

ABSTRACT

THESIS: Phenomenological Understanding of Elite Athletes' Experiences with Mental Blocks in Closed Skilled Sports

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COLLEGE: Health

DATE: July 2021

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With the sports world placing high demands on elite athletes to accomplish functional movements, athletes are under a great amount of pressure (Gray, 2004). This imposes stress onto athletes to obtain, maintain, and successfully perform skills and abilities within practice and performance, potentially causing the athlete to overthink (Christensen, Sutton, & McIlwain, 2015). Overthinking can cause cognitive impairment when attempting the skill, potentially leading to psychological impairments, such as mental blocks (DeCaro, Thomas, Albert, & Beilock, 2011). Due to literature proposing conflicting arguments as to why mental blocks occur, this study aimed to further understand the underpinnings of mental blocks using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Additionally, this study observed mental block development through the lens of self-efficacy theory due to previous research proposing the vital role it plays with mental blocks (Day et al., 2006; Lawrence 2016; Maarenen et al., 2020). Six elite adult athletes who participated in close-skilled sports and were either currently experiencing a mental block for at least one month or had experienced one within the past two years participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with questions like, "Could you describe when you first realized that there was a problem with the skill?" and "What do you think

changed before your mental block?” Themes involved pressures to perform and performance anxiety, with subthemes of participants indicating that social support, fear of injury, negative self-talk, and pre-performance routines having an impact on their mental block. Participants reported having lower self-efficacy levels mainly due to the pressures to perform and performance anxiety. Future directions should dive deeper into self-efficacy sources to better understand effective interventions.

Keywords: performance blocks, self-paced tasks, pressures to perform, anxiety, self-efficacy