



The Voices in My Head

Simon Hartley advises what you should do if you start thinking negative thoughts

“**D**octor, I have these strange voices in my head. They say all the things I don’t want to hear. They ask me questions I don’t want to answer. The voices are always negative, always vocalising my doubts, fears, insecurities and worries. These voices are no good for my squash game or my sanity. Doctor, can you help me to silence the voices in my head... please!”

Do you hear those voices too?

Many athletes have asked me: “How do I stop thinking negative thoughts?” On one level the answer is alarmingly simple. If you want to stop thinking about X, start focusing on Y. If you tell yourself not to think about X, of course you’ll start thinking about X and

everything related to X... X-rays, X-Box, X-Men, X-rated movies (ok, let’s not go there!). Therefore, if you want to stop thinking negative thoughts, one simple answer is to start focusing on something else. Focus on something that’s going to really help your game. You can take control over your focus. Choose to focus on something that will help you play better. Focus on watching the ball as closely as possible. Focus on feeling the shots. Focus on the sound that your shots are making or the sound of your footwork. The truth is we can only focus on one thing at a time. By immersing yourself in that new focus, your brain will be unable to think the negative thoughts.

“That’s easier said than

done. What happens when I keep getting negative thoughts flying through my head?”

The first step is to disengage from those thoughts. Observe them. Watch and listen to them without owning them. View the thoughts from the perspective of an interested bystander. If your brain says “you’re bound to screw this up, you always do”, notice that thought without engaging with it. Could you step back and view that thought as ‘interesting’ or ‘entertaining’, rather than ‘threatening’ or ‘intimidating’. Disengaging from our thoughts allows us to challenge them.

If we actually take time to challenge our thoughts, we’ll see that many of them are simply not true. For

example, the words “I can’t...” very rarely mean “it is absolutely impossible for me to...” Have you ever heard anyone say the words “I can’t dance” or “I can’t sing”. In reality, anyone who can move can dance and anyone who can make a vocal sound can sing. What they normally mean is “I don’t perceive that my dancing is very good and I certainly don’t think it is good enough to show you. Therefore, if I dance, I’ll be embarrassed... so I’m not going to.”

When we actually challenge some of our irrational thoughts, we expose them for what they really are. Thoughts like “I always fail when...” are normally untrue. I listened to a housewife and mother criticise herself because she

“always feeds the kids pasta”. I asked her when she’d cooked pasta twice on consecutive days. When she thought about it, she concluded that she couldn’t remember ever cooking pasta twice on consecutive days. Our irrational thoughts and beliefs are incredibly limiting. However, it’s amazing how fragile these scary-looking, irrational beliefs can be when we take a moment to challenge them.

Whilst writing *How To Shine* (published by Capstone), I interviewed an extreme



Andy McMenemy, the 49-year-old extreme sportsman, set a world record by running 66 ultra-marathons (31 miles) on 66 consecutive days, one in every city in Britain. McMenemy was raising money for ABF The Soldiers’ Charity

Top Tips:

- Choose your focus.
- Disengage from your negative thoughts.
- Challenge irrational beliefs. Seek the truth!
- Ask yourself: "What's the worst that can happen?"
- Make sure that you are happy with who you are as a person.

endurance runner called Andy McMenemy. He established a world record by running 66 ultra-marathons in 66 days in 2011. Many people asked Andy: "What if you fail?" His answer was: "What if I don't?" Even if he took the time to answer the first question, he'd probably find that the worst possible scenario was not that bad. What if he did attempt a world record and fail? Does the world explode? The

worst that may happen is that he spends months in the attempt and doesn't complete his challenge. Some might say that attempting it in the first place is an achievement.

What would happen if you followed one of those negative thoughts to conclusion by asking: "So what?" Let's take an example. "What if you lose?" Okay, what if I do lose, what's the worst possible scenario? Does someone close to me die? Do they lose a limb perhaps? When we actually look at it rationally and objectively, the very worst possible scenario is not actually that bad. We might conclude that if we lose this match, a few people might be disappointed and we might decide we need to knuckle down and work on a few things in training. We might find that our coach screams and shouts, or gives us the silent treatment for a while. In reality, we can never account for what other people do, how they feel or

what they say. If a coach, parent, crowd or journalist decides to be negative, they will. That is their choice. It is your choice to buy into it or not.

For some athletes, their big fear of failure in sport is underpinned by a bigger fear. If I lose, I'll judge myself as being a failure in my sport. Because I've invested so much of myself into this sport, the sport has become my life and my life is my sport. For some it goes further than that. Their self-identity is heavily invested into their identity as an athlete. So, if they lose, they perceive that they are a failure in their sport... and therefore in their life. Some athletes rely on their performances to feel good about themselves. That's a fragile place to be.

"How do I fix that one Doc?"

The answer is simple, but not easy to do. Broaden your life and your sense of identity. Find out who you are as a person, not just as an athlete. Become happy

with yourself, accept yourself for who you are and the things you do. Don't rely on your performance to feel good about yourself. Don't aim to be perfect or expect it of yourself. Perfection is not attainable. Perhaps aim to keep getting better, because that is always possible.

Ultimately, we have the ability to control the conversations and the voices inside our heads. We can choose what we think and how we feel. The first stage is to decide that you want control back.

SIMON HARTLEY

is an Accredited Performance Sport Psychologist. He is the author of 'Peak Performance Every Time'. He has also consulted to ESR and the EIS.

Contact Simon on simon@be-world-class.com