

Common Distorted Thinking Patterns in Athletes – Dr. Larry M. Leith

Common negative thinking patterns used by athletes and others:

1. **All-or-Nothing Thinking** – usually contains some variation of “always” and “Never”, such as “I’ll never get to play sports again thanks to this stupid pandemic.” **Catastrophizing** is a form of all-or-nothing thinking
2. **Overgeneralization** – seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat, such as missing a few free throws and commenting, “I can never make a free throw even if my life depended on it.”
3. **Mental Filtering** – picking out a single negative detail and dwelling on it to the exclusion of all the good that occurred, such winning a set in tennis but replaying over-and-over that one shot that was just outside the line. This is sometimes referred to as **rumination**.
4. **Disqualifying the Positive** – the tendency to reject or deny positive experiences or outcomes by telling yourself that they “just don’t count.”
5. **Jumping to Conclusions** – interpreting a situation as negative even though there is no logical reason to do so, such as, “My teammates must hate me because I made an error that lost us the game.”
6. **Magnification and Minimalization** – an extension of mental filtering such as, “That key strike out that closed the game for us didn’t make up for the four players I walked.”
7. **Emotional Reasoning** -- assuming that negative emotions you have as an athlete define who you are as a person – “I get so nervous before the start of a race that I make myself sick. I’m such a weak-minded person.”
8. **Using “Should” (or “Shouldn’t”) Statements** – These statements are related to jumping to conclusions where one negative performance or mistake is generalized into unreasonable conclusions, such as, “I really sucked today, I should just quit the team right now.”
9. **Labeling or Mislabeling** – an extreme and ultimately damaging form of overgeneralization according to Leith. It involves tagging or labeling yourself as something you’re not, because of one mistake, bad game, unfortunate error or bad call. “I missed that game-winning shot, I’m such a loser.” The opposite also holds true such as mislabeling someone as a star because they made a critical shot.
10. **Personalization** – this last mental distortion occurs if you find yourself uttering negative self-statements such as, “If I were a better person, we would have won that tournament,” or, “I can’t be trusted to take the game-winning shot because I’m such an emotional wreck.”

Adapted from: Leith, Larry M., The Psychology of Achieving Sports Excellence. (2008). Sport Books Publishing, Toronto, ON.