

Talk about the importance of connection and help people gain some appreciation for the importance of being connected for themselves, for others, for learning, for performing and finding joy in everyday life. If you are talking to someone, and they are not listening or you're on the phone or you're with them and they are not listening, they have no idea of what you said. They may be nodding their head but they're not there. Or you may not be there. Disconnected interactions do not feel very good and are a complete waste of everybody's energy.

If someone is trying to explain to you how to do something and you don't listen, then how are you going to do it? If you're not focused on getting the lesson or connecting in a performance it's not going to be anywhere near as good as it could be.

So first we need to talk about simple ways to connect with listening, or engaging in something for short periods of time. Can you connect fully with listening for two seconds? Like right now, can you connect for two seconds? Do you feel a full connection? Can

you do it for 5 or 10 seconds? Can you read 3 three words or 3 sentences and be connected and remember then? Can you expand on the time you are fully connected?

Brittany: *Can you expand on that?*

Terry: *Yes, let's use nature as example. Go into a nature setting. Can you look around and find one beautiful little thing to focus on – it could be a little leaf, stone, flower or stick or actually, feeling the earth or air, or listening to the sound of a stream - watch it and see how it flows. You live life closer to the core when you connect more fully with nature, activities, experiences and people versus disconnect with nature, activities, experiences and people. To make this happen more often or more readily, think and talk about focused connection and what it is for you, discuss how you get better at connecting - why it's important and encourage other people to feel and understand what it is. Then encourage people learn to sustain the depth and duration of a connected focus in different contexts of their life.*

Connected focus is very important in my life. I value it and see clearly through my work that great performers, great learners and people who really enjoy their lives have really developed their capacity to focus fully in contexts that are important to them. I clearly want to nurture that connection in my own life and want to help others learn to nurture these essential skills for positive living in their own lives!

Brittany: *After you experience the feeling of connected focus what are the feelings that resonate within you personally?*

Terry: *Well let's say I went for a run this morning...it's not always completely connected because sometimes I might drift*

from one connection to another like from my body to the feel of the ground or the snow, or hearing a stream. Or sometimes there might be a thought flashing in about...being aware of what I am connected to so I know what frees me to do this and I know when I'm there - I'm just feeling great - fully alive. I'm in tune with everything going on with my body and nothing is hurting. I'm feeling free. Nobody is getting into my space or trying to get at me. When I'm done, like when I get back home, I just feel...radiant. I just gain a lot of positive energy from that experience which can sustain me for the whole rest of the day for whatever I'm doing next. I can work better and interact with others better. I'm just in an overall better state of being as a result of that experience. I think in the beginning when I did some of those activities, like when I first started running, I felt good for having done the exercise. My body felt good, strong, and alive but not at the level that I experience that now. It's because I'm really experiencing the experience. I'm not just saying, oh I've got to go do my run and get it done. What I enjoy most is the process of engaging fully with the experience of doing and enjoying the process of doing.

Brittany: *So you're beyond just going through the motions...*

Terry: *Yeah, so it's not just getting it done and thinking "Whew! Now that's done I'm going to go and do something else." It's more just being fully where I am. Sometimes even if I don't really want to be somewhere or doing something...I will still connect once I'm there. Because if I'm there I might as well be fully there and make the best of it! The only way to do that is to find something of value or something worthy of connecting with in that context. You can always learn something or feel something or connect in some way or listen to someone who may*

make a comment that might be relevant - just listen and learn from what they're doing or not doing. The more you're living in the moment, the more you live your life. The more "present" you are in every single part of your life, the more quality you can bring into your life because you're living your life more fully. A lot of people are never fully where they are - they are here but they are not really here. You can see it in so many people.

Brittany: *Is a connected focus specific to the task you are doing or is it more broad and connecting fully to your surroundings?*

Terry: *It can be both. If I'm speaking or consulting with someone and we are having a connected conversation about something relevant, especially related to performance debriefs or preparing for something important I am totally engaged in that task. I am not connected to anything besides that person and trying to feel that shared connection because if I'm in that state I am in a better position to ask good questions and to draw out important issues or feelings and maybe to make some comments that might be of value to that person.*

When I am in a nature setting I think it's a mix. Part of my focus or connection is out there in nature – connecting to what I am seeing and feeling. And usually when I'm out in nature there's movement involved - physical activity. I'm walking or running or paddling or swimming or skiing. So in that context my connected focus can go back and forth from my body to connecting to what is going on in nature around me. Or it can be a combination of both - feeling the wind on my body or the sun on my face and my body moving freely. It's kind of back and forth focus but I'm always feeling connected with something good. I might shift focus back and forth quickly or I might be feeling connected

with several things at once. I'm feeling my breathing is in sync and feeling fluid and feeling the breeze or the sun. I'm connected to feeling all kinds of things that get me grounded in the experience. And I am definitely not thinking about what's going on in any other context.

Brittany: *Somewhere where you're not.*

Terry: *Exactly. The only place I want to be when I am doing this is right here and nowhere else. So I am not thinking about negative things or spending time worrying about anything because if I did that then I wouldn't be fully connected with what I'm doing. I wouldn't gain from the freedom that I get or experience in those contexts. But sometimes I look at a lot of things too. I mean when I'm running through trails in the woods, I'm looking...I've got to make sure that my visual focus is far enough ahead so that I'm not going to be tripping over rocks or fallen tree trunks or something. But I still really look closely and connect fully with nature. If I'm walking I always slow down or stop to look really closely at streams and the way the water flows. When I look closely at streams or completely calm stretches of water, I feel like I'm a part of it because I see and feel how the water flows and I feel the peace and tranquility of a still lake or quiet ocean. I hear the sounds - how the water finds a way through obstacles - over rocks, under rocks, around branches or fallen trees. There are always analogies for me in nature for living your life more fully or more fluidly - like flowing through obstacles or finding a new or better path and not getting all stressed out about things that in the end don't make a really big difference in your life. Something as simple as a calm lake in the morning has a special feel with the mist slowly rising up. It's very tranquil and very peaceful - very quiet. It's another kind of fully connected focus that*

touches you on a deeper level of feelings. I love watching the mist rising off the water or paddling through it because moving through it is also very rhythmical and peaceful. It's very connected, you're very much a part of it - you feel like you're part of that lake or part of that complete silence. You're part of it. It feels like it's radiating through all of you. For me those are pure connections - totally pure connections where nothing is distracting me or trying to break that connection. There's nothing I don't like about that experience. In some of those contexts not only do I finish my run or paddle or adventure but I come home feeling great energy because there is an abundance of positive energy in nature.

There are also a lot of good energy gains that come from connecting with good people or other positive experiences. But nature...nature also has the lessons of tranquility - just being calm. Being calm and being silent. That's another thing that is missing in a lot of lives... just finding and embracing moments of silence - moments of silence where you don't have radios or TV's on or electronic devices or people talking at you. You are removed from all kinds of distracting noises. You're just silent. You can have pure connection with silence - silence you feel inside of you and outside of you. That makes me feel more grounded, more peaceful, more at ease. That's one reason I like doing things in nature. When I am running on trails on a beach I am actually touching the ground. I am grounded and I'm part of the earth...

Brittany: *You feel connected to the earth?*

Terry: *Yes, I feel grounded to the natural energy of the earth. There's a lot of energy in nature. There's energy from water, rivers, lakes, streams, the ocean, trees, the wind, the sun, the earth - so if you open yourself to*

connect with those feelings there is energy. There's energy in people. There's energy in creative ideas. There's positive energy in lots of places if you open yourself to connect with it - but if you don't connect with that energy you don't get it.

Brittany: *So if you're not connected you miss the opportunity?*

Terry: *Absolutely. If you don't connect with something it is as if it that something or that potential opportunity does not exist.*

Brittany: *So you mentioned that you are still able to connect during situations even when you do not want to be there...so is a connected focus possible in all situations? For example, if you're working with a child and the child doesn't want to be in a situation, can they still learn to connect, somehow? Or is learning to fully connect easier for things that we love to do?*

Terry: *Well it's easier to connect with things that you're passionate about or things you like, for sure! But it is possible to connect and find something of value in those situations where you have never done it before or maybe don't feel like doing it or you don't feel like being in a class. It is still possible to focus and gain something from the experience – even it is just a lesson about your capacity to focus when you choose to focus. Someone may ask you to do something and you don't really feel like doing it but you end up doing it and enjoy doing it or parts of it. For me, once I am there I might as well be there fully. Because to be there and be negative or to think, there is absolutely no value in this - usually just makes things worse. I think you can find value, or a lesson, or something positive in almost any situation if you decide you're going to focus on making the best of it. It's just a question of remaining open to connect*

with simple opportunities because sometimes you do something you don't want to do but some really good opportunities come out of it. But if you're not open to that simple opportunity and you don't connect with it - that opportunity doesn't exist for you. That happens in a lot of contexts. One person can have many positive experiences (or highlights) in a day and another person could walk the same path and have none because one person is connected with simple opportunities and one person is not.

Or one person could be carrying negative baggage from something else in to other contexts. So, there is a component of being open to connect and find value or to find things worthy of connecting to. Just the experience of connecting with anything positive is of value because at least you're fully there and you can gain something from that experience. Kids can also learn to connect more fully - to listen more, to connect more, to be there more fully, to let certain distractions go, to connect in more positive ways, to look for the positives rather than dwelling on the negatives. I've seen some pretty huge turn around in kids where they think everything is negative. Nothing is positive and nothing good in life - no highlights. And then you start to point out little things - what about that? What about that beautiful little bird? Or having kids go out on treasure hunts for highlights to connect more fully with positive little things and enjoy them. If we never open people to these possibilities of connecting and how to connect it may never happen or they may live their whole lives with little or no positive connection to people or anything else and that certainly doesn't lead to a joyful life.

Brittany: *Yeah, I agree. So, tell me about some of the things that take away from positive connected focus?*

Terry: *Well one thing is people who dwell on the negative. They dwell on the negatives, think about the negatives, look for the negatives, talk about negatives and that tends to close a lot of doors to living your positive potential.*

Brittany: *Okay.*

Terry: *Sometimes stress can block people from connecting in positive ways. They are dwelling so much on the stress or the worry or why they can't do something or why somebody won't like them or why this won't work - that they are not giving themselves a chance to connect in positive or fully connected ways. You can turn that around by talking with people about seeing things that maybe they have not seen before, like positive things in themselves, good things, good feelings or good things in other people or in their own experiences. Maybe they can't find anything good and you can point out - well what about this or what about that? I think you can nurture people to see the positives or connect with the positives at any age. You can help them gain a more positive perspective or at least get them focused on trying to connect with anything positive in their day - one simple thing! Just one thing! If they say there is nothing positive then maybe you can go with them through part of their day and help them see some simple positives - "Okay, see this – this is a positive...and this is a positive." Sometimes it helps to get people sharing in groups, sharing highlights, sharing experiences where they were really connected, things that they find uplifting, really simple things. I have observed children learning about new highlights in*

these groups and actually saying, "Oh, I never thought of that (as a highlight)." Or "I never looked at that in that way" or "I never realized that when somebody gives you a hug it can be a highlight or that you can feel good about such simple things or feel happier because of those things." You can help people understand or see more value in living in more positive and connected ways, ways in which they are more connected with people and their own experiences and not shutting doors before they even look inside.

Brittany: *One more question for you. If someone were to approach you and say, "I want to live a more fully connected life. How do I do that?" How would you respond?*

Terry: *If they can read, I would tell them to read the book, "Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone" because that book has everything you need to live a more joyful and fully connected life. If they can't read I would teach them some of the activities in that book.*

Brittany: *Good answer! (Laughs) Any final thoughts?*

Terry: *When you control what your focus on and what you do not focus on, you begin to control your own life and your own destiny (barring unforeseen random acts of chance).*

This is the power of focus.

Bottom Line – Continue to learn and help others learn to focus in more positive and fully connected ways.

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Sarah Plain and Tall

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Abstract

The purpose of this participatory action research study was to develop a better understanding of stress in the lives of adolescents, to understand how they cope, and to assess their response to a program developed to help them cope positively with the stress they are facing. The following article focuses on the relationship I established with a student named Sarah. Sarah's story will be told in the form of a narrative, to capture my conversations, observations, and interactions with her during my time in her classroom.

Please allow me to introduce you to Sarah. She and I met when I worked in her class one spring. As a researcher, my goal was to learn about those things that caused stress for her and her peers, and to offer positive strategies for mitigating the stressors they faced. As I taught in this classroom, interviewed students, and observed behaviours and relationships, it was immediately evident that Sarah was a victim of bullying, and was also shaken by the shock of exclusion (Elkind, 1984) and isolation that often accompanies adolescence. In the following article, Sarah tells her own story. The words have risen out of our conversations, interviews, my observations and reflective journals, and her own written work.

My heart broke as I watched the tears of pain roll down Sarah's cheeks. After nine weeks of working together, it seems that this research study has really caused her to dig deep as she discusses some of the pain that it is to be her. "Nobody thinks I'm special. Boys are all dumb. How can they do that to a person, picking on them the way they pick on me?"

I reminded her that "All princes start as frogs," in a feeble attempt to lighten her mood.

"It's hard to be positive when you are picked on all the time. Those other people ~ how can they live with themselves?"

"Don't give them all your energy, Sarah," I countered, "they don't deserve it. Don't spend your energy there."

"It's hard!" she screeched at me, "I hate them! I just wish the whole Shields family would be killed in a car crash!" Turning to me, she asked, "Do you know the Shields family?" I do not know the Shields family

personally, but since Mr. Shields is a prominent figure in the community, I am familiar with who he is.

Sarah went on to fill me in, and then referring to Mr. Shields she said, “Oh sure, nice family on the outside. There’s just one little thing that disturbs the image: his family! He’s got a rotten son. His son Mark he’s a son of a beep¹ you know? You get the picture? I wish he would choke on his own poison and die!” she screamed, sobbing.

Sarah’s teaching assistant Mrs. Adams walked over with a box of tissue and sat down. “This is good,” she said. “She needs to get this anger out. We’ve been working on encouraging Sarah to write these feelings down.”

“Maybe you could jump on your trampoline today?” I suggest.

“I guess,” Sarah responds.

“You know Sarah, today in class we talked about forgiveness as a way to be more positive. Wouldn’t it be better to let some of that anger roll off of you?” suggests Mrs. Adams.

I went on to further this thought, “Sarah, when you forgive, you release the other person, and by doing that, you release the grip they have on you. Anger then has no more power over you. Those people have no more power over you when you forgive and let it go.”

“Yeah, right,” Sarah retorts. Classroom teacher Mrs. Smith approaches us and sits down across from Sarah, saying, “You

know, Sarah, I believe that what goes around, comes around.”

“Oh, so you mean that one day Mark will be bullied as bad as he bullied me?” she questions.

“Well, maybe he’ll be in a different situation that will make him realize how he has treated others, and how he should treat people,” replied Mrs. Smith.

“Well, I hope so,” said Sarah.

In another pathetic attempt to be encouraging, I piped in, “Only two more months left, and then you’re outta here!”

“Ha!” Sarah blurts. “It feels like two million, trillion years.”

Mrs. Smith broke in, turning the conversation in a different direction. “Next year, you will be going to Sherbrook High School, and you’ll have lots of friends to choose from, and it will all be new.”

“No one will like me there. All of those people have their nice little lives,” said Sarah.

“You have a nice life too, Sarah,” Mrs. Smith counters.

“Yeah, if you call being picked on and being treated like a freak everyday,” says Sarah.

The Person Behind the Pain

“What’s it is like to be you?” I asked Sarah during an interview.

“Awful!” she shouted back at me.

“What’s awful?” I asked.

“Well, I have to put up with friends who try to impress people that are *rude*, by being

¹ All quotes taken from interview transcripts are verbatim. In some instances, student’s have “censored” their own words, such as Sarah did above.

rude themselves. And, apparently, *God made me His chew toy 'cause God just loves to pick on me!*"²

I probed further, "What's it like going to Yorkdale School?"

"It's terrible 'cause that's where the stuff happens." She went on to share that her community is a good community to live in, but the people in it are bad. Sarah ended our interview by saying, "this school is rotten!" Sarah's descriptive imagination and ability to verbalize her feelings causes her hurt to really come to life. There is so much pain in her heart and in her words as she shares what it is like to be her. Sarah, who is white, has been attending this school since kindergarten, and has always been different. She has a learning disability. Sarah has a team of people supporting her in her education, including two very involved parents, a full time teaching assistant who travels with her to each class every day, and a counsellor outside of the school. Sarah is a very bright, incredibly articulate, and creative student who is also a quick thinker and an amazing writer. Sarah appears to have no "filter" and fully speaks whatever is on her mind. How lonely and isolating it must be to be Sarah. In this class, and apparently throughout the school day, she is needled, teased, and bullied.

Other students are not kind to Sarah. While some do not treat her with unkindness, neither do they make a move to include her or invite her into their circle. Perhaps that would be too risky, after all, she is different. Sarah is sad and mad. In the three months that I worked at Yorkdale School, I did not see her laugh or smile once. Instead, she sat slumped forward, arms folded, and head hung low.

² Italics used to emphasize when certain words were shouted during an interview.

Sarah on "Stress"

During our first interview together, I asked students to explain what stress is. Sarah's definition of stress was highly descriptive. In her words, "Well stress is sort of like, um, soda pop in a can. You know, imagine that it's calm at first but then someone comes along and starts to shake that can and you gotta' let the stress out to someone right away because the more you keep it down, well, the bigger the mess it will be when you open it up." For Sarah, stress really is like a shaken can of soda pop. The hurt that she has experienced in her life is expressed with overt anger and hostility toward others. She is confrontational and ready to unleash her wrath on anyone who crosses her.

Changing Relationships, the Shock of Exclusion & Popular Girls

"Going to school with 'Team Psycho' and listening to pointless conversations about boys" are a few things that cause stress for Sarah. When I probed further, for examples of things that would cause someone her age to experience stress, Sarah launched into a dialogue about the pain of changing relationships and being excluded during adolescence. "Well, there are some people who have been friends with someone for a long time but then their friends start to make friends with someone else and ignore their old friend, so that would cause stress."

She explains further, "I remember when I was younger, well, you didn't really just have a few best friends, like, all the girls in your room were best friends. Sarah went on to share how her former friends have gone on to enjoy the antics of a boy she describes as "cruel to the bone," a person who has made life very miserable for some underdogs. Sarah wailed, "I thought they were my friends. They used to be when we

were younger. This isn't going to reach any of them, right? Good, because they're *just a bunch of miserable little snots who've got mosquitoes stuck up their butts.*"

Adolescence can be a time of changing social groups, and many of the girls whom Sarah used to play with have moved on to different social groups. Sarah is experiencing a classic case of the "shock of exclusion" that David Elkind (1984) first described. Adolescence brings with it many "shocks" and one of them is the shock of exclusion, where individuals who used to be friends, because proximity made it convenient, seek out different friends, based on similar values, attitudes, and interests. With increased mobility, proximity no longer determines with whom an individual maintains a friendship. This shock of exclusion has left a huge void in Sarah's life, and it is very painful for her.

The stress of being excluded has grown into contempt for the girls who used to be Sarah's friends when they were younger. She spends much of her energy despising these girls. Through informal observations, it would appear that Sarah can be quite confrontational with her former friends, and shows little restraint when it comes to sharing her thoughts and feelings. These girls, who have become the "popular girls" exclude her, ignore her, roll their eyes at her, and when provoked, verbally duke it out with Sarah.

Sarah feels that these girls are shallow, and all they care about are boys. "...basically these people, all they're concerned about is boys, boys, boys, and that's pretty much it. And here's something I've learned: If these girls can't find anyone else to be mean to, they turn on each other. So, maybe they're not as close as they appear to be to everyone else." Sarah's observations are sharp, and so

are her words. Her confrontational nature can, at times, contribute to a tense classroom climate.

Sarah suggested that perhaps some of these girls are stressed out with their own lives, and pick on her as a means to vent some of their own stress. Sarah went on to explain, "Maybe most of the girls, mainly my ex friends, maybe most of them have got stress in their lives and maybe they're dealing with stress in a negative way by picking on me, and stuff." When I asked her what advice she has for those girls, to help them cope more positively, she shouted, "*The next time you have the urge to play the cruel game of 'torture the freak,' keep your big, fat, trap shut!*"

Sarah and I explored the need for people to feel popular, or to be accepted by the popular crowd. Sarah felt that "Only pathetically stupid and desperate people would" want to be friends with popular people, if those popular people are mean. Sarah also suggested that others want to be popular "even if it means not being sensitive to your best friend's feelings." Sarah then launched into an attack of her friend who is striving to get in with the popular crowd. "I don't know. Here's something ironic," Sarah said. "A lot of people do things they think will make them popular, you know, like bully people who are socially beneath them when in reality it just makes them look like an insecure 'wanna be!' That's what Alli looks like now. Someone who's insecure and a total 'wanna be'.... The only reason why Alli even wants to be friends with Dawn is because she's impressed by her oh so heavenly, skinny figure, and by her cool style of clothes and makeup. And she also wants to be friends with Andrea because Andrea is from Africa, right, and she thinks that probably Africans have a lot of cool jewelry and stuff like that, and she's afraid that if she's no longer friends with them, all

that stuff will just be taken away from her. *I think I'd rather be a dork for the rest of my life than be a totally inconsiderate wart to my friends.*"

Sarah is very upset that her friend Alli is attracted to the popular crowd, and is trying to fit in with them. Alli lets Sarah down when she fails to speak up in defence of the underdog, when Sarah thinks Alli should. Instead, Alli sits idly by, and watches the drama unfold. This infuriates Sarah, as she laments "Well, now I'm not sure if I want to be Alli's friend any more. *That's not Alli! Someone stole her and replaced her with this robot clone of her!*"

Girls' emotions tend to be very social in nature and their negative emotions are often caused by interpersonal conflict rising out of what they perceive as breaches in behaviour expected from peers, family and romantic partners. Adolescent females desire solidarity with these people, and when there is a breach of trust, relational strains and stress result (Larson & Asmussen, 1991). Sarah feels a breach of trust with Alli, whom she feels has let her down by attempting to break into a new social groups.

Sarah went on to share a time when she was involved in a group science project. "And, you know what? One time during our science project, guess who I was partnered with? Alli and Andrea! I hate Andrea I can't stand her." Dripping with sarcasm, she goes on, "Who wants to be like her? Oh, wait, I know! That girl I was telling you about - Alli she's the friend who didn't listen to me when I tried to tell her about those rude girls. When I tried to tell her about how mean and manipulative Dawn was, she wouldn't listen to me."

My hypothesis is that Sarah truly wants to protect those she cares about from the

popular girls whom she sees as "rude little snots," and also feels threatened that if her friends try to get into that crowd, that she might lose them, or already has.

One day during a game of dodgeball in gym class, an incident arose where one of the popular girls hit one of Sarah's friends in the head with a ball. Sarah explains, "Well, Dawn accidentally or purposely, I don't know hit one of my friends, Joy, on the head with a ball and, um, Joy was crying. This really got to me because she's normally a tough girl so I sat by her. And you know what? I was just about ready to commit my first murder because while I was comforting Joy, Dawn was standing there smiling. Yeah, she actually was, as though it was the cutest thing in the world. And, even though she said she was sorry, I could tell from the look on her face she didn't really mean it.... And then she walked away with a flip of her hair. Little snot!" When I asked Sarah what she could do to cope with the pain she feels at the hands of these girls, she suggested that a good strategy to try might be to, "not [focus] on the friends that betrayed you and try focusing on the people who are still with you, no matter what." That would be a very good coping technique for Sarah, if she can harness the energy produced from her anger, and channel it in a positive manner.

Thoughts on Boys & Bullies

"Who bullies you?" I asked Sarah.

She shared, "It's mostly from guys, you know. Guys are like bloodhounds, they can smell fear.... They find your weakness, then they use it against you.... Anyway, if you try to stand up for yourself, the guys just sort of point and laugh at you. They actually think they're being funny." I cannot imagine how one would cope with daily, incessant bullying. When asked how she copes, she shares, "Unfortunately, standing up to them

does not work; neither does violence. And neither does ignoring because they still continue to do it and they laugh at you. Like, the boys actually think they're being funny; well, if *they're* being funny, do you know what that means? *I'm the Queen of France!* If I was, I'd throw them in a dungeon!"

With all of the rage that Sarah feels toward those who pick on her, she could not help but muse over their possible fate. "They're going to end up in jail, or they'll end up working in a drive in, or they'll become taxi cab drivers, or they'll cut hair at the mall!" Further on she elaborates, "Actually, the bullies, in my opinion all the people who pick on me now are not going to be successful later in life. Like, um, when they're busy picking on people all the time, they're not going to get a job because they won't be able to relate to people so good. And, if you act like an insensitive beast, you'll lose your job 'cause you won't care what happens to it." Her final prediction of their probable fate: "I think that one day at least one of my tormentors will anger someone who's bigger than them. That person's going to beat the living daylights out of them!" she said with satisfaction.

Being teased is not something that has suddenly happened at the onset of adolescence for Sarah. She shares, "You know how there's always one kid that every boy is going to pick on? That was me and, um, well stuff like that doesn't make me in the mood to do my homework and I sometimes leave my homework till late at night" which often augments stress for Sarah in her life.

The Risk of Rage

There is no doubt that an individual who is persistently treated unfairly, picked on, and bullied would feel angry and helpless. Sarah's anger toward her perpetrators is

strong, and is a "red flag" for me. I fear that her anger may one day lead to an act of rage. If fully unleashed on someone at a later date, Sarah's rage could put her, or others, at grave risk.

Sarah shared in a written piece of work that after being incessantly needed by a boy, she dug her nails into his arm, and was very proud to have left marks behind. I asked her to explain what happened. Sarah did not relate the incident, but said, "He seemed sorry about it well, he didn't until after I hurt him...he had it coming." The satisfaction from having dug nail marks in this boy's arm must have left Sarah feeling as though she had some control, and was less of a victim, something she does not experience often.

During an interview, I reminded Sarah about a class discussion we had on elite athletes and the amazing skills they have honed, such as commitment and drive. "What kinds of those skills do you wish you could just grab hold of?" I asked.

"I don't know the ability to beat someone up!" she said emphatically. I mentioned to Sarah that I sensed a lot of aggression in her. She agreed. I decided to be blunt and ask her if she thought that she was really going to hurt someone one day. She thought about it and responded, "I might if they continue to push my buttons....People who have hurt me *if they're going to throw a tomato at me, I'm going to throw a brick back at them!*"

One homework assignment asked students to write about an incident where they experienced an emotion, and took the energy yielded from that emotion and used it in a positive manner, and an example of when they used it in a negative manner. Sarah explained, "The worst negative energy I remember happened when William nearly drove Xavier out of school and then bragged

about it. Then one of [William's] cronies made a stupid remark about making miracles happen. It made me angry that someone could have that much cruelty and not even feel the least bit guilty about it. I felt enraged at William and at the people who actually supported him for it and I still feel that fury today. It was frustrating that I couldn't do anything about it. I will never understand why some people can be so thoughtless and cruel." Not only is Sarah enraged when she is teased, but when it happens to others she empathizes to the extent that it causes rage to well up inside of her, in defence of the victim. This desire to get behind the marginalized was re-emphasized in a subsequent piece of homework, where Sarah cited "being teased unjustly, seeing friends teased unjustly, and bullying in general, whether at me or someone else" were things that zapped her of her positive energy.

Pain

Sarah cried in my presence several times, both after class, and during interviews. In one tearful moment, she expressed her pain in these words: "Why do boys have to be mean to me? What is it about me? Why? What have I ever done to them? Maybe I'm just a rotten person who doesn't deserve anything!....It's not fair! They should be the ones crying and being miserable! They don't deserve to be happy." Her pain is very real and very deep. She suffers at the hands of both male and female classmates. She does have a handful of friends at school, but her very strong opinions and confrontational disposition may make it difficult to for friends to stay loyal to Sarah.

A Supportive Family & a Positive Self-Concept

Sarah is the youngest of four children and the only child still living at home. Her parents appear to be very supportive of her,

and it would seem that Sarah has begun to talk with her mom and older sister at length about the problems she experiences at school. If she was ever in trouble, or had a really big problem, Sarah mentioned that she would go to her sister to talk about it. Having significant supports in one's life is critical for any youth. For Sarah, the support of her family, and in particular these women, help her to cognitively re-appraise situations, and act as a 'voice of reason' for her.

One factor that can potentially put some youth at risk is their inability to positively fill their leisure time. For those without leisure skills, youth often find themselves getting into trouble (see Nazer-Bloom, 1996). For Sarah this is not an issue. At home she works on her laptop, surfs the internet, watches TV and rides her bike in the park. The fact that Sarah has honed leisure skills is a good distraction for her. She is skilled and talented in many creative arts and had no difficulty thinking of ten things she is good at, which include: "reading, writing stories, drama (acting), photography, singing, bowling, cooking, computer games, computer (internet) research, and movie trivia games." Engaging in these and other activities put Sarah in good stead as they serve not only to fill her time, but can also be used as methods of coping.

Sarah's parents attended a triad conference, where they met with both her teacher Mrs. Smith, and Sarah, for the purpose of discussing Sarah's mid-term progress. This occurred about nine weeks into the intervention. Sarah's parents wanted to discuss Sarah's involvement in the study. Apparently, as a result of the topics being addressed during the intervention, a lot of emotions were coming to the surface that they were having to deal with at home.

Together Sarah and her parents began discussing ‘fitting in,’ not being popular, not fitting into certain styles of clothes, and feeling upset at certain girls. All of these things that were brewing up in Sarah were now becoming topics of conversation at home. Her parents stated that these discussions were causing Sarah some stress. During the interview Mrs. Smith asserted, “This is life! Sarah needs to deal with these issues!” Mrs. Smith told Sarah’s parents that Sarah was working well in the groups during classtime, and that Sarah was presenting her work at the front of the class, and doing a great job. “Sarah lit up at this comment,” Mrs. Smith later shared.

The dialogue occurring in Sarah’s home as a result of the topics discussed during classtime really encouraged me. Any student who believes something covered at school is significant enough to share at home shows that the content is having some impact. The dialogue that continued at home with Sarah’s parents and sister demonstrates that Sarah is putting into practice some of the positive coping techniques discussed during our time together. Even though talking about issues relating to mean girls, bullies and popularity cause stress for Sarah, she was being equipped to learn how to cope with this stress during classtime, giving these skills a personally meaningful context for her. It is scary to think about how students would cope with this type of bullying without family support in place.

The support of Sarah’s parents definitely enhances Sarah’s self-concept. In one homework assignment I asked students to write about a time they experienced a strong emotion, and how they channelled the energy yielded from that emotion and put it into something positive. Sarah shared, “The best positive energy I remember happened when I was celebrating my birthday party. I decided to have a murder mystery and I

planned the whole thing myself. I bought a Murder Mystery game at Wal-Mart, made an invitation list and decided everyone’s parts. It was the best party I ever had because my friends and I got to act out parts and forget who we were. We laughed together as we discovered who we were married to and what kind of mischief we were all up to. It was great fun.” Sarah’s parents appear to go to great lengths to support their daughter, not only in academic pursuits, but socially as well. This sort of support will serve to continue to enhance Sarah’s positive self-concept.

Effectiveness of the Intervention for Sarah

Right from the start of the intervention, Sarah was not too self-conscious to allow herself to get into the relaxation exercises during classtime. As a result, she appeared to really benefit from them. One day Sarah came in late to class, and had missed the relaxation portion of our lesson, but still wanted to do it. She and Mrs. Adams went into another room, and started Sarah’s day out with relaxing. Mrs. Adams later shared that she and Sarah had made a routine of starting each day with a relaxation session. Mrs. Adams felt that it started the day out on a positive note for Sarah, and helped them both to cope better later on in the day. As a facilitator, seeing students use the skills they have been taught, as well as witnessing them apply these skills in a variety of contexts was very heartening.

During classtime we discussed positive and negative self-talk, and how people sometimes speak to themselves in ways far worse than others would ever speak to them. We went on to discuss how negative self-talk affects our attitude about ourselves, and that it is a better to speak to ourselves positively, since positive self-talk is more helpful and less defeating. In a written piece

of work, Sarah shared examples of when she speaks negatively to herself, and offered solid suggestions regarding how to change the negative thoughts into more positive ones. “Sometimes I think there must be something wrong with me if my opinions are different from my friends.” She also shared, “Sometimes I tell myself I am not very stylish when I see the clothes some of my friends are wearing.” To counter these unhelpful thoughts, Sarah said that she would, “try very hard to tell myself that my friends are entitled to their opinions, even though they are different from mine.” Regarding the clothing, Sarah observed, “when I look carefully, I realized [their clothes] are often from the same stores I get my clothes. I tell myself I look just fine.”

Sarah is very self-aware, and has developed a very good sense of that which makes her feel angry, including: bullies, deleting computer work, boys who don’t listen when adults lecture about bullying, friends who don’t listen to her, going to school, getting picked on, seeing other people being treated unfairly, and interruptions while working. Even more impressive is Sarah’s ability to identify what cues her body is giving her when she is beginning to feel angry. Many students were unable to identify any physiological or psychological changes occurring in their bodies when anger sweeps over them. This level of self-awareness could be very helpful for Sarah to learn to get a better handle on her anger. “Increased breathing, a hot throat, a sudden urge to punch someone, a hot stomach, and tense muscles” were physiological and psychological responses Sarah experiences in response to anger. However, recognizing these anger cues early on in the fight or flight response, and then making a decision to respond positively will be very important for Sarah. Coping in the heat of anger was rehearsed during classtime, but it will be up

to Sarah to make a conscious decision to take a deep breath and a step back, when she begins to recognize the cues her mind and body are giving her, when the anger begins to build.

It would appear by Sarah’s list of things she does to cope with anger, that she has a good handle on how to control her anger, as she lists: a) listening to music, b) inhaling and exhaling, c) reading, d) day dreaming, e) writing stories, f) writing songs, g) doodling, and h) exercising. Her list was the most comprehensive of all her peers. In the same way that Sarah needs to practice taking a deep breath and a step back when she realizes that anger is rising in her, she also needs to rehearse these strategies for coping with anger, before she unleashes her fury on others. By taking the time and creating the space between herself and others, she will increase the likelihood that she will cope with her anger more positively.

Overall, I believe that the intervention was very successful for Sarah. During our time together, Sarah identified what makes her feel stressed, and what she does to cope. She has recognized exercise as a good way to help her get rid of anger, by jumping on her trampoline or riding her bike. She has begun to talk about the pain that she has lived with, and is developing some skills for coping with anger. The dialogue that has been occurring at home as a result of the intervention is a very positive sign that her parents are being made aware of the difficulties that Sarah experiences at school. Daily rehearsal of the relaxation skills will help Sarah to automate deep breathing and relaxation, as a response to stress and anger. Automating a relaxation response in the face of anger or stress would be a healthy way for Sarah to cope.

Sarah's Monologue

At the end of our twelve weeks together, students were asked to write a poem, song, story, rap, act out a skit, share favourite song lyrics or something along that line, to present to the class what they had learned during our time together. When Sarah was called, she approached the front of the class, and launched into the following monologue off the top of her head. It was apparent that these thoughts had been brewing in her mind for a long time. Notably, her performance was met with crossed arms, rolled eyes and “tisks” from some of her female peers.

Popularity

Popularity. Has anyone noticed it has the word “pop” in it, as in soda pop? It looks great and tastes great, but you have to add things, to make it good. In the end, it's just artificial flavouring and colouring. There are girls who have it all: fantastic clothes, amazing make-up; guys just love them and are willing to lose every shred of dignity for them. These are the type of girls a lot of people look up to, but I wonder what these popular girls would be like if we got to know them better? You might get off lucky and find a girl who is both pretty and nice, but other girls can be manipulative and downright nasty. Sadly, people don't look beyond that; the good looks are all you see and all you're going to get. There are some girls who are so fascinated by this, they're willing to use any means to become popular. Some decide to get popular at any cost, even if it means dumping your best friend. I must ask this: How is ditching your best friend supposed to get people to think you're “cool?” Will it win over respect? Or will it just get you feared and possibly hated? Their popularity earns them fear, power and hatred. I wonder if it is all really worth it?³

³ Sarah later typed out and shared her monologue with me. This is nearly verbatim of what she recited to her peers.

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Self-cultivation and Meaning through the Experience of Injury Rehabilitation:

A Case Study of Two Female Basketball Players

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Abstract

This case study involved interviewing athletes who had sustained moderate to severe injuries about the experience of being injured and the potential for self-cultivation and meaning synthesized through recovering from an injury. Two female intercollegiate basketball players were interviewed at the beginning of their rehabilitation and again at the end after successfully recovering and returning to sport. Data analysis revealed unique characteristics about the rehabilitation process with respect to loss of control, social support and learning about their confidence, motivation, perseverance, attitude, and resiliency. This article examines the experiences of these athletes as they navigated through the rehabilitation process and highlights the potential for the creation of a positive learning experience and self-cultivation that injured athletes can discover through the experience of recovering from an injury.

Introduction

While it can certainly be difficult and challenging for individuals recovering from an injury, I have found in previous research that some people have discovered profound meaning through dealing with pain, injury, and subsequent rehabilitation, with many expressing the positive experiences of what they learned about themselves through such an experience. Many believe that they are stronger people for the experience. A recent example highlighting this idea is that of

Kevin Everett, a tight end with the National Football League who played for the Buffalo Bills until September 9th, 2007, when he collided with Denver Broncos' Domenik Hixon resulting in Everett sustaining a severe spinal cord injury. Of his remarkable recovery, he is described as having a constant positive attitude and his experience has had a profound impact on his perspective of life and of himself as noted in the following:

..he describes only a transforming strength that has come with his injury. 'I look at my life now in a whole new fashion' he says. 'You realize how blessed you are. You thank God even more when you wake up in the morning and for every little thing you have.' (Layden, 2007, p. 59).

Based on comments from various researchers (Kerry & Armour, 2000, Mainwaring, 1999; Snyder, Lehman, Kluck, & Monsson, 2006; Tracey, 2003), a needed area of research is to reframe the injury recovery process as having the potential to be a positive learning experience and an opportunity to foster self-development. Several researchers in sport psychology have noted the potential benefits of adopting an optimistic attitude in rehabilitation (Bianco, Malo, & Orlick, 1999; Gould, Udry, Bridges, & Beck, 1997; Mainwaring, 1999; Tracey, 2003), with some reporting the use of positive coping styles, such as problem or instrumental coping to manage the rehabilitation process (Gould et al., 1997, Mainwaring, 1999). In the Gould et al., (1997) study of elite skiers, several of the athletes described a reframing of the experience from initially negative to a positive one and demonstrated the use of problem or instrumental style coping. Athletes in the Mainwaring (1999) study displayed a positive attitude toward the process and utilized problem-focused coping during their recovery. Additionally, Mainwaring (1999) noted the importance of optimism as having the potential as a buffering influence, and the athletes in the study demonstrated a positive attitude and optimism about their ability to recover even though they were experiencing a great deal of negative affect.

Examining the experiences of injured individuals offers an opportunity to explore a unique area in which humans make meaning out of a painful event. People tend not to experience injury purely as a physical occurrence. From a phenomenological perspective examining the experience through the rich narratives of injured athletes as they explore meaning experientially can provide a unique understanding of injury rehabilitation. For the purpose of this paper using phenomenology as a qualitative method was guided by Patton's (2001) description of taking an individual's unique outlook and gaining an understanding of how people experience and interpret a given phenomenon. The intention with this approach is to focus on the meaning of the experience (e.g., injury recovery) for the individual (Nesti, 2004). Self-cultivation is a term used to describe a process of self-development that can be realized through various means such as movement, effort, or, as used in the present examination, confronting challenges faced during rehabilitation from injury. Self-cultivation utilized in this manner is derived from the self-development and movement literature and highlighted through the sport philosophy work of Davis (1977), Neal (1972), and Slusher (1967).

The purpose of the study was to examine the experience and meaning uncovered through rehabilitating from an injury. The objective was to uncover, through the use of in-depth interviews the unique and personal self-cultivation and meaning that many people experience through rehabilitating from an injury. By doing so, a better understanding of the psychology of injury recovery was gained. The study was guided by three research questions:

- a) Is there potential for self-cultivation and meaning to be gained through the experience of recovering from a moderate to severe injury?
- b) Is it possible for injured people to reframe the appraisal of the situation of being injured in order to turn the reality of being injured into something positive by taking the perspective that the experience is something to learn from and an opportunity for personal growth?
- c) By providing an opportunity to explore the experience of being injured, does it facilitate an enhanced experience for the injured person such that they describe it (among many possibilities), as a positive learning experience?

Design and Methodology

This exploratory case study was phenomenological in nature and provided the opportunity for injured athletes to describe their experiences through semi-structured interviews in order to reveal an understanding of a unique aspect of the psychological recovery from injury.

Participants

Athletes who were referred to a sports medicine clinic for the purpose of rehabilitation of a moderate to severe injury suffered through participation in intercollegiate basketball served as participants for the study. The participants in the study were two female intercollegiate basketball players from a southwestern Ontario university. The ages of the participants were 20 (participant 1) and 22 (participant 2) and both had been involved in competitive sport for 12 and 13 years respectively. Each participant had sustained a total of 5 career injuries previously through sport participation. The criterion for inclusion in the study was based on a definition of injury which kept them out of

practice and/or competition for at least 7 consecutive days. Injury severity was determined by use of the Colorado Injury Reporting System (Blackwell & McCullagh, 1990). For inclusion in the study participant 1 sustained anterior collateral ligament (ACL) tear to her right knee requiring surgery participant 2 sustained a fracture to a sigmoid bone in her left foot and.

Procedures

The study was a prospective design involving interviewing clients attending rehabilitation sessions for a moderate to severe injury sustained during participation in sport. Determining a moderate to severe injury was assessed by the physician and the athletic therapist. The study involved interviewing injured people prospectively, as they progressed through their rehabilitation program. Once the athlete agreed to participate, they signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic form (age, type of injury, prior injury history, sports/recreation they participate in etc). Participants were interviewed at the beginning of the rehabilitation within 1 week of sustaining their injuries. The first interview was conducted to gather useful information about their personality and cognitive processes (e.g., thoughts about being injured, coping mechanisms) at the onset of rehabilitation. The first interview helped to obtain an understanding of each participant and how they viewed themselves and aspects of how they were approaching rehabilitation. The first interview was approximately 20 minutes in length and the second interview was approximately 45 minutes in length and was conducted at the conclusion of their rehabilitation program upon successful completion of rehabilitation and/or substantial recovery from the injury. The second interview was more involved and focused on how recovering from an injury influenced their lives, how they dealt

with the injury emotionally, and the impact of the injury from a personal growth and learning perspective.

Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and all data analysis was done by the researcher. The data was content analyzed using an interpretational analysis to reveal patterns and themes. The analysis was based on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and interpretational analysis described by Tesch (1990) and was analyzed for consistent and/or divergent themes. These themes helped to facilitate multiple comparisons in an inductive analysis process. The transcripts for each athlete were analyzed as a separate case study initially in order to describe the experience of each athlete through the steps of interpretational analysis. The researcher then compared the two athletes' data to identify possible commonalities and contrasts in the experience of injury rehabilitation. Results are presented with respect to the individual experiences reported by the athletes, as well as the themes generated centred on personal self-cultivation and meaning.

Results

The experiences of the two injured basketball players recovering from a moderate to severe injury were characterized by several themes across both sets of interviews. Interview one focused on their thoughts, coping mechanisms and personality with the data revealing many divergent responses from the two participants with some similar responses surrounding feelings of loss of control, the importance of the role of social support, and the recognition that although recovering from an injury is difficult they are resilient, motivated and maintain a positive attitude. Interview two contained questions that delved into how the participants perceived

the injury impacting their lives, the possible meaning derived from the rehabilitation experience, and what they may have learned about themselves, life, and/or other people during their recovery. Interview two uncovered many convergent and divergent responses, with both participants reporting an overriding positive attitude marked by perseverance, motivation, determination, and persistence. Though the participants had both similar, as well as varied responses to the questions, the dominant difference centred on how participant one was extremely articulate about a myriad of feelings about her experiences, while participant two was very focused on the physical aspect of her injury.

Interview One

Participant 1

Participant one had sustained an ACL tear to her right knee requiring surgery that was scheduled for two and a half months from the time of the interview. The interview took place 1 week post-injury. At this time she was understandably distressed and angry about her situation and reported feeling “upset” that this injury had occurred. She had torn her left ACL the previous year and was now facing missing the majority of another basketball season and the fact that she was dealing with another ACL tear was the reason for her saying she felt “disillusioned”. In spite of these feelings, she did not dwell on the negative for long and chose instead to talk about her feelings of motivation to push forward to be strong for surgery and to come back to playing basketball the next season. She recognized her resilience as both a dominant thought as well as part of her personality and described that her resilient nature was developed in part through previous experience with injuries. This point is highlighted in the following statement:

I went in a circle like this, right after it happened I was ‘it was ok it sucks, accept it move on let’s get this done’, and I was extremely angry. ‘Why me?’ That sort of thing and then it went back to acceptance. It was just frustration and I don’t want to do this again, like it took so much out of me last time, ‘don’t make me do this again’ and then back to ‘ok, well, you have two choices, lay down and call that your career or fight like hell.’

When asked questions that pertained to coping mechanisms, couched in terms of what was difficult to deal with at this time and what was helping to deal with her injury, a theme of a loss of control was revealed; however, it was buffered with the role social support played for her during this time. She reported that she felt a level of “uncertainty” and felt a “sense of vulnerability” which was difficult to deal with, but she took comfort in her social support system including friends, family and most importantly to her, the athletic trainer. She described her social support system as giving her the confidence to feel “hopeful” about her recovery and this provided much needed comfort at this time. The hopefulness and support she had, coupled with her description of herself as highly motivated enabled her to recognize that she is a very positive person who was going to get through this rehabilitation successfully.

Participant 2

Participant two had sustained a fracture to a sigmoid bone in her left foot. The interview took place 1 week post-injury. At this time she was “upset” and “discouraged” and her responses to the interview questions were dominated by her extreme focus on the pain she was in and the physical aspect of her injury. The theme of loss of control for this

athlete was centred on her feelings of a loss of independence and a frustration with the challenges she was experiencing with daily activities of living due to her limited mobility (e.g., climbing stairs, walking to class, carrying laundry). Her feelings of loss of control were also noticeable in her fear that she was losing fitness, emphasizing her strong focus on the physical aspect of her injury. This is highlighted in the following:

I can’t work out. I’ve gone to the therapy room and lifted weights, but I don’t feel that I have burned anything off. I just feel that every time I am just going to keep gaining weight instead of burning off anything which doesn’t make sense. I know I am not going to get fat or anything but I am going to feel that I am losing muscles because I am not working them out. That is what the big concern is.

The participant also made several comments throughout the interview about how much pain she was in and how “depressing” it was that she felt she could not work out or practice. Although she described herself as feeling “depressed”, she was quick to point out that she relied quite heavily on her social support system including her teammates, her coach, and her family to help when she was struggling. She described the valuable role of her support system in the following; “everyone has been calling or stopping by so they don’t let me go very long being by myself.” She continued by describing the significant and appreciated support she received from her coach to help keep her involved and a part of the team, “he has been calling me a lot, just to make sure what is going on and he’s been trying to give me stuff to do related to the team so that I am not sort of floating away.” Although she did not initially describe herself as highly

motivated at this time, she was able to identify that she possessed a solid level of resiliency and a positive attitude most of the time, albeit at this phase, often with the help of her social support system.

Both athletes had a strong sense of resiliency and possessed a positive attitude. Participant one was more forthcoming about her positive nature and demonstrated a strong sense of focus and motivation to successfully recover. Participant two was focused on her physical pain and did not describe herself as particularly motivated at the time of the first interview, although she clearly described herself as positive and resilient and knew she would “make it through”.

Interview 2

Participant one was interviewed 9 months post-injury and 6.5 months post-surgery. At this time she had completed a significant amount of rehabilitation and had returned to modified practice. Participant two was interviewed 2 months post-injury, she had completed her rehabilitation program, and had returned to modified practice and was playing a few minutes in some competitions.

Participant 1

Participant one was very focused on maintaining a positive attitude and emphasized how important using previous injury experience was to enhance her confidence to deal with the present injury. Having experienced the same ACL injury to her left knee the previous year, she reported that knowing what to expect with respect to the details of rehabilitation demands and typical physical progress with all aspects of pre and post-surgery, helped her to feel more confident and focused on her rehabilitation. This point is highlighted in her description; “knowing what the next step was and how to get there, just the knowledge of having done

it already... [previous experience] absolutely hands down helped.”

Her motivation remained strong throughout her recovery and she repeatedly made comments about her ability to “look forward” and “push through” the challenges of rehabilitation. She was adamant that she would not give up and was committed to adhering to all aspects of the physical exercises required in her rehabilitation program. However, she did recognize the difference between the physical versus mental rehabilitation by stating, “the physical aspect of it is not a problem. I don’t mind being in the gym twice a day. I don’t mind doing the extra stuff, stretching, icing. It is the mental part of it that is hard.” She viewed her motivation and determination in simple terms, “it’s just from within and you just do it.”

Reflecting on the impact, meaning, and self-cultivation of the injury for her, she described it as an experience that made her, “know she had to buckle down and push through” and she became aware of how “positive” and “goal focused” she was during her rehabilitation. Although she recognized that dealing with the injury was challenging and a long process, she kept focused on “the big picture” and was motivated to return to playing basketball. Through the process she became more aware of her depth of perseverance and determination as she said, “I just learned that I can. If I put my mind to something I can do it. I mean I am not going to question that ever again in my life.” When asked specifically what the experience of recovering from an injury meant to her she highlighted her perseverance when she said, “It’s definitely taught me a lot about myself that the fact that I am still here and that I haven’t thrown the towel in. Like wow, you say you are going to do something and you

actually do it.” She went on to mention the importance of her social support when she said, “the fact that I am still around is important. It’s definitely taught me who my friends are, my support system – [the athletic trainer].”

The participant was noticeably introspective at the time of the second interview and a couple of times during the interview said she knew she had “changed” and “matured” which she attributed to going through this rehabilitation process. She initially described herself as a person who values close friendships, but does not tend to open up and talk to people very freely. This experience taught her the value of confiding and trusting in people to the point where she described opening up and talking to friends and even to me as much appreciated as, “comfort in knowing everyone was there for me”, which she said helped her to feel more “confident” that she could persevere through her long rehabilitation. She went on to explain that she had come to view being injured as “a good thing”. Although she chuckled as she made the statement knowing it may sound odd to say that sustaining an injury could be a good thing she saw the value when she said, “I wouldn’t have changed it [being injured] because it has made me. It’s given me the ability to open up more. I am more determined than I was before. “

For participant one, dealing with the challenges of this injury was difficult, but led her to realize how much determination and motivation she possesses. Most surprising to her was that she learned to be more open with people and discovered the important role social support plays in her life. She now believes that this injury has helped her to realize that she can “do whatever I put my mind to” and feels more confident that she will be able to cope well

with future challenges because of what she has learned through her injury experience.

Participant 2

Although the participant had returned to practice and was participating in some playing time in games she was still experiencing some pain and was still very focused on the physical aspect of her injury. She described her rehabilitation experience as “difficult” and “frustrating” where she had repeatedly felt she was “missing out” and felt “alienated” from her teammates and from feeling a part of a team, which she said decreased her adherence to attend rehabilitation sessions. She was pleased that she was practicing and playing, but noted that she was doing so with some hesitation due to pain she was still experiencing. During the first interview she had reported about her fear of losing fitness coinciding with her inability to train and her limited mobility at that time. At the time of the second interview, even with continued pain and discomfort, she was able to train and play so she was less concerned with fitness loss and instead this fear had been replaced with her self-described “confidence” of, “knowing that I am a fit person”.

In spite of feelings of alienation and pain she had been employing instrumental coping by making attempts to deal with the physical challenges of her rehabilitation including listening to her the recommendations from the athletic therapist, and consulting with her teammates and her coach. She also reported that although she felt some discouragement, overall, she was determined to “push forward” and was “motivated” to return fully to competition. The role of her social support system was described as “monumental” and that she always knew she surrounded herself with valued friends; this latest injury experience reaffirmed how important these people were to her. She also

acknowledged how much she appreciated the support from her coach and the athletic trainer whom she described as someone who was “always there” for her, whether it was for rehabilitation assistance or just someone to talk to about how she was feeling.

Reflecting on the impact the injury had on her she indicated that this injury experience had made her feel “concerned” in general and “uncertain about decisions in the future”, as she was concerned whether she will be able to remain healthy and how this might impact whether she would continue to play basketball. The impact and meaning of the experience was centred on her present state of uncertainty, coupled with her focus on the pain she was experiencing and her hesitation with certain movements on the court. Initially she was unsure what impact the injury has had on her and was unclear as to whether she had learned anything. When she continued to talk she realized that she had underestimated herself and she had learned that she is “motivated” and possesses a great deal of “determination” and “perseverance”. She described her learning in the following:

It taught me that even if you are prepared something might come out of no where and you have to believe in yourself and the people that are helping you to get back to where you were. That fracture helped me see how much my family supported me. It also showed me how driven I can be when I want to get over something and back to doing what I love. This injury allowed me to see that having people around that you can trust and talk about anything with is something extremely important because sometimes I need to get things off my chest and then I feel so much better.

Her support system provided her with comfort and assisted her to feel confident and motivated, which she described as something that was “engraved” in her with the present injury experience.

For participant two, dealing with the difficulties of recovery was challenging for her, characterized by her feelings of alienation and frustration, but through reflection led her to realize how much perseverance, motivation, and patience she possessed. She had reached a point at the time of the second interview where she believed that rehabilitating from this injury had taught her that she can handle challenges and she was confident she will be able to face other challenges in her life successfully.

D Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the experience and meaning uncovered through rehabilitating from an injury. The objective was to examine the potential for self-cultivation that many people may experience through rehabilitating from an injury. Data from interview one, which focused on establishing information about their thoughts, coping mechanisms and personality, revealed themes centred on feelings of loss of control, the importance of social support, and recognition of their capacity and ability to be resilient, motivated and to maintain a positive attitude. Data from interview two highlighted the meaning and learning the participants articulated upon reflection of their rehabilitation experience, which revealed their overriding positive attitude marked by perseverance, motivation, determination, and persistence.

Feelings of loss of control for the participants were a natural part of dealing with the changes and sudden disengagement

from sport experienced in the early phase of injury recovery. Rather than remaining focused on fears of loss of control, both participants were able to refocus on positive aspects of themselves such as how motivated, resilient, and positive they could be when facing a challenging situation. In light of this finding it is worth viewing this 'loss' as a potential catalyst to appraise the situation of injury recovery as an opportunity for becoming aware of one's capabilities (e.g., motivation, resiliency, positive attitude). Viewing rehabilitation this way offers the opportunity to initiate a proactive approach, which ideally could be beneficial for those recovering from an injury. Data from the present study is consistent with findings from previous researchers (Bianco et al., 1999; Gould, et. al., 1997; Mainwaring 1999; Tracey, 2003) who commented on the benefits of a positive attitude as helpful in coping during rehabilitation. Mainwaring (1999) furthered this idea by suggesting, "...that an overall disposition for optimism has buffering effects for the negative emotion associated with traumatic life events." The present study compliments and extends previous research by virtue of examining, through open-ended interviews, the potential and capacity for self-cultivation and meaning synthesis in injury rehabilitation.

The role of social support was linked to the participants' proactive view in that they relied heavily on their support system to enhance their confidence, motivation, and resiliency. Social support has been identified as an important facilitator for rehabilitation by numerous researchers (Handegard, Joyner, Burke, & Reimann, 2006; Gould et al., 1997; Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001; Udry, 1997). Additionally, Magyar & Duda (2000) identified the potential for social support to influence and lead to higher self-confidence, particularly with athletic training staff. This

finding is consistent with the responses of the participants in the present study, emphasized in particular by participant one who linked her social support system to the confidence she felt they provided her and helped facilitate hopefulness about her recovery. This sense of hopefulness and confidence they gained has potentially interesting implications since both participants linked them to their belief they have an enhanced capability for handling future challenges they may face in life.

Participants in the study were asked specific questions regarding the possible impact, meaning, and self-cultivation that may have been revealed through the experience of injury rehabilitation. Choosing to conduct the study in this manner allowed for rich data to be uncovered about the experience that purposefully promotes a positive and proactive view of the injury rehabilitation process. While sustaining and recovering from an injury can be physically and emotionally challenging, the alternate view is to consider appraising and reframing it to be something to learn from and to be potentially positive from a personal growth perspective. The participants certainly struggled in the early phases of their recovery, but were also able to identify their abilities to be motivated, positive, and resilient in the face of this challenge. They chose to seek out social support, to utilize problem-focused and instrumental coping, and to recognize an awareness that they could persevere both in their current situation, as well as with future adversity. Reflecting on what can be learned and cultivated in injury rehabilitation was a beneficial experience for the participants in this study and has the potential for anyone recovering from an injury to appraise and reflect on the process as a meaningful learning experience. Viewing rehabilitation this way can also be used by researchers and

practitioners who work with injured individuals to assist in reframing the experience into one that can be viewed as positive and self enhancing rather than the traditional view of the rehabilitation process as always difficult and arduous with no

redeeming qualities. The participants in the present study demonstrated that there is not only light at the end of the proverbial ‘tunnel’, but light along the way and in the future.

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Causal Attribution among Business Executives Investigation

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Abstract:

In this study, the authors investigated causal attributions for achievements at work amongst 124 business executives. The business executives appeared to have traditional self-enhancing attribution patterns when they explained their successful achievements. When explaining their unsuccessful achievements, there was evidence of self-protecting. This is discussed based on the fact that the business executives take both responsibility for and believe they have control over their unsuccessful achievements; attribution to strategy was the most significant attribution for unsuccessful performance. The study also revealed a strong relation between metacognition and attributions of successful achievements to strategy and ability. This may indicate that the business executives' abilities to think about their own learning processes predict their attributions to strategy. The results found in the investigation indicate that the business executives think and act strategically with regards to their achievements.

Causal Attribution among Business executives

In business the performances of executives are typically measured by tangible, observable outcomes based on expectations and previous accomplishments. Companies frequently focus on the growth and development of requisite skills of their employees aimed at maximizing individual performance and corporate financial return. An average workday for executives in such environments is often hectic and they are expected to (and expect to) constantly upgrade their technical and leadership skills (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2008). Thus, high effort and good results are expected. Experiences among business executives

should therefore lead to a complex mixture of thoughts and feelings related to their performances. How people react to success and failures depends on their interpretation of the outcomes. Attribution theory seeks to explain people's causal interpretations of successes and failures as well as the emotional and behavioural consequences of these interpretations. Beliefs about causality determine cognitive, affective and behavioural consequences (Weiner, 1995). Attribution theorists argue in general that increasing the individuals' attribution of failure to lack of effort is successful in increasing persistence and performance (Fösterling, 1985; Weiner, 1995). However, their research is mainly based on

heterogeneous samples where efforts vary strongly. Among business executives in a competitive market however, high effort is the rule. Thus, effort might not be the most efficient cause when explaining one's own behaviour.

The main purpose of this study was to identify and discuss functional causal attributions among business executives in a competitive market and how this relates to the participants' metacognition. In the present study, participants were one hundred and twenty-four business executives in a Fortune 500 company which was branch leading over the last three years.

Theoretical Foundations

Causal Attribution

Influenced by the theoretical analyses done by Rotter (1966), and more importantly, Heider (1958) and Kelley (1967), Weiner developed his attribution theory (1972) focusing on intrapersonal processes. Weiner addressed the fact that one has to use and combine various sources of information to determine causal explanations. Some of this information will originate from the actual situation, while other information is stored in the person's memory as experiences from past events. Weiner states that in real situations there are a large number of possible causes for success and failure (Weiner, 1989) and he hypothesized that attributions would hinge on three dimensions; locus of causality (internal vs. external), stability (whether the causes change over time) and controllability (whether the cause can be changed by the person) (Weiner, 1985).

Locus of control was proposed by Heider (1958), and is the most fundamental dimension in attribution theory (Homsma, Dyck, Gilder, Koopman & Elfring, 2007). Weiner and colleagues later redefined this

causal dimension into locus of causality, so that the dimension locus (of control) was differentiated from perceived control (Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest & Rosenbaum, 1971). Apart from being internal or external (locus of causality), a cause can be seen as stable or unstable (e.g. being constant over time or likely to change). A third causal dimension, which also originated from Heider, was connected to the model for classification of the causal dimensions (Rosenbaum, 1972). Rosenbaum originally called this dimension "intentionality", while Weiner chose to call it controllability. This dimension was a result of the recognition that causes like effort, mood and fatigue, which are all internal and unstable causes, differ as to the degree of control that can be exerted over them.

Causal attributions are important because of their tendencies to influence future behaviour through their influence on both motivation and affect (Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996; Weiner, 1985). The perceived stability of causes influences expectations of success and all three causal dimensions influence a variety of emotional experiences (Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996; Weiner, 1985). Theorists agree that people have a general tendency to utilize both self-protecting and self-enhancing patterns of attribution (Miller & Ross, 1975; Skaalvik, 1990, 1994; Zuckerman, 1979; Withley & Frieze, 1985). This implies that individuals tend to attribute their own successes to internal factors such as effort and ability, and failures to external factors. In short, humans tend to take credit for their own achievements by attributing them to factors for which they are responsible, whereas failures are more often explained using external factors where the situation is responsible. Martinko (1995) calls these two types of attribution, dispositional and

situational. Dispositional attributions ascribe a person's behaviour or achievements to internal factors such as personality traits or ability, while situational attribution ascribes a person's behaviour or achievements to external factors such as social influence from other people (i.e., leadership). This is what Weiner calls a self-protecting attribution pattern (Weiner, 1986). However, self-protection in the ego defensive sense might not be an adaptive pattern when subsequent progress and performance is the main goal. The reason for this is the importance of perceived controllability for subsequent effort and choices. People cannot optimally improve their achievement if they perceive themselves to have little control over the causal factor which leads to the specific achievement. Responsibility and controllability are therefore generally desirable causal attributions (Arkin & Maruyama, 1979). In general, internal, unstable and controllable attributions after a failure (effort and strategy) lead to more functionally determined behaviour and emotions than other types of attributions (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Bandura, 1982; Weiner, 1985). Functional task behaviour is defined here as high persistence and accuracy (Chapin & Dyck, 1976; Fowler & Peterson, 1981; Schunk, 1981). The expectation of performing these tasks successfully in the future may be maintained if the individual believes that they can control the cause of the behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Attribution to internal, stable and uncontrollable causes after failure, such as lack of ability, but also attribution to external causes, may over time lead to irresolution and learned helplessness because the individuals perceives that they have little control over the cause of their own behaviour (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978; Maier & Seligman, 1976; Dweck, 1975).

Humans often use information on the basis of the outcome of specific situations to decide how much energy or effort to spend in the situation (Weiner & Kukla, 1970; Kukla, 1972). The reason for this is that effort and outcome are seen as related variables. Because of this, if one experiences great performance, one concludes that effort was high, while failure is attributed to a lack of effort. A review of attributional training confirms that increasing the individuals' attributions of failure to a lack of effort, is a strategy which has been consistently successful in increasing persistence and performance (Fösterling, 1985). This makes sense if the person didn't put much effort into the situation and subsequently failed. One may question, however, if attribution to lack of effort is adaptive or even possible after maximum effort. A number of careers in today's society, such as the participants in this study, are demanding and expect high levels of effort from people. In such a case one may question if it is possible to conclude and believe that failure to produce expected results is due to lack of effort? To answer this question we need to investigate theories related to causal attributions and performance.

Strategy- the plan of action

Research has shown that reflection upon the accomplishment of one's actions after the event has been a very effective tool for improving performance (Baird, Holland, & Deacon, 1999; Busby, 1999; Dwyer, Oser, Salas, & Fowlkes, 1999; Ellis & Davidi, 2005; Ellis, Mendel & Nir, 2006). This implies that reviewing the successful or unsuccessful strategies used during an event changes the individual's mental models and improves their actions in similar events. This post-event review elicits more internal (as opposed to external) and specific attributions (as opposed to general). Ron, Lipshitz, and Popper (2001), who studied

“post-flight-reviews” in the Israeli Air Force, quoted pilots as saying that the most important element of the self-debriefing is proving that they made the error and that it was their responsibility (locus). This implies causal attribution to internal causes. Once they had done that, performance improvement was seen as the next natural step, as taking responsibility for errors was essential to doing better the next time around. However, this might not always hold true because of the importance of controllability. If they perform better the next time around, their actions should differ somewhat from the previous unsuccessful situation. This implies that their strategy in the situation has changed because of their review of previous actions in similar situations. The causal attribution dimension in this case can therefore be defined as strategy. Strategy is both unstable and controllable since the individual has an opportunity to influence and change it (controllability). This shows that taking responsibility might not be enough; controllability over the causal factor explaining behaviour is also essential. Nakanishi (2004) found a significant increase in self-efficacy among high school students after a period of focusing on strategy attribution after a successful behaviour. Learning strategies are presumed to have a greater influence on self-efficacy than attributing failure to effort (Ito, 1996). These results show that attribution to strategy, for both successful and unsuccessful experiences, might improve subsequent performance. It's obvious that a general cause of an outcome (e.g. the lack of effort) is less informative than a specific cause (e.g. an aspect of the strategy during accomplishment). As supported by Abrahamson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978), knowledge of the specific factors leading to a specific performance is more useful for guiding subsequent behaviour and

performance. This is of great relevance to attribution theory. Controllable, internal, unstable and specific attributions are favourable. There is also evidence that focusing on strategy through self-monitoring and self-instruction can be a remedy for helplessness among children (Diener & Dweck, 1978). This raises the question of whether lack of effort is too general as a causal explanation and whether specific attributions would be favourable, especially in environments where high effort is a matter of necessity.

Strategy as a causal dimension

The positive result that arises from reviewing one's performance after the event (Baird, Holland, & Deacon, 1999; Busby, 1999; Dwyer, Oser, Salas, & Fowlkes, 1999; Ellis & Davidi, 2005; Ellis, Mendel & Nir, 2006), is a reflection upon one's strategy adopted in that specific situation, which implies that two dimensions in particular are key: (a) Awareness of and insight into the situation and the strategy adopted, and (b) the self-reflection upon one's strategy implementation and resultant performance in the situation. This provides evidence that strategy, and especially attribution to strategy, is a complex area.

Strategy is the plan of action individuals use to achieve their goals or accomplish a task (VandenBos, 2006), which means that strategy is supposed to characterise the working process. Strategy is categorized as an internal, unstable and controllable cause of attribution (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2005). While effort provides information about the intensity of the working process, strategy describes the quality of the plan of action related to the working process. Little research has been done into the development of causal attributions with respect to the use of strategies. Most of the research in this area focused on attributions to ability versus

effort (e.g., Cooley & Ayres, 1988; Kistner, Osborne & LeVerrier, 1988; Wigfield, 1988). Even in pioneering studies on the simultaneous use of attributional retraining and strategy training (Borkowski, Weyhing & Carr, 1988; Reid & Borkowski, 1987), participants were only instructed to attribute success to effort. Getting students to attribute their success (resulting from using the learned strategy) to use of an effective strategy may be more convincing in these cases (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger & Pressley, 1990). Of course such an approach would, by definition, require extending our current knowledge about the development of attributions regarding the use of strategy. It's obvious that effort is required to apply strategies (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger & Pressley, 1990), and that the amount of effort could be vital for successful strategy implementation and resultant performance. However, the above review shows that this may not be sufficient. To be successful, strategy has to be effective and efficient in any specific situation and has to be changed when it is not adaptive.

Aim of the Study

The first aim of the present study was to explore causal attributions following success and failure among business executives. Based on the previous discussion we expected that success would be attributed to strategy as well as ability and effort. Focusing on employing adequate strategies is necessary to succeed in demanding executive positions. Furthermore, we suggest that the perception of being able to choose adaptive strategies is related to both perceived abilities and effort. We also expected that failure would be most strongly attributed (inadequate) to strategy because this attribution allows one to believe that failure can be changed into success. Furthermore, we expected that executives would avoid attribution of failure to ability,

thus demonstrating a self-protecting pattern of attribution. To what extent failure would be attributed to lack of effort was a more open question. On the one hand, attributing failure to lack of effort may not be easy following high effort. On the other hand, given that an executive has multiple responsibilities, tasks or assignments it may not be possible to give equal attention to all tasks.

Metacognition

As discussed above, reviewing one's own performances after an event require (prerequisite) awareness and insight into the situation and the strategy adapted. Thus, the cognitive ability in order to do this successfully and with quality seems to be an important issue. Metamemory acquisition procedures (MAPs) ensure that effective and efficient strategies are maintained and that strategies detected as ineffective and inefficient are discarded (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger & Pressley, 1990). Strategy is therefore related to other cognitive processes; hence causal attributions made to strategy should depend upon the quality of these cognitive processes. Learning strategies are defined as thoughts and behaviours intended to influence the learner's ability to select, acquire, organize, and integrate new knowledge (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). It is an unstable quality which the individual believes they can control. Metacognition is an important concept in cognitive theory. It consists of two basic processes occurring simultaneously: monitoring progress during work, and making changes and adapting strategies (Winn & Snyder, 1996). This implies that in order to focus on the strategy and/or be aware of the strategy before and during implementation, higher order metacognition might be necessary. The awareness and use of strategies and metacognition are quite strongly related. In general, students with

high metacognition use more strategies relative to students with low metacognition (Garner & Alexander, 1989; Pressley & Ghatala, 1990), and also use more sophisticated strategies (Schraw & Moshman, 1995), with greater flexibility (Swanson, 1990). A number of strategy intervention programs have found that scaffold strategy instruction tends to improve metacognitive awareness (Paris & Jacobs, 1984; Pressley and Wharton-McDonald, 1997). Since metacognition includes awareness of one's own thinking and learning, this might be perceived as an ability of the individual for choosing and employing effective and adaptive strategies in the process of learning and problem solving. Thus, an individual's strategic skills are predicted by the individual's metacognitive ability. There are also findings which imply that low cognitive ability may limit an adaptive attributional process (Allen, Walker, Schroeder & Johnson, 1987). We therefore propose that attribution of success to strategy is positively related to attribution to ability. Hence, a second purpose of this study was to test the expectation that attribution of success, but not failure, to strategy and to ability would be positively correlated.

Knowing how to learn and which strategies work best are valuable skills that differentiate expert learners from novice learners (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). Metacognition, defined as the awareness and regulation of one's cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979; Baker & Brown, 1984) is therefore a critical ingredient to successful performance. "Metacognitive skills include taking conscious control of learning, planning and selecting strategies, monitoring the progress of learning, correcting errors, analyzing the effectiveness of learning strategies, and changing learning behaviours and strategies when necessary" (Ridley,

Schutz, Glanz & Weinstein, 1992). Metacognition therefore includes two related dimensions: (1) knowledge of cognition, and (2) regulation of cognition (Brown, 1987). These two dimensions are invariably linked in the sense that to know something means knowing how to use it. Knowledge of cognition is assumed to include three components: declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge (Brown, 1987; Jacobs & Paris, 1987). Declarative knowledge is awareness about ourselves as learners and what factors influence our performance, procedural knowledge refers to knowledge about strategies, and conditional knowledge refers to knowing when or why to use a strategy. Regulation of cognition also includes three components: planning, regulation and evaluation (Jacobs & Paris, 1987). Planning includes setting goals, activating relevant background knowledge and budgeting time; regulation involves monitoring and self-testing skills necessary to control learning; and evaluation involves appraising the products and regulatory processes of one's own learning.

This has an interesting relevance to attribution theory. It could mean that people with higher order metacognition (ability) focus on their strategy when they perceive a causal explanation to the behaviour experienced. Being aware of- and to regulate one's own cognition might be perceived as an ability, and it is this ability which might make individual's capable of regulating their actions through their strategies. Thus, there should be a relation between metacognition and causal attributions to both ability and strategy. One potentially effective strategy is therefore to combine attributional retraining with cognitive strategy training (e.g., Borkowski, 1992; Cole & Chan, 1990; Borkowski, Weyhing & Carr, 1988; Reid & Borkowski, 1987), so that focus is on the

quality of learning, instead of only on the effort, which has been the general practice in attributional retraining methods (e.g., Cooley & Ayres, 1988; Kistner, Osborne & LeVerrier, 1988; Wigfield, 1988). This could result in a move from a general causal attribution pattern to a more specific one. Effort is reckoned to be general strategic knowledge, whereas knowledge about task demands, which strategies work best and how to use them efficiently, are specific strategic knowledge (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger & Pressley, 1990). To move from a general causal attribution, individuals need to be aware of their own cognitive processes. Thus, higher order metacognition might be a prerequisite for attribution to strategy. Quirk (2006) argues that metacognition is intelligence. It is the metacognitive aspect of intelligence that enables the individual to be “not just reactive to the environment but active in forming it” (Sternberg, 1997, p.1030). Borkowski and colleagues argue that it is the general and specific strategic knowledge, combined with perceptual efficiency, which promotes the development of higher order metacognitive knowledge (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger & Pressley, 1990). It is the establishment of these advanced metacognitive components that eventually promotes successful performance (Borkowski & Kurtz, 1987). We propose that attribution of success to strategy is positively related to higher order metacognition. A third purpose of this study was to test the expectation that attribution of success to strategy would be positively related to higher order metacognition.

Method

Participants and procedure

One hundred and thirty seven business executives in a branch leading Norwegian Fortune 500 company were asked to voluntarily participate in an on-line

questionnaire concerning targeted thoughts, feelings and actions at work. The business executives in the study were the company’s CEO’s (Chief executive officers) and middle managers who were office managers in different departments in the company. Of the 137 business executives asked and eligible, 124 participated in the survey. Periodic reminders by mail and by an internal project manager were utilized. Thus the final results were based on responses from these 124 business executives representing a 90.5% participation rate. A gender breakdown of the subjects included 56.5% men and 43.5% women. In terms of age, 4.8% < 30 years, 61.3 % aged 30 to 45 years, 29.8 % aged 46 to 60 years, and 4% > 60 years.

Instruments

All measurements used in this study were based on previously developed scales proven to hold both satisfactory validity and reliability. The measurements were originally created in English. The measurements were translated into Norwegian and slightly adjusted for the purpose of this study by the authors.

Attribution

Attribution was measured by means of the 20- item Forced Choice Attributional Style Assessment Test (ASAT - I) developed by Anderson, Jennings & Arnoult (1988). The scale was modified and used to measure intra-personal attributional style in specific work related situations. Items measuring interpersonal behaviour were taken out in the modified version together with the choices relating to personality traits and mood. Attributions in general situations, such as “You have failed to complete the crossword puzzle in the daily paper”, are not relevant to specific work performance, and were thus taken out of the original test. This resulted in a six item questionnaire for

specific work related situations (three for positive outcomes and three for negative outcomes). Four different choices were offered for each item, relating to strategy, ability, effort and circumstances, which gave us 8 different sub-scales. The participants were asked to consider the causality of their performance at work on a seven point scale ranging from completely untrue (1) to completely true (7), for each of the 4 variables (strategy, effort, ability and circumstances). The adjusted measurement was not a forced choice as in the original, because of the desire to investigate relationships between the different choices. For example (item 1, positive outcome): “You have just received successful feedback on tasks performed at work.” (a) “I used the correct strategy to achieve it”, (b) “I’m good at this”, (c) “I worked really hard to achieve it”, (d) “Other circumstances (people, situation, e.g.) influenced the result”.

Metacognition. To measure metacognition we used the self-reflection and insight scale (SRIS), which has been proven to be a useful measure of private self-consciousness (Grant, 2001a & 2001b). Grant (2001a, 2001b) explored several measurements (among others The Private Self-consciousness Scale) for this purpose and concluded that the self-reflection and insight scale was most suitable for measuring private self-consciousness. The instrument contains two subscales, one measuring self-reflection, and the other insight. A total number of 20 items are used. Examples of items are: “I don’t often think about my thoughts” (Self-reflection), “I’m not really interested in analyzing my behaviour” (Need for self-reflection), “I’m usually aware of my thoughts” and “Thinking about my thoughts makes me more confused” (Insight). Responses were made using a five point scale ranging from completely untrue

(1) to completely true (5), which is the same as the original scale.

The reliability of the instrument was high, with a cronbach’s Alpha above .79 for all scales. The cronbach’s Alpha of the instruments is shown in Table 1.

Results

Table 1 show the statistical means and standard deviations of attributions related to both successful and unsuccessful achievements by business executives at work. The results demonstrate that business executives use all four causal dimensions when explaining their own successful achievements at work. We used the paired samples t-test to compare the means of the causal dimensions in this study. Significance values (p value) less than 0.05 (CI .95) was set to indicate if there was significant differences in mean values. The means of attribution of success to strategy, ability, effort and circumstances were; 5.97, 6.02, 5.75, and 4.91, respectively. The strongest attributions of success are to strategy and ability and the tendencies to attribute to strategy and to ability are not statistically different ($p > .05$). However, the tendency to attribute to strategy and to ability was significantly stronger than the attributions to both effort and circumstances ($p < .05$). Also, attribution to effort was significantly stronger than to circumstances ($p < .001$).

The means of attribution of failure to strategy, ability, effort and circumstances were; 5.09, 3.28, 4.12, and 4.00, respectively. The results reveal that unsuccessful performance was most strongly attributed to strategy, which was significantly different from all other attributions to lack of success ($p < .001$). The least frequent attribution of lack of success was to ability. The scores were significantly lower than scores for all other attributions to

lack of success ($p < .001$). A comparison between attributions of successful and unsuccessful achievements in Table 1 shows a strong tendency to attribute success to ability and to avoid attributing failure to ability. The difference between attributing success and failure to ability is substantial, whereas the difference between attributing success and failure to strategy is smaller, although it is significant ($p < .05$). These results clearly demonstrate use of protection

against learned helplessness and a self-protecting pattern of attribution.

Correlations between the variables being studied are also displayed in Table 1. With one exception the correlations ranged from moderate to weak. The exception was attribution of success to strategy and to ability, which was strongly correlated (.77). In comparison, the correlation between attribution of failure to strategy and ability was much smaller (.30).

Table 1

Zero-Order Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Study variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Metacognition	–	0.42	0.35	0.25	0.26	0.23	-0.11	0.03	-0.12
2. Attribution success strategy		–	0.77	0.32	0.10	0.40	-0.07	0.02	-0.14
3. Attribution success ability			–	0.41	0.20	0.22	-0.18	0.03	-0.16
4. Attribution success effort				–	0.27	0.02	0.05	-0.16	0.02
5. Attribution success circumstances					–	0.15	0.12	0.14	0.16
6. Attribution failure strategy						–	0.30	0.41	0.03
7. Attribution failure ability							–	0.47	0.14
8. Attribution failure effort								–	0.05
9. Attribution failure circumstances									–
<i>M</i>	75.98	5.97	6.02	5.75	4.91	5.09	3.28	4.12	4.00
<i>SD</i>	10.35	0.78	0.72	0.94	1.37	1.26	1.51	1.52	1.29
<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	0.85	0.88	0.81	0.80	0.89	0.79	0.89	0.80	0.88

Note. Numbers in bold represent significant correlations. Correlation of .23 or higher are significant ($p < .01$) and of .18 or higher are significant ($p < .05$).

The measures of attribution were further analysed by means of exploratory factor analysis with principal component extraction, varimax rotation, and eigenvalues greater than 1. Three factors were extracted as shown in Table 2, explaining 67 % of the variance in the equation. Attribution of success to ability and to effort constituted one factor which we have termed “Self-enhancing attribution of

success”. Interestingly, these are the two most dominating attributions. They both represent internal attributions of success. Therefore, it is important to note that the attribution of success to effort loads about equally strongly on this factor and on the third factor, which mainly contains external attributions. The second factor contains all the internal attributions of failure, effort as well as ability and strategy.

Table 2

Exploratory Factor Analysis of the different attribution choices

Variables	Factor 1: Self-enhancing attribution of success	Factor 2: Internal failure pattern	Factor 3: External pattern
Attribution success ability	0.91	-0.02	0.07
Attribution success strategy	0.90	0.12	-0.04
Attribution failure effort	-0.03	0.84	-0.01
Attribution failure ability	-0.20	0.72	0.25
Attribution failure strategy	0.38	0.72	-0.02
Attribution success circumstances	0.20	0.15	0.72
Attribution failure circumstances	-0.31	0.09	0.64
Attribution success effort	0.51	-0.20	0.57

Note. Numbers in bold represent factor loadings.

One of the purposes of this study was to explore relations between patterns of attribution and metacognition among business executives. Hence, we conducted a second factor analysis including metacognition and the eight measures of attribution, as shown in Table 3. The analysis revealed three factors consistent with the results presented in Table 2. The additional variable, metacognition loaded strongly on factor 1, which we now term

“Metacognitive pattern”. Attribution of success to effort also loads on this factor. The significant cross-loading for attribution of success to effort is still present in the new factor analysis. Thus, attribution of success to effort loads both on the metacognitive pattern and the external pattern. Also worth noting is that attribution of failure to strategy almost cross-loads with the self-enhancing factor in both models.

Table 3

Exploratory Factor Analysis of the different attribution choices and metacognition

	Factor 1: Metacognitive pattern	Factor 2: Internal failure pattern	Factor 3: External pattern
Attribution success strategy	0.88	0.11	-0.09
Attribution success ability	0.87	-0.03	0.01
Metacognition	0.64	0.03	0.11
Attribution failure effort	-0.02	0.84	-0.01
Attribution failure ability	-0.20	0.72	0.26
Attribution failure strategy	0.39	0.71	-0.04
Attribution success circumstances	0.26	0.14	0.71
Attribution failure circumstances	-0.29	0.09	0.65
Attribution success effort	0.51	-0.21	0.53

Note. Numbers in bold represent factor loadings.

Discussion

The present study explored causal attributions following success and failure among business executives. Consistent with our expectations success was strongly attributed to strategy as well and to effort and ability, whereas it was less strongly attributed to external causes. Moreover, success was more strongly attributed to strategy and ability than to effort. Also, consistent with expectations failure was most strongly attributed to strategy and most weakly attributed to ability. Attributions to effort followed both success and failure, however the tendency to attribute achievement outcomes to effort was stronger following success than failure.

The study also explored relations between attributions following success and failure. Consistent with our expectation we found a much stronger correlation between attribution to strategy and to ability following success than failure. However, attribution of failure to strategy, ability and effort form one common factor in the exploratory factor analysis. Thus, the results regarding the relation between attribution of failure to strategy and ability remain inconclusive. Exploratory factor analysis also revealed a positive relation between metacognition and both attribution of success to strategy and ability.

Among business executives in a competitive market, high effort is both common and expected. However, we suggest that working hard is not perceived as sufficient in order to succeed, one also have to work smartly. Moreover, we suggest that ability is perceived as necessary in order to work smartly (see Covington, 1992). Thus, when business executives experience successful achievements, attribution to ability, effort and strategy make sense. Therefore, it is not surprising that business executives made

multiple attributions of successes. The business executives attributed their successful achievements to strategy as well as ability and effort. This is a typical self-enhancing pattern of attribution, which implies that the business executives tend to attribute their own successful achievements to both controllable and uncontrollable internal factors (Miller & Ross, 1975; Skaalvik, 1990, 1994; Zuckerman, 1979; Withley & Frieze, 1985). In short, the business executives tend to take credit for their own achievements by attributing them to factors for which they are responsible. Ability is traditionally seen as a self-enhancing attribution of successful achievements because ability is perceived as important and a prerequisite to achieve good performances (Covington, 1992). There is also evidence for arguing that strategy may be a self-enhancing causal attribution, because it is indicative of ability. This will be further discussed later.

On the other hand, the importance of, and the need for self-protection were obvious when we investigated the attributions made by executives explaining their unsuccessful achievements. Theorists agree that humans tend to utilize a self-protecting pattern of attribution. This implies that failure is attributed either to external causes or that internal attributions are made to lack of effort, whereas attribution of failure to ability is avoided. The results confirm that the business executives in this study avoid attribution of failure to ability, whereas they make stronger attributions to external factors and to lack of effort. However, the strongest attribution of unsuccessful achievements are made to strategy. This may also be regarded as a self-protecting attribution in the sense that strategy may be changed and improved. This result provides clear evidence of protection against learned helplessness, since ability was the least significant

variable used to explain unsuccessful achievements, and the most significant choice of attribution (strategy) is within an executive's control. The fact that unsuccessful achievements are most frequently explained by strategy, but also by effort which is perceived to be within the control of the individual, is an important finding. We argue that this is a self-protecting attribution pattern in an ego-defensive sense. Strategy may be perceived as an internal causal factor, but one which is probably perceived as unstable and controllable by the individual, especially for this particular sample who is aware of one's own possibility (metacognition) to regulate the learning process by using effective and efficient strategies. As a result of this, expectations about future successful achievements may be unaffected by current unsuccessful performance (Bandura, 1982). Self-protection is therefore the most significant result when business executives explain their unsuccessful achievements. The results indicate that the executives perceive themselves to be both responsible for, and able to control their unsuccessful achievements at work. When working with a specific task unforeseen things may happen. For example, it can be a big challenge for business executives to execute the most efficient and effective strategy during mandatory results- and appraisals conversations. Mandatory results- and appraisals conversations are demanding because they depend upon the response from the employee, and the response might be unforeseen. Using the wrong strategy should be a reasonable explanation in terms of being self-protective in such challenging situations. Being aware of this fact and being able to reflect upon this (i.e. being in possession of metacognitive abilities) seems necessary for attribution of failure to strategy to work optimally self-protective. A person can only control that of which he or

she is aware, that of which he or she is unaware, controls the person (Whitmore, 2002). Therefore, the metacognitive abilities among the business executives in this study empowers them. On the other hand, when strategy is effective and efficient, this should be self-enhancing. Thus, the business executive proved that he or she is capable of being self-reflective, learning from previous failures, and executed the most efficient and effective strategy in new situations. The fact that attribution failure strategy almost cross loads with the self-enhancing factor in both models (Table 2 and 3) shows the complexity regarding the strategy dimension.

The individual's perception of control related to strategy attribution is however complex. The perception of control is dependent on how the individual perceives strategy. To be able to control the strategy, the individual needs to be aware of alternative strategies and believe that he or she is able to use these strategies, or to adjust the current strategy, to make it more efficient and effective in the situation. To do this, metacognitive skills might be a prerequisite, since metacognition includes awareness of one's own thinking and learning. The conclusion that the attribution of unsuccessful achievements to strategy is self-protecting, as discussed above, is based on the assumption that the individual has a repertoire of strategies, and that they believe that they are capable of changing the strategy, or to employ different and more efficient strategies.

The high correlation between attribution of success to strategy and ability and the moderate correlations between these attributions and attribution to effort are particularly interesting. We suggest that effort illustrates the personal investment in the working process and strategy illustrates the quality and smartness of the working

process. It is obvious that any given strategy requires effort in order to be successful. Effort could therefore be perceived as a general dimension of every strategy, and the relation between strategy and effort is therefore quite reasonable. The correlations between attributions to strategy, ability, and effort, support the notion that effort is seen as a prerequisite for utilizing one's abilities and effectively employ adequate strategies. A possible explanation of the strong correlation between strategy and ability may be that ability is seen as a prerequisite for choosing and employing effective and adaptive strategies. Thus, the close relationship between attribution of successful achievements to strategy and ability might indicate that the business executives perceive that their strategic skills are predicted by their abilities, meaning that to work smartly is perceived as ability. The close relationship between strategy and ability is less evident when executives are explaining unsuccessful achievements. This is explained by the need for self-protection and protection against learned helplessness. We argue that the attribution pattern seen among the business executives leads to a psychological state of learned hopefulness and independence, rather than learned helplessness, because of their beliefs in their abilities to use effective and efficient strategies.

The correlation matrices and the factor analysis, including metacognition and attributions, confirmed our expectation of positive relations between metacognition and attribution of successful achievements to strategy and abilities. This result indicates that it is the business executives' ability to think about their own learning process which predicts their attributions to strategy, since metacognitive knowledge and skills involve strategic thinking. A strategy cannot be successful if it is not effective and

efficient, such that the learning and mastery in the situation is optimal. The ability to monitor personal progress during the learning process and make useful adjustments is an important part of metacognitive skills. The individual's strategy in the learning process may therefore be related to other cognitive processes, our findings support this prediction. Successful achievements could therefore be perceived as evidence of their ability to work strategically (i.e. the ability to continuously develop, use, monitor and adjust personal learning strategies).

Attribution to effort is traditionally recognized as an internal attribution. In the present study the factor analysis showed that attribution of unsuccessful achievement to ability, strategy, and effort formed one factor. This indicates that attribution to effort is perceived as an internal factor. However, the factor analysis showed that attribution of successful achievements to effort loaded about equally strongly on an external factor and an internal factor consisting of attribution to ability and strategy. A possible reason is that even though effort is controllable by the individual it may also be context depended. For instance, given that a person is working with several assignments in a given period, all assignments may not be given an equal amount of attention. Moreover, the business executives in the present study had long working hours. Therefore, although effort is controllable in theory, their effort or investment might reach a point where it may not be further increased. Instead of increasing effort, the business executives in question may be forced to reduce effort in some areas or tasks in order to increase effort in other areas. Both effort and effort attributions should be studied in future research.

The findings of this study suggest that the business executives are active in forming their own environment and personal growth, that they perceive themselves to have control over and be responsible for both their successful and unsuccessful achievements. In addition the findings provide evidence for the use of both self-enhancing and self-protecting pattern of attribution. The findings of this study suggest that the business executives are active in forming their own environment and personal growth, that they perceive themselves to have control over and be responsible for both their successful and unsuccessful achievements. In addition the findings provide evidence for the use of both self-enhancing and self-protecting pattern of attribution.

A limitation of the present study is that the sample was fairly small and that business executives from only one company were represented in the sample. Future research should employ larger and more varied samples. Also, the measure of attribution stated general questions about attribution of successful and less successful achievements. The measure of attribution was therefore relatively abstract and hypothetical. An important task for future research would be to explore attributions of real achievements. Also, one needs to be aware of the fact that the results in this study are from people working in competitive market environment. Therefore, one should be careful not to generalize the results to other contextual situations or other types of environments. Future research should study and compare attributions in different types of environments.

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A Long-Term Consulting Tale in Professional Polo

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Abstract

This article portrays a tale of providing mental coaching services to a polo player for 13 consecutive years. While polo is not a highly popular sport, it is played around the world at the professional level and poloists like all other high performance athletes work hard to advance their skills, game level and to excel. My story telling starts with my way of becoming and being a performance consultant; bearing in mind the literature, theories, and research that shaped my work. I then share a polo player’s quest to excellence through a large pool of day-to-day themes extending from developing cardinal mental skills to getting older and the playing days after reaching ‘the dream’. Significant parts of our consulting work are revealed with creativity flowing freely in the forefront.

The Bits and Pieces of the Tale

The fall season has come and gone-- some good, some bad. So, the other day I found a quote in a book, Close Range, by Annie Proulx which I had underlined years ago. It inspired me...! Here is what it said about the “rough, bruising life” of a young rodeo rider: “... when he got on there was the dark lightening in his gut, a feeling of blazing real existence.” This rings true with me. The dream for my polo is that feeling of “blazing real existence”. In my own words: “It makes me feel alive.” One way that it blazes, when I am playing with all of me, is that my senses are wide open, totally perceptive, and acutely sensitive. Maybe it’s adrenaline, maybe it’s the sense of challenge about using great skills towards a big contest. Perhaps it’s my “love-hate” relationship towards competitive situations--Who is

better? Whatever, why-ever, I know that my gut blazes and I get that feeling of aliveness. (Polo player, 2003)

We started our consulting partnership during the time I was working on my doctoral dissertation. The student-athletes’ at the University of Virginia polo team intrigued my interest in the game of polo. After following collegiate polo for a while, I decided to drop my sport--alpine skiing--from being the focus of my doctoral research and explore polo players’ competitiveness. When I was conducting the interviews, one of the participants became interested in mental coaching, and so this tale began.

This article portrays my personal approach on providing mental coaching services to a polo player, for 13 consecutive years. My aspiration in writing this paper was to share a tale with those who often ask the

questions: How do you do it? How do you work with athletes? What do you do? I chose to reconstruct this tale as it includes a large pool of themes that we worked on during the years, extending from the first days of getting to know the athlete to the days of walking with him toward career termination. Most importantly, this paper is the narrative of a sport psychologist; my narrative presented through a rather simplistic, non-scientific, yet passionate, honest, and caring writing style aspiring to offer a rather unusual way of knowing (see Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006, Sparkes, 1998; 2002). The first-person writing style was chosen as it reveals more frankly the key features of my work and constructs more fairly this long-term consulting tale. Definitely a 13-year tale cannot be summarized in 25 pages, yet I hope that by opening up my notebooks, computer files, and unrecorded experiences I will add a pebble to our professional practice databank. As Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) suggested, I am also confident that each reader will have his and her own reflections on how the tale told here could have been narrated by them.

A Few Truths about Polo

Polo is not a popular sport in terms of fan, media, and commercial support (Beal, 1993; Milburn, 1994; Price & Kauffman, 1989), but it is a sport where athletes around the world try to excel and reach maximum potential. Polo is considered to be one of the oldest team sports played with a ball (Price & Kauffman, 1989), an elitist and secluded sport, an expensive and demanding one. According to Milburn (1994), polo brings together many sports on one field. It is like playing hockey, baseball, tennis, and soccer while riding a horse.

Polo teams consist of four men; three professional players along with the amateur

who pays for the team--the sponsor or patron as usually called. Polo teams may change their roster as often as every three weeks. Since this is how long a tournament usually lasts, there is not much time for building team cohesion. Most polo teams do not employ coaches and the role of the highest rated player is to coach the team. Hence, demanding and complicated roles are imposed on him and besides preparing himself and his horses for a game/tournament, he also has to care, prepare, organize, and strategize for the whole team. For professional players, polo is played year round. Accordingly, most professionals relocate themselves, organizations, and families from the USA, to England, France or Argentina in order to earn money year-round but most importantly to challenge their level of playing through good competition. Another truth in polo (mostly occurring to medium- and low-goal players) is that players' contracts may die out at any time the game result was not the desirable one for the patron, team manager or highest-rated teammate. Consequently, this increases the pressure for a win or at least a strong performance. Last but not least, polo players are greatly concerned about their handicap rating; teams are made up based on the sum of the four players' handicaps and most certainly earnings are based on them. Handicap ratings range from "novice" (-2) to "perfect" (10), are initially evaluated by local committees and then discussed by the national handicap committee twice a year based on the criteria of general mastery of polo fundamentals, horsemanship, sense of strategy and conduct, as well as quality of horses [United States Polo Association (USPA), 2010]. Off the record, a player's winning record appears to be an extra silent criterion affecting one's handicap.

From a practical perspective, the abovementioned truths add immensely to the demands of the sport. Aside from the physical, equestrian, technical, and tactical skills, the cardinal mental skills for succeeding in polo appear to be similar to the ones reported in sport psychology studies exploring successful athletes' characteristics (e.g., Gould, Weiss, & Weinberg, 1981; Orlick & Partington, 1988; Gould, Guinane, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2002). In one of the few books written about polo, Price and Kauffman (1989) indicated that in order "... to win, an athlete must possess certain mental skills: concentration, positive thinking, the ability to control attitude and energy, the ability to manage pressure, continuous motivation, and visualization" (p. ix).

The athlete in this Tale

He entered the professional polo circuit in 1988; reached the 8-goal handicap in 1992 yet in the fall of 1996 he was lowered from 8-goals to 7-goals. From there, he went straight up to 8-goals, to 9-, and then to 10-goals in 2002. As he was claiming each next handicap, he was getting stronger mentally, physically, technically, strategically, and of course horse-wise. There are no secrets on how he did it: He did it himself! Primarily, he was smart to surround himself with great people to work with and to be supported by. Whenever he wanted to get good at something he was open to look for the right situation and person(s) to learn from, yet above all he was committed to do the required work.

He was fortunate to have a family that in some ways shaped and at all times supported his polo aspirations. Yes, he comes from a polo family. Of course, not an Argentine

polo family, but even an American one makes the difference--especially when one's grandfather owns a polo field and when at the age of nine one is able to exercise polo ponies every morning before going to school. He married a supportive woman, veterinarian specialized in large animals, who dared to act as the best-ever devil's advocate when necessary. Last but not least, he has employed the same loyal, hard working grooms for over 14 years, who take excessive pride on their work for him.

He approached his polo career as a free-lance professional. This means he chose to look for a job every year, every season and not to be attached to a polo patron/organization for long periods of time. Being employed by a patron/organization on a regular basis would have provided a steady income, yet with extra household chores, such as working on the team's horse-string, on teammates' selection and preparation, as well as 'pleasing and entertaining' the patron. To his view, a steady polo job would also abridge his chances to play with many different great players, learn from them, and to pursue better earning deals every season, thus he was chose to go with the job insecurity that came with the free-lance approach.

Me in this Tale

I did not have a polo background at the start of this consultation. I brought in all that I knew about the psychology of performance and the player brought in all that he knew about polo. I studied polo from the sidelines watching hundreds of games live and videotaped in order to learn, see and comprehend the line of the ball, the right of way, the incredible messes that take place at knock-ins and throw-ins, and the 10 different types of penalties. I read most books written about polo. Luckily, this poloist was very articulate and talkative.

Concerning the fact that I knew little about polo when we started out, he saw that I was ‘giving him a fresh, different perspective’ and this notion eased my mind while it challenged me to learn. Still today, I am nowhere close to a polo expert yet through my work with poloists I built some solid knowledge on how their minds work and what it takes to play the sport at the highest level.

My Way of Being

The following conceptions, established through my studies, readings, and experiences, guided my work with this polo player and they are still valid for me nowadays:

- If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.
- Confidence is the sum total of your thoughts about yourself on a day-to-day basis.
- You will become what you think about yourself.
- You are only as good as your next performance.
- Luck is the moment preparation meets opportunity.
- Men are disturbed not by things per se, but by the perception of them.
- If you don’t have it, you cannot give it.
- In all that happens, look for the challenge rather than the threat.
- Being positive simply means that you see the choices in front of you.

Of course, most of these were borrowed. Whether they were borrowed from Epictetus, Leo Buscaglia, Bob Rotella or unknown thinkers, they were put to good work and never presented as my own with the exception of the last two.

The work of Lazarus (1966; 1981) Lazarus and Averill (1972) Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and others’ on cognitive appraisal, along with Kobasa and colleagues’ (see 1979; 1982) work on hardy personality gave me a practical interpretation regarding an athlete’s response to demanding situations (see Maddi, 2002 for a recent review). The idea of teaching athletes “through symbolization, imagination, and judgment” (Rotella & Lerner, 1993, p. 533) to view stress and anxiety as challenging, exciting, and beneficial was within my capabilities. Hence, showing a performer all three sides of a coin became a fundamental practice of mine. Furthermore, popular psychology mottos like “be positive, stay positive, think positive” were too abstract and generic, thus I came up with an operational definition of what it means to be or think positive (i.e., last bullet point in list above). Practically it appears to work well, as I simply ask and teach a person to view his/her choices in the here and now; nonetheless, I have no research data to support this notion.

Moreover, my way of being as a performance consultant was nurtured through some theoretical models. Bob Rotella (1994; 1995) taught and wrote about the two distinct mindsets that an athlete ought to possess; the training and the trusting one. The training mindset is great for practices while the trusting one is what the athlete needs when he/she competes, when he/she has to execute, to let go and play all out. The training mindset, is characterized by the concept of work; it connotes that the athlete works to progress his/her skills, thinks about what he/she is doing, analyzes, and questions in order to discover what works best for him/her. On the other hand lays the trusting mindset which is characterized by the notion of play and connotes that the athlete does not question nor think too much; he/she just

plays, executes plays and tactics, sees and responds to the situation-at-hand. The athlete trusts himself and what he/she has been trained to do, trusts his/her teammates and what was practiced with them. Trust is a key characteristic of this competition mindset, which ought to be learned and practiced during training sessions by blending the two mindsets. Recently, Eliot (2006) in his book *Overachievement* included a chapter titled *The Trusting Mindset* (pp. 3-18), where he elaborates and attempts to extend the teachings and writings of Bob Rotella. In this line of thinking, I help athletes view the difference between a game and a practice and develop strong and clear training and trusting mindsets. This approach also means that I disagree with the idea of treating a game like a practice session--since some type of evaluation exists in all games/competitions, these two are different.

Robin Vealley, a few years before she published her work on the multiple sources of confidence (Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998), gave a lecture at the University of Virginia graduate students' on these multiple sources (Vealey, 1995). Throughout my consulting years, the three main categories of confidence sources (perspiration, regulation, and inspiration) have proved to be a great tool. Based on the specifics of each sport, I always discover new sources to aid an athlete in believing. If one source is out of sync for a day, well who cares, there are lot more reasons to feel good, sure about thy self. All I have to do is to make sure the athlete sees his/her reasons to believe and uses the strongest one/s based on the demand-at-hand. Recent studies on world class performers' confidence sources and interpretations refreshed and offered further support to this practical approach of mine (see Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007).

Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy also had an impact on my work. The 'persuasion' source of efficacy along with Vealey's (1995) 'confidence inspiration' offered another ace in my sleeve. Through trial and error, I found out that in some occasions I had to act as a 'crutch' for the athlete, to persuade him, to inspire him. This crutch function is fine for me, as long as we take the time to do the work and eventually remove me as a crutch. At all times I keep the end in mind: The day the athlete will no longer need my services.

Last but not least, it was Doug Newburg's (1993) resonance performance model that fitted well with my way of thinking, acting, and being as a person as well as a consultant. According to this model, each athlete has a dream, and this dream denotes how he/she wants to feel in his/her daily pursuits. The athlete engages in extensive preparation, including activities that enable him/her to live this dream. However, all athletes face obstacles and at that point some develop ways to revisit their dream before they engaged in more preparation, while others just engage in more and more preparation and lose sight of their dream. This cyclical process that guides one's performance, during which the athlete stays in touch with his/her dream, was termed resonance. According to Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, and Doell (2002) resonance occurs when there is a seamless fit between how the athlete wants to feel on each day about his/her pursuits and the environment in which he/she lives. "Resonance is about moving toward a harmonious experience between one's inner world--that is, the feelings an individual wants to have--and his or her surroundings. It is enjoying the process of expanding one's self out into the world in an authentic way." (Newburg et al., 2002, p. 252). This heuristic model of resonance in performance

enhanced my practice through the use of four very meaningful and useful questions: “What feelings do you seek to experience in your sport on a regular basis? What prepares you to experience these feelings? What prevents these feelings from occurring? How do you get these feelings back when they are lost?” (Newburg et al., 2002, p. 263).

Most certainly, I am cognizant of and trained on developing psychological skills through techniques, as these are presented in various sport psychology courses and handbooks. After trying goal setting, self-talk, imagery, and relaxation techniques first and foremost on me and also practicing them extensively with athletes; I chose to use them when suitable, as a means to help the person-athlete develop himself along with his/her training and trusting mindsets and not as the main course of my work. In line with that, it is important to mention that my consulting work follows the recently discussed holist approach to sport psychology (see Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2011; Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). If I had failed to see this poloist as a regular person; to recognize the man, the athlete, the husband, the father, the teammate, the hired-pro in him; if I had not spent enough time in tournaments and practices; it would have been difficult for our work to be effective and meaningful.

Our Consulting Tale

The fact that I started working with this specific polo player after he was lowered to 7-goals, meant that he had done at least few things right to be up there. About two-thirds of the rated players in USA carry a handicap of 2-goals or less while very few advance beyond 3-goals (USPA, 2010). Actually, since 1890 when the handicap system was initiated, less than 50 players have been

awarded the 10-goal handicap (USPA, 2010). Thus the basic idea was not to change him, as his approach to playing great polo was fairly successful, but to figure out what was not facilitating his progress at that point in time.

I did not use questionnaires to evaluate his skills and needs but a discourse approach: I asked and he shared, he asked and I shared. After the first few meetings that were spent to get to know the athlete, when we met we did marathon sessions (an approach taught by Bob Rotella), usually two to five days of face-to-face work while sitting in his office space, walking around the barn or the fields, having lunch or dinner, driving his kids to school and soccer practices, watching his wife do acupuncture on his horses, or driving with him to practices and games. On these days, we usually spent 4 to 6 good hours discussing performance issues and then I also spent time observing him (his polo organization and his various teammates eventually) at the barn and on the field. These hours allowed me to get into his riding boots, to grasp his day-to-day reality and world, his needs and desires. The marathon sessions gave us generous time to talk, to think through, to argue, to figure out what would suit him best, and to support him in developing a well-built reasoning for his choices and decisions. For the rest of our consulting days, calling, faxing, and later on emailing were valuable means of communication for our consulting work and the assignments I asked him to complete very often.

The first thing I did in January of 1997 was to organize and prioritize my notes. The key notes I kept based on what he shared during our first two meetings read as follows:

- Plays his best when he is creative and spontaneous; when he feels loose and the

game flows, which happens during practices but not often in games.

- If asked 2 to 3 years ago to share his polo dream, he would have talked about becoming a 10-goal player. Now his dream has changed; he wants to reach his playing potential, to be as good as he can be, probably a 9-goal player.
- Questions himself and his abilities as well as his horses on game days.
- Worries about others and tries to change their game as much as he can.
- Prior to a game he feels some kind of fear and enters the game feeling nervous.
- Feels awful after losing a game.
- Thinks too much and overanalyzes plays, people, and situations.
- What others say/think of him influence a great deal of what he thinks for himself.
- Uses his imagery to see poor and non-successful plays before these occur within a real game situation.

My interpretation of the hours spent around him and these notes revealed that I had met a troubled poloist--although he looked darn good on the field and in media presentations--who didn't dare to say out loud that he aspired to become a 10-goal player, who despised his pre-game nervousness, who did not trust himself and teams, who wanted to control things and teammates, who was pessimistic when thinking about his polo career.

According to my interpretations, confidence appeared to be a matter that needed fundamental work. Most likely, his lack of

confidence triggered the questioning about himself, his abilities, his horses, his teammates' skills and abilities. Presumably, it also had a role in the undue fear and nervousness prior to a game, the poor images he would see through his mind's eyes, the bad feelings after a game, as well as in his worries of what other people thought of him. Hence, I decided to focus on developing a strong belief system before touching on anything else.

The practical themes shared below are in a somewhat chronological order presenting how this consultation progressed. It is impossible to say that this is all the work we have done during the past 13 years, that we only worked on one thing at a time or that we did not revisit issues again and again. These themes were chosen to be included in this article as examples of our work, considering that some of them are of the most common issues that sport psychology consultants' come across (e.g., building confidence, developing positive thinking and attitude, pre-game preparation, etc.), hence in some cases recent literature that has attracted my attention as applicable is also presented. Important to say, that thinking out of the box has been at all times the basis of my consulting.

Believing in self, in teammates, and not in opponents.

The following questions initiated our work: If you do not believe in yourself, whom do you believe in? Have you ever considered that by not believing in you, indirectly you give your vote of confidence to the opponent? These questions triggered long discussions and set the ground for eventually discovering his sources of confidence as an athlete, a person, a husband, a father, a son, etc. When one needs to believe, my motto is: 'From all possible sources of confidence, anything goes!' I was creative, open-

minded, and spontaneous as a consultant when ideas bounced back and forth in order to pick one that would help the athlete. I prompted and pushed the athlete with lots of why's and how's though lots of questions asked.

The answers to the questions I pose helped the poloist discover and shape his own way toward his dream; he made choices and decisions based on them, as well as specific plans on how to follow these decisions through to realization. It's not that I am Greek but I have great fondness for the Socratic Questioning (see Carey & Mullan, 2004) where asking and answering questions stimulates critical thinking and brings out ideas--it has been very efficient throughout my work. Based on each question a new one is formulated in light of the progress of the discussion. The basic notion of this approach is to help a person discover his/her beliefs on a specific theme through a series of questions that explore the definitions and reasons of the theme-at-hand. This is how I approached the poloist's confidence, by pushing him to explore his thoughts of himself, his inner-talks, his daily actions on and off the field, his determination, his worries, his dreams and aspirations. For example, of the first questions I posed on this matter were: What are three things you do very well in polo? What are three things you don't well in polo?

Moreover, I prompted him to think of his mind as a green mind that can be transformed into a champion's mind with time and work and to be as patient with him as he was with any young green horse of his schooled for years prior to playing high-goal polo. Why not use the same line of thinking? Why approach his preparation for high-goal polo differently? I also guided him through our talks to notice that what he thought of him and his game is what his confidence

was all **about; that if he managed his** thoughts he could own his confidence.

It was very helpful for him to realize that confidence does not come solely from being successful. Past successes are wonderful sources of confidence but not the only one. There was always a source that he could use no matter how bad the day appeared to be. The same way he swapped a horse for a stronger one within a game, he could also use different confidence-votes to boost his thoughts and feelings. Being smart and efficient meant that he would use all available resources to get to his dream. On any given day his polo-confidence could be based on one, some or all of the following sources (see the work of Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998; Hanton, Mellalieu, & Hall, 2004; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007):

- His achievements from (a) knowing that he masters his polo skills and feeling good about them, (b) his past successes, (c) the game experience he had accumulated, and (d) the strong string of horses he had built.
- His self-regulation from (a) being physically prepared, (b) being mentally prepared, (c) having devised a strong game plan, and (d) feeling good for his physical presentation, e.g., fit and lean, strong, healthy, etc.
- The climate/environment around him based on (a) his support system (e.g., family, friends, teammates, grooms, myself), (b) feeling comfortable within the polo environment, (c) having good polo horses and trusting them, and (d) his teammates' strengths.

Following this line of thinking, his penalty-confidence was boosted extra by task specifics for which he felt good about and in control while standing in the 30- or 60-yard line. Such are his sense of competence from his horse-skills, having practiced hitting 10,000 penalties [see Gladwell's (2008) writings on the 10,000-hour rule for success], his penalty routine, his experience, his commitment and determination to get the ball through the posts, his mallet-skills, as well as the well-trained horse he had chosen to be on for the penalty-at-hand. Likewise, for the various parts of his game extra sources of confidence were recognized and put to use.

Preparing to the teeth

If luck is the moment when preparation meets opportunity, then in a game played with a ball that travels at 110 miles per hour in a field about the size of three football fields (300 X 160 yards) and eight players who ride at full speed, you better be prepared. Better said by him: "Be prepared to the teeth!" After reaching 8-goals, definitely a poloist knows how to prepare for a game. Nonetheless, the lack of coaches in polo is critical as each player has to figure his way of preparing without formal and regular guidance. In addition, preparation structure (e.g., team rituals, meetings, practices) changes as often as a player joins a new team.

Given that knowing you are well prepared is a source of confidence, we implemented "The 2-Nights before the Game" plan (2-NBG). I came up with this plan in order to provide pre-game structure and routine that would help him prepare, focus, and thus hopefully play with fewer worries. This 2-NBG was conversational in nature and included the following questions: How are you feeling about yourself today? How are you feeling about your horses? What

strengths does the opponent bring on the field? What are your team's strengths playing against them? What are the opponent's weaknesses? What do you guys need to be careful about? How have they (i.e., opponent) been playing until now? What does your team need to do to be efficient against them? What will your team do differently in the second half to surprise them? What do you bring on the field against them and what do you need to execute? What else is on your mind?

The 2-NBG was rather simple and appeared to work for him. I chose to start and end with the focus on him. It was important to talk about the opposing team's strengths but avoided ending our talks with a focus on them or even his teammates. Team strengths were also discussed as he was a high-goal player and most often had to devise his team's game plans A and B--i.e., the ideal and not-so-ideal plan. He enjoyed having more structure, guidance, and support during preparation. Eventually (this means after a couple of playing seasons), we made sure he did not get caught up in following these questions step by step, but gave himself the freedom to be creative as every team he played for and against was different.

Post-game thinking habits

The player's post-game thoughts and feelings after a poor game were very often too negative and had to be confronted as they had a strong negative effect on his life off the field and the days that followed on the field. A decision he had to make involved how he would view and evaluate past performances. The basic query was: Are you going to be sincere with yourself about how you did, correct the mistakes in your mind and move on or are you going to dwell on them, be judgmental, critical, and even label yourself as a lesser player? It was his choice. Whatever he chose to see in his

past performances ought to be decided bearing in mind the dream he had for himself to move forward and not back. Even in his worst games there were always plays that he executed well and those executions / plays waited to be acknowledged.

I never suggested or supported the idea of ignoring mistakes and weaknesses, but a huge distance lays between acknowledging a mistake, working to improve on it and being overly critical, dwelling on it, and tearing oneself apart. A mistake ought to be just a mistake. One mistake or 10 mistakes in a row do not make up a bad person, a bad player, or a failure. I wanted him to become very clear of the immense gap between a mistake in execution or a lost game and what constitutes a failure. Identifying a mistake or a weak skill/technique is a significant step but correcting or improving on it is the most crucial step in this performance journey. Most importantly though, we worked based on the idea that an athlete can improve his/her weaknesses by building on his/her strengths; not on the weaknesses.

The poloist worked hard on correcting mistakes and improving weaknesses and then on learning to trust the work he did. When the athlete trusts himself and the things he/she is good at, has the vigor to play full heartedly even when possessing some weak skills, teammates, or horses. Trust can be essential; according to the literature trust does not rely on proof and it can be decided a priori [see the work of Moore & Stevenson (1991; 1994) on trust, Rotella's writings on train and trust mindsets (1995), as well as Eliot's (2006) elaboration on it]. Hence, through our discussions I guided the athlete to have faith in him, his horses, his teammates.

Additionally, after a poor game or a loss and before allowing a bad performance or a poor score get under his skin, we conversed by means of the following questions: Is it worth worrying about it too much? Can this poor performance or loss impact your future life and polo dreams? How will worrying or feeling sad, bad, frustrated change anything? If so, then what can you do today, tomorrow, and the day after to change this? I encouraged him to give clear and precise answers without any but's, if's, or should's. When I was not present or available to talk, watching the video of his last game also worked well. When he watched his game on video, even only a few hours after the game was played, he would always see the things he did great and these great plays always outnumbered the poor plays.

A forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind set

From my experience, an unbeatable athletic mind exists. This term does not mean that the athlete does not experience losses, frustration, bad performances or setbacks, but it means that the athlete maintains his/her drive, focus, composure, trust, and confidence while dealing with force majeure [see the work of Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton (2002) on mental toughness]. In view of that, an unbeatable mind has nothing to do with what one did yesterday, how he/she played yesterday. An athlete's unbeatable mind is thinking in the present for what is directly ahead and not already behind.

The task was to get the poloist accustomed to look forward to every next play instead of hanging on to a previous one. His loss of focus during a game due to poor plays had to be minimized via refocusing. The central themes in our discussions were that the unbeatable mind is confident, positive, forgiving, accepting and non-judgmental,

full of dreams for the future, tough in dealing with setbacks and obstacles, picky with other people's comments, analytical yet with limitations since over-analysis leads to paralysis, plus thorough and optimistic with preparation as well as evaluation. There would be times that the opponent could beat his team score-wise but they should not be strong enough to beat his mind. They could beat his skills but still not his way of thinking. Maintaining an optimistic attitude and a clear mindset that is built on solid decisions and choices, regardless of daily setbacks, helped him move on. It was this forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind that took him to each next play, next game, next tournament, next handicap rating, and ultimately to his dream. Eventually, Next Play became a key phrase for the player on a day-to-day basis; steering him towards the desired direction. Next Play, along with his breathing-tree-reminder (he always picks one upon his arrival to the field), helps him focus and refocus as often as he needs.

Under this forgiving and forgetting unbeatable mind that maintains one's drive, focus, composure, trust, and confidence; developing a thicker skin was another essential gizmo for him because of the negative influence other people had on his confidence. "What do you hear in their words?" was the opening question. Hearing between words and reading between lines are common practices in all of us. Getting him into the habit to only hear and read the actual words without interpretations was key. I prompted him to hear other's opinions, advice, or comments in the media in a selective way: To identify the fact and leave out the emotion. If a comment lingered long enough in his mind, I would ask (eventually he learned to ask himself): Do you like this comment? Do you need this person's view on your way up the polo ladder? Upon answering these questions it

was easier for him to discard or keep the comment based on the criterion "Is there any use for it? If yes, what's in it for me?"

The dream of his blazing real existence

Questions in the form of "What is your goal and where do you want to go?" did not help us a lot. For a long time he was hesitant to express his polo dreams, too timid in articulating them and constantly guided by results and proofs. By thinking through the four resonance questions "What feelings do you seek to experience in your sport on a regular basis? What prepares you to experience these feelings? What prevents these feelings from occurring? and How do you get these feelings back when they are lost?" (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, & Doell, 2002, p. 263; see also Newburg, 1993), he finally tackled his dream. In the passage that follows, his writings portray his resonance, as any effort from my side to write this part of the tale would be very poor.

My dream is to find this feeling of intensity and total sensory connection when I am playing the game; specifically, when I am playing MY GAME. I can even learn to appreciate it (I almost said "enjoy it"!?) while it's there, and not only after the event. I reach this state through giving it my all; through thinking good thoughts which enhance my confidence about my ability to play well. Perhaps the stars just lined-up correctly? This is the challenge: getting myself to this state. And it is another state, one of total awareness. I'm acting by "letting go" and letting my body lead. I'm not looking much at other players (teammates, opponents) or umpires. I may have a short outburst at an ump or opponent, but my anger quickly dissolves because there is no time. I have the next play to execute, or prepare for. I am in it. My mind

is comfortably locked on my objectives. And they are simple and clear. I also enjoy a warm feeling which comes after executing good plays. I might say, “OK, next play”, but I enjoy the boost from my good goal and I feed on it.

I am human and unnecessary thoughts do arise even during best, best, best performances! “Geez, I’m playing one of my best games ever, I missed those two goals, I really want to finish my next chance, who’s watching, we can win this game, I hope we win this one, I just got out-dued on that play, let go and play.” These thoughts are there. But when I am living my dream, playing from my gut, I can deal with those thoughts in a very intelligent manner. I can recognize that it’s OK to have them--everybody does--and bring myself back to my breathe, my tree, or my “next play” or “play the game” mantra. Sometimes, when the feeling doesn’t come easily in a particular game, my best technique is to try to “just be there” with a calm mind, and trust that the game will get into me. That just “being there” is sometimes enough because it allows the sport to bring out my instincts, my anticipation, and hopefully my total connection with what I am doing. Outside the parameters of my polo field, good things come--accolades, money, team offers--because of my connection inside the field and because of my dream-state which, ironically, has a lot to do with not caring about reactions outside this match’s polo field. Even my goals of playing at the highest level of the sport for a long time, of being a great 10-goal player, of fulfilling my potential can be things that are outside the boards. What is inside the boards is that emotion of “blazing real existence”. Visit this often, go for it and--if it is meant to be--my goals will take care of themselves.

My dream is to experience the feeling of intensity that I get from playing the game with everything I have. I put myself in the most competitive situations possible because these challenges bring the “lightening in my gut”. Love-hate it may be, but these big feelings are my dream. They exist because I care. (Polo player, 2003)

This passage not only reveals his resonance but also the work that was done between 1997 and 2003 on his mental game of polo, considering the notes I shared earlier here taken when we started our consulting partnership.

Afterword

There cannot be an epilogue in this tale, since our consulting is still in progress. After being rated at 10-goals for four years, at the age of 42, the national handicap committee proposed that he be lowered to 9-goals. Still, he had a great string of horses, strong polo-skills, horse-skills and a playing experience that kept him at the very elite string of players. However, a new puzzle eventually emerged and two of its major pieces read: “still strong” and “retirement.” Multiple questions were then placed on our work table: “For how long will I keep playing; keep making good money; be able to support the lifestyle we have as a family; be in position to support three strings of horses; be in position to pay for this whole organization (farm, farm-manager, grooms, etc.); be injure-free? Minor muscle injuries last longer these days, am I getting older? What will I do after polo? Should I go back to school for a graduate degree, pursue a horse breeding business, a coaching career in the sport since some teams have started employing x-10-goalers as coaches?” Retirement proved to be a daunting theme. These questions required answers and these answers ought to come from him, not from me. My role was (and still is) to be there to

actively listen and exchange ideas; to help him organize his thoughts and to explore future career options; while at the same time we still work on keeping him focused, strong, and ready to play.

Today, he still plays high-goal polo and is rated at 8-goals. For the past few years the word retirement is more often mentioned and extensively discussed. The opening act towards easing up on his polo career came through revisiting the priorities that involved his family. From playing 10 months per year around the world, he decided to play in fewer tournaments and spend more quality time with his wife and three sons as well as to start experimenting with horse breeding. This move also meant selling one string of horses. The idea that eased the transition from 10- to 9- from 9- to 8-goals was 'quality over quantity'. Quality over

quantity was a resourceful scheme that had previously helped him get from 9- to 10-goals.

As Campbell (1991) once said, "I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive." (pp. 4-5). Whether it is about a green mind, a next play, quality over quantity, or what's in it for me, this poloist developed a strong sense of feeling what is meaningful for him and his life, on and off the polo fields. I trust that the work done for living his polo dream to the fullest will keep him alive through finding, nurturing, feeling, and living more dreams in the years to come.

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Stepping Stones

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A book review on “Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone” by Terry Orlick

“I envision a world where we all embrace joy and harmony within ourselves, our relationships, our homes, schools, communities, and places of work - a world in which we all strive to contribute in meaningful ways.”(Orlick,2011, p.3)

In the positive action-oriented book, “Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone” Terry Orlick (2011) shares his dream and life-long mission to create a better world by nurturing better people. The success of such a mission is dependent upon children, youth and adults learning, applying, and living pertinent life skills. These life skills called “Positive Living Skills” are the “stepping stones” alluded to in the introductory poem of his book – skills that may allow us to be positive “Builders of Eternity” with a life-changing “Bag of tools” to build such a positive world. This book provides the tools and the content which positions it as one of the most important stepping stones for helping everyone to live a better, more meaningful and more positive life.

“Builders of Eternity”

Within the introductory chapters of this book, Orlick invites his readers to ask themselves what three gifts they would give their children if they could give them any three gifts in the world. Orlick’s three gifts support the foundation of this book: Positive Focus, Connected Focus, Less Stress and More Harmony. Orlick affirms his stance that we all can create positive-real world change by teaching children the essential skills to live more fully and more joyfully. He acknowledges that we are not teaching children these life enhancing skills and many people do not live in fully connected, joyful and respectful ways, subsequently wasting meaningful talents, opportunities, and daily moments to embrace and produce acts of kindness, love, and joy to those around us. He calls for better role models

who exhibit positive thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, and highlights the need to create more positive educational programs for life long learning and quality living. Orlick then presents to his readers the real-world skills that we can apply to live more meaningful, joyful, and focused lives everyday – right now.

Embracing Opportunities and Choice

The simplistic beauty of Orlick’s book resides in the power of choice and positive action. In a world full of “polluted people” who choose to dwell in negative thoughts and action, Orlick contends that we can choose to act in more positive ways. We can choose to imagine and create a better and more positive world. We can choose to live in less stress and more harmony by engaging

in a fully connected positive focus. We can make a promise to ourselves and keep that promise to live more fully and express our love, joy and appreciation through the simplest acts within our daily lives. As Orlick explains, we can CHOOSE to be open to life's magic moments and we have the CHOICE to love openly, listen to others, and show our appreciation and support in meaningful and positive ways. Thus he provides his readers with pages filled with personal insight and tools to help his readers start to live more positively – beginning with positive action in the present moment. Furthermore, this book offers a reflective mirror to its readers to closely examine their own lives. Orlick places the power of positive change in the reader's control, alluding to the fact that we are the drivers in our own lives and we can choose and act in ways that become energy gains, rather than energy drains. Through the "Positive Living Reflections" and "Personal Reflections" questions the reader has the opportunity to reflect about the quality of his/her current life and how he/she can live more fully. There are no gimmicks or tricks to living a more meaningful life. After reading the pages in this book the reader cannot help but realize that he/she has the opportunity to contribute the quality of his or her own life and to a better world through positive choices and actions.

“Bag of Tools”

After creating the foundation and purpose within the first five chapters, Orlick proceeds to provide the reader with the tools, or positive living skills, to live a more fully connected and positive life. Not only does Orlick discuss the significance of these tools, he also provides real-life activities to reinforce and instill these tools through interactive opportunities that can be shared among family members, teams, and within educational classrooms. These tools consist

of Highlights, Fully Connected Focus, and Relaxation activities. Anyone willing and ready to live a more positive life and create a better world can actively participate in these activities.

Highlights

“Highlights are simple positive experiences, connections, actions, or interactions that bring joy, quality, and meaning to your life” (Orlick, 2001, p. 61).

At the beginning of this chapter, Orlick provides meaningful quotes from children and teens who have participated in the Positive Living Skills programs. These quotes provide support for the importance and impact of positive living skills and were developed from over 30 years of applied research with children, teens, and adults within the Positive Living Skills programs. The beauty of Highlights is that they can immediately be enhanced by becoming more engaged and attuned to our environments and by actively seeking out the Highlights around us and within us. By simply choosing and acting to embrace the Highlights around us, we can greatly enhance the quality of our lives. Orlick provides a “Wheel of Highlights” to encompass the wide range of highlights that are within our everyday experiences, including elements such as Nature, Relaxation, and Physical Activity & Play. Engaging activities, such as Treasure Hunting for Highlights, Clicking for Highlights, or listening to the highlight activities on the Positive Living Skills Audio CDs provides the reader with a chance to not only personally acknowledge his/her highlights, but to share these highlights with the people around him/her. Furthermore, within activities such as Songs of Praise, the reader can acknowledge the positive

attributes within the people around him/her. Orlick has used this activity to build collaboration and positive connections among teammates, students, and even business personnel thus demonstrating the wide variety of applicability of these skills to different life domains.

Fully Connected Focus

“A fully connected focus is a complete, positive connection with an experience, learning opportunity, performance, action, or interaction. There is a feeling of being totally absorbed in the experience, becoming the experience or inseparable from it”

(Orlick, 2011, p. 101).

At the heart of living a better life and creating a better world is fully connected focus. Through years of working with high level performers, children, teens, and adults, Orlick has found that our focus determines the direction and destiny of our lives. Similar to his 2008 book, “In Pursuit of Excellence,” Orlick positions focus as the central component to higher quality living. Likewise, this skill is a central to the positive living skills tool box. As noted by Orlick, our focus moves in the directions we choose or allow it to move. Fully connecting to our experiences and environment is a like a flowing stream of connection, rather than short bursts of concentration and attention that are typically attached to the term “focus” within other contexts. With a fully connected focus we can learn more, feel more, and move closer to our potential as human beings. In contrast, with a disconnected focus we live within the confines of a shallow life and fall within energy drains and negativity traps.

Similar to the Highlights chapters, in the Focus chapters Orlick provides the reader with questions to understand and act towards a personally relevant and meaningful fully connected focus within his/her life. To teach a fully connected focus to children, teens, and adults Orlick provides the eight Pillars of Focus (such as Focused Learning, Listening, Seeing and Feeling) and activities to enhance the focus in each of these areas. These activities are enhanced when shared among family members, classmates, and teammates. Furthermore, Orlick explains how we can teach activities that enhance the depth, duration and meaning within our Outside-in Focus, Inside-out Focus, and Inside-in Focus. Through activities that involve making connections through seeing and listening, connecting to objects, working through distractions and learning to refocus, and embracing “Magic Moments” Orlick claims that we can learn to be in the present moment and connect to the positive aspects around us. Within the Focus chapters, Orlick supports why this book is such an essential tool for teaching children and youth how to live more fully – specifically he explains that we expect people of all ages to focus yet we do not teach children or youth how to focus fully or to understand how to fully connect to their experiences. Furthermore, he reminds his readers that we have the CHOICE to connect more fully and focus on more meaningful positive actions, interactions, and connections within the everyday moments of our lives.

Relaxation and Joyful Living

“A life that includes daily relaxation or moments of silence – to simply relax, reflect, and regenerate mentally, physically, and emotionally is the best path to positive, balanced living” (Orlick, 2011, p. 168).

Similar to Highlights and Fully Connected Focus, Relaxation is a key tool within the Positive Living Skills programs. Orlick acknowledges the wide range of physical, mental, and emotional benefits in learning to relax. The content of this chapter includes relaxation scripts from the Positive Living Skills Series audio CDs and simple activities that invite the reader to engage in Spaghetti Toes, Jelly Belly, Flowing Streams, and Muscle Relaxation. Although it may seem that the vocabulary within this chapter is sometimes geared only towards children, these scripts and activities are of benefit to all ages and provide the reader with ample opportunities to learn and practice relaxation through simple, real-world methods that can be practiced and enjoyed every day.

Conclusion

Terry Orlick's (2011) book, "Positive Living Skills: Joy and Focus for Everyone" offers an incredible opportunity to live more meaningful, positive lives and to create a better world for all people. By sharing his dream and mission of a better world, Orlick has written a book that will inspire and create positive real world change. Teachers, parents, children, families, classrooms, teams, and anyone wanting to live a more positive life will benefit from this book. The

material shared within the pages is insightful, heart warming, and action orientated. We CAN CHOOSE and ACT for a better world and live to our true human potential. This book and the content within it should be shared with everyone around the world, especially within the educational curriculums and programs teaching our children and youth. As emphasized by Orlick, a more positive world and positive living can begin now. This book inspires the reader to realize how our feelings, choices, and actions impact our lives and the lives of others. In a very clear and concise manner, Orlick provides his readers with the tools and insight to create real world positive change. These pages remind us of our responsibility to be positive "Builders of Eternity" and to use the aforementioned "Bag of tools" provided within these pages to be better, live better, connect better, and build a better world. Within the final paragraphs of the Positive Living Skills book, the reader is left with the choice to begin on a more positive journey starting NOW. There is no conclusion to this book, only positive beginnings and the capacity to start building a better world through one positive skill, one positive activity, one positive choice and one positive action at a time.

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The focus of the Journal of Excellence is sharing knowledge, wisdom, experiences and applied research that is relevant to the lived experience of excellence in any domain (including sports, education, coaching, consulting, the performing arts, health and well being, business/workplace, leadership, positive living and learning skills for children and youth and joyful living). Research of an applied nature, including case studies, interventions, interviews, narrative studies, and personal experiences with the pursuit of excellence are welcomed. The Journal of Excellence is also open to publishing personal accounts, short commentaries, individual interviews, poems or stories that offer insights into the nature of high level challenges, strategies for remaining positive and focused under adversity and the mental links to excellence in all human domains. Reviews of books, videos/CD's, films, conference highlights and new initiatives in an applied setting are also considered. The Journal of Excellence is looking forward to sharing meaningful ideas with others committed to enhancing excellence in all domains.

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Note: Appreciation is extended to Rémi Simard who is responsible for formatting the on-line Journal of Excellence.