

4 Questions to Help Change a Young Athlete's Negative Thought Process

As a coach for young athletes, whether they're in elementary school or high school, you're going to deal with the emotional rollercoasters that young people experience. A fight with a friend over the weekend can translate to feelings of despair on game day, and stress over a championship game can leave an athlete feeling paralyzed. But as a coach, you can teach your athletes how to examine their feelings and move on from negative moments.

"Coaches care about athletes, which means we tend to give them reassurance when they have a negative thought," says [TrueSport Expert Kevin Chapman](#), PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders. "That works for maybe 30 minutes, but it's ultimately going to backfire because now you have to keep reassuring them. The way to get out of that is to teach an athlete to think flexibly by asking the right questions."

According to Chapman, "The whole point of these questions is to get the athlete to look objectively at situations and not rely on emotional experiences. As the coach, you know the answers to the questions that you're asking, but it's going to be much better for the athlete if they work it out for themselves rather than you spoon-feeding them the answer."

Here, Chapman offers some of the best questions to ask when your athlete is having a tough time or a negative moment on or off the field. And remember, these are also questions that you can teach athletes to ask themselves so that they learn how to question their behaviors and solve problems for themselves.

QUESTION: What's the evidence that this thought is true?

"This is one of my favorite questions to start with," says Chapman. "If a kid were to say, 'I know we're going to get blown out at the next game,' I would ask, 'Well, what's the evidence that this thought is true?'"

"He might answer something like, 'They beat us by about 20 in the last game.' Now we're starting to think evidence, not emotion."

QUESTION: What's happened in the past? Could there be another explanation?

"To change an athlete's thought process, we're asking evidence-based questions, not emotion-based questions," Chapman says. Your job here is to take the emotion out of the equation and force your athlete to come at a question logically, looking at only objective facts. Often, athletes will realize that their emotional argument isn't based in logic, which allows them to change their conclusion.

QUESTION: Does blank have to mean blank?

Being flexible is being able to generate other possible outcomes that are based on evidence, which means being able to say, "It could be _____. But then again, it could be _____." For example, getting beat in the last game sounds like a pretty good argument for getting beat this time. But follow that up with these questions: 'Does them beating us by 20 mean that they will automatically beat us by 20 again?'

Are you 100 percent sure that this outcome will occur? Are you certain that this thought is true?

In math class, students are told that they need to show their work on a test to get full credit. Make them do the same as athletes: What is the incontrovertible evidence that this is going to be the outcome?

QUESTION: What's the worst that can happen? Can you cope with that?

It sounds counter-intuitive to force an athlete to go even deeper into a negative thought. But leading the athlete through the worst-case scenario often helps them understand that the 'worst case' really isn't so bad. "This one is what I call the catastrophizing question," Chapman says. "Because catastrophizing is thinking the worst. It's actually great to make an athlete think through the worst thing that can happen. Once they decide what that is, ask: 'Can you cope with that?' The answer is almost always yes."

The easiest example is a playoff game. The worst thing that could happen is the team could lose because of a fumble made by the athlete. But can the athlete survive that? Of course. He won't be kicked off the team, his teammates will understand, and his coach will support him.

Takeaway

Many coaches wonder how to help their athletes overcome negative thoughts that impact performance and enjoyment of the sport. Use these questions to help your athletes change a negative thought process in their sport and beyond.



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