

A Way to Amplify (or Weaken) the Effect of Self-Talk on Performance

Description

It's been a couple years now since our dog was a puppy, but I still remember when he was afraid to go down stairs.

He'd sort of peer down the steps and scamper nervously from side to side a bit, and eventually plant his butt firmly on the ground and resist taking the next step.

So we'd cajole and encourage him, saying "C'mon DJ! You can do it!" And eventually, one day, he did make it down the stairs.

Of course, this sort of encouragement is not unique to puppies. We do this with our kids, our students, our friends, our colleagues. But perhaps more importantly, we also do this for ourselves.

Because when things are a little uncertain, it's common to try to building up our confidence and courage with a little internal pep talk. And studies on self-talk suggest that this can indeed facilitate greater learning, accuracy in certain motor skills, and even strength and endurance.

But sometimes, self-talk doesn't seem to work, and instead, we feel doubts creeping in. Where saying "I got this" is met by another voice that says "No you don't. You're totally going to screw this up."

So is there a way to get our words to sink in better, quiet those fears and doubts, and help us perform up to our abilities in these moments?

Well, a recent study suggests that it may not just be our words that matter, but our physical motions as well.

Err...what?

Reinforcing or undermining self-talk

You know how talking to some people is like talking to a wall? Where they're so expressionless, and give you so little feedback, that you have no idea what they're thinking?

Whereas most folks smile or nod along, and in so doing, make you feel supported and validated in whatever you're saying?

There is research which suggests that the same thing might be true with self-talk as well. Where nodding *reinforces* the validity of the thoughts in our head, while shaking our head "no" *undermines* whatever we

might be thinking.

I know that sounds sort of weird, but let's take a closer look.

Positive or negative self-statements

A team of researchers ([Horcajo, Paredes, Higuero, Briñol, & Petty, 2019](#)) recruited 150 CrossFit athletes to participate in a study purportedly about the use of headphones at the gym.

Everyone was randomly assigned to either a positive self-statement group or a negative self-statement group, and asked to write down and record themselves saying either 3 positive things about their current state of physical fitness, or 3 negative things about their current state of fitness.

Things like: "I have trained very hard every day," "I have increased my resistance," or "I'm in really good physical condition." (positive)

Or: "I've been missing some workouts lately," "I feel more tired than usual," or "I get injured way too often." (negative)

Nodding or shaking

They were then given a set of headphones, which they were told were being tested for "sound quality, comfort, and so on" while engaged in certain movements. To test them, half of the participants were asked to move their heads up and down while listening to their self-statements – so as to get the athletes to act as if they were nodding, but without telling them explicitly to nod.

The other half of the participants were asked to move their heads side to side while listening to their recorded self-statements (like shaking their heads "no").

Then came a few physical tests.

Physical tests

First up was a vertical jump test, to see how high they could jump.¹

Then they did a squat test (30 squats in 45 seconds) to gauge cardiorespiratory performance.²

Finally, there was a deadlift test, where athletes were given 4 lifts, at various weights they selected, enabling researchers to calculate an estimate of their 1-rep maximum.³

So what kind of effect did self-talk and all this nodding or shaking have on performance?

Results

Vertical jump

Overall, the positive self-talk group performed better than the negative self-talk group – 31.09cm vs. 27.70cm.

But what all the nodding? Did that have an effect on self-talk?

Well, the positive nodding group averaged 33.15cm, performing significantly better than the negative nodding group, which averaged 26.15cm. So physically affirming either positive or negative self-talk did seem to **amplify** its effect on performance – in both a positive or a negative direction.

Meanwhile, as predicted, there was no significant difference between the head shaking groups, where the positive shaking group averaged 28.96cm, and the negative shaking group averaged 29.21cm. Essentially suggesting that shaking their heads had the effect of **weakening** whatever effect positive or negative self-talk may otherwise have had.

Squat

Likewise with the squat test, the positive nodding group scored 4.64 (lower scores is better), while the negative nodding group scored 5.75 (a statistically significant difference).

And once again, there was no statistically significant difference in performance between the shaking groups, with the positive group scoring 5.53, while the negative group scored 5.10.

Deadlift

And finally, with the deadlift, it was more of the same.

The positive self-talk group had a substantially greater estimated 1-rep max than the negative self-talk group – 159.86kg vs. 133.12kg. And the positive *nodding* group had a 1RM of 175.23kg, while the negative nodding group had a 1RM of 122.31kg.

Meanwhile, there was no difference in performance between the positive and negative shaking groups – 144.08kg vs. 143.62kg.

So what does this all mean?

Takeaways

The main takeaway is that it seems our body movements can potentially amplify the effect of whatever

we're saying to ourselves.

So nodding along in apparent agreement, could make positive self-talk even more performance-enhancing. And nodding along to negative self-talk makes the negativity even more detrimental to performance.

Meanwhile, shaking our head seems to invalidate or *neutralize* whatever we might be saying to ourselves. Which is pretty intriguing, because it suggests that saying something negative like "I should have practiced more" while *shaking* your head, for instance, might lead to a better performances than if you were to say the very same thing while nodding.

Caveats

Of course, you have to take all this with a grain of salt, because the study looked at feats of strength ([Festivus](#) reference intended!) and cardio, as opposed to fine-motor control and accuracy.

And the authors acknowledge that it'd be interesting to see what might happen if the nodding or shaking was done on purpose, instead of through the ruse of testing headphone comfort (although I do feel like it was kind of transparent).

Still, this seems like an intriguing thing to experiment with. But how would that work, exactly?

Take action

Well, there are two ways you could try this out.

Whether it's a studio class, final exam, first date, or plank challenge day at the gym, the next time you engage in positive self-talk or a mantra like "[I'm excited](#)" or "I got this," try nodding along as you say this to yourself, and see if it changes your experience (and quality of performance) in the moment.

Or, if you find yourself stuck in negative self-talk loop before something important, and are having trouble getting out of it, you could at least try shaking your head, to see if this helps to blunt the impact of these statements.

Until you are able to get yourself into a more positive headspace of course, at which point you can try nodding again.

I know, this all sounds a little goofy, but in a way, that kind of makes me all the more intrigued. If you try it, let me know how it works out!

Reference

Horcajo, J., Paredes, B., Higuero, G., Briñol, P., & Petty, R. E. (2019). The Effects of Overt Head Movements on Physical Performance After Positive Versus Negative Self-Talk. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 1–10.

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