Optimizing athletes’ mindsets: Application of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) in sport

RENÁTÓ TÓTH1*, VIKTÓRIA RESPERGER2 and LÁSZLÓ TÓTH2,3

1 School of Doctoral Studies, Hungarian University of Sports Science, Budapest, Hungary
2 Department of Psychology and Sport Psychology, Hungarian University of Sport Science, Budapest, Hungary
3 Teacher Training Institute, Hungarian University of Sports Science, Budapest, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the integration of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) within sports psychology, aiming to enhance athletes’ mental health and performance of athletes. Sports psychology, encompassing diverse approaches, prioritizes both the mental well-being and performance of athletes. REBT, a vital component of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), revolves around an individual’s beliefs influencing emotional, behavioral, and physiological reactions to events. It identifies and replaces irrational beliefs with rational alternatives, as depicted in the GABCDE model, emphasizing the impact of beliefs on reactions to triggering events. Previous research highlighted the detrimental impact of irrational beliefs on athletes’ mental well-being, identifying these beliefs as a significant risk factor for the emergence of mental disorders, which in turn lead to compromised performance. The integration of REBT into sports psychology shows promise in reducing anxiety, perfectionism, and irrational beliefs among athletes. Its flexibility allows for swift and powerful interventions, either individually or in group settings, fostering mental resilience and enhancing performance. Sports psychologists and coaches play pivotal roles in recognizing and addressing athletes’ irrational beliefs, fostering a rational mindset conducive to stable and positive performance. Integrating REBT into training and performance enhancement offers athletes a stable mental foundation, improving self-confidence and stress management, thereby optimizing sports performance. Overall, the integration of REBT into sports psychology offers a promising avenue to bolster athletes’ mental fortitude, optimize performance, and foster a balanced mental landscape, facilitating the attainment of their athletic goals.

KEYWORDS

sports psychology, REBT, CBT, athlete mental health, performance enhancement

INTRODUCTION

Sport psychology encompasses various methodologies and approaches focusing on two main objectives: mental health enhancement and performance enhancement. While athletes and coaches focus primarily on results and physical performance, a sports psychologist must never overlook the mental well-being of the athletes. One of the central topics of the debate today revolves around how can athletes achieve peak performance without compromising their mental health. The primary aim of this brief review is to introduce a psychological approach the application of which not only contributes to optimal physical performance but also help the mental health development of athletes.

Sport psychology commonly utilizes and investigates a comprehensive intervention called Psychological Skills Training (PST [1]). This term encompasses various psychological
techniques (e.g. relaxation, self-talk, cognitive reframing, etc.), with a particular emphasis on practices aligned with the methodology of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is an evidence-based approach which has been extensively validated by contemporary psychological research [2]. Initially, CBT emphasized behaviorism, notably highlighting the role of operant conditioning - reward or punishment - in altering maladaptive behaviors [3]. Next CBT started to focus on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns. In the past decades, CBT highlighted process-oriented approaches, concentrating on how individuals relate to their thoughts rather than solely their content [4]. This approach includes Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT [5];) and mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., MBSR [6];).

In our current review, we aimed to elaborate further on Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) as a part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and expand its applicability in sports psychology based on the results of existing research.

WHAT IS RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY (REBT)?

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT [7];) stands out as a defining intervention within the second stage of CBT in psychology. It operates on the overarching principle that an individual’s beliefs (thoughts) rather than the events themselves determine the emotional, behavioral, and physiological consequences [7]. To illustrate the process of REBT intervention, Ellis and Ellis [8] developed the ABCDE framework, represented by an English mosaic word.

As Fig. 1 illustrated, this model posits an activating event (A), which triggers emotional, behavioral, and/or physical consequences (C) within an individual, influenced by their beliefs (B). Ellis (1957) asserts that the pattern of consequences (e.g., anxiety, avoidance behavior, increased heart rate) is determined by whether the individual associates rational or irrational beliefs with the activating event. Irrational beliefs are rigid, illogical and extreme thoughts that lack alignment with reality. The latter parts of the ABCDE framework focus on the therapist and client engaged in disputation (D) regarding identified irrational beliefs and subsequently developing and reinforcing effective rational beliefs (E), which are logical, flexible, and not extreme, hence aligned with reality. Later on, the ABCDE model had the letter G added (see Fig. 1), indicating that events contradicting an individual’s goals and values can truly become significant trigger situations [9]. Dryden [10] highlights four opposing pairs of rational and irrational beliefs: preferences – dogmatic demandingness, anti-awfulizing – awfulizing, high frustration tolerance – low frustration tolerance, self and others acceptance – depreciation. Rational beliefs can foster the emergence of healthy emotions and adaptive behavioral reactions [11]. In contrast, numerous earlier studies have linked irrational beliefs to several psychopathological conditions, such as depression [12, 13] or anxiety disorders [14–16].

HOW CAN REBT BE INTEGRATED INTO SPORT PSYCHOLOGY?

Undoubtedly, athletes engaged in sports activities are not exempt from the potential adverse consequences of irrational beliefs. Although the prevalence of irrational beliefs and the integration of REBT in sports psychology is relatively recent - the first book on this topic was published by Turner & Bennett [17] – current research presents relevant findings concerning the effectiveness of REBT in sports psychology [18]. Several studies indicate associations between irrational beliefs and compromised mental well-being among athletes (e.g. [19];). Mansell and colleagues [20] investigated the predictive relationship between irrational beliefs and both self-confidence and psychological distress. Their findings indicate that primary irrational beliefs, specifically dogmatic demandingness, forecast competitive anxiety and depressive symptoms through the secondary irrational beliefs, including awfulizing, low frustration tolerance, and depreciation. These research outcomes substantiate REBT-I model of Ellis [21] within an athlete sample, underscoring the premise that primary irrational beliefs precipitate the activation of secondary irrational beliefs, thus engendering psychological distress. Earlier research has also revealed that in the context of athletes, irrational beliefs may increase performance-reducing competitive anxiety [22] and the appearance of maladaptive perfectionism [23], adversely affecting sports performance (e.g. [24];). These outcomes underscore the necessity within sports psychology to identify potential irrational beliefs and then replace and strengthen them with rational alternatives.

One of the significant advantages of REBT-based sports psychological intervention is its flexibility and swift implementation. Based on suggestions from Wood and colleagues [25], clients require 5–12 face-to-face sessions to comprehend, practice, and incorporate REBT principles. However, research indicates effective changes within shorter time frames. Turner & Barker [26] found a significant decrease in

![Fig. 1. GABCDE framework of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) [9].](image-url)
anxiety after three 20-min face-to-face sessions with cricket players. Additionally, Mio & Matsumoto [27] discovered a significant decrease in irrational beliefs and increased self-esteem among Japanese high school athletes after a single 50-min session. Deen and colleagues [28] explores the efficacy of five counseling sessions REBT in reducing self-reported irrational beliefs and enhancing self-reported resilient qualities among elite squash players from Malaysia, utilizing a single-case multiple-baseline across-participants design. Results indicate significant reductions in self-reported irrational beliefs across all athletes and significant increases in self-reported resilient qualities in some athletes, contributing to the emerging body of research on the application of REBT in sport psychology and offering insights for its future utilization in relevant settings. REBT can be applied not only individually but also in group settings for athletes. Tóth and colleagues [29] observed significant reductions in competitive anxiety, perfectionism, and irrational beliefs among Hungarian junior ice hockey players after an 8-week REBT intervention.

REBT can be integrated into athletes’ lives in various ways. Primarily, it can be the responsibility of sports psychologists and coaches to identify irrational beliefs among athletes and address or modify these beliefs. This may involve challenging thinking patterns related to REBT, where irrational thoughts are identified, discussed, and transformed into positive, rational thinking patterns. Table 1 describing and providing examples of belief pairs can assist in recognizing and restructuring irrational beliefs. Furthermore, REBT can aid in managing stress and anxiety during competition by helping athletes understand that their negative emotions are not caused by the event itself (A–C), but rather by the beliefs associated with the event (B–C). Integrating the REBT mindset into athletes’ daily training and performance building is also crucial. Counseling sessions focusing on reinforcing individual performance based on rationality and acceptance instead of irrationality can contribute to more positive and stable sports performance. Overall, introducing REBT into athletes’ lives through managing their thought processes and emotional reactions can enhance self-confidence, improve stress management, and build a more stable mental foundation to optimize sports performance. Coaches play a role in strengthening a rational mindset through their behavior. However, it’s essential to note that coaches are not (sports) psychologists. If issues arise that go beyond coaching competence, it’s crucial to involve the appropriate professionals, such as sports psychologists.

DISCUSSION

In summary, this paper delves into the integration of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) within sports psychology, emphasizing its potential to improve both mental health and athletic performance. Sports psychology, a field blending diverse methodologies, prioritizes enhancing athletes’ mental well-being alongside performance. REBT, a crucial part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), operates on the premise that an individual’s beliefs drive emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses to events. It scrutinizes irrational beliefs and replaces them with rational alternatives.

Illustrated through the GABCDE model, REBT underscores the significant influence of beliefs on reactions to...
events, emphasizing the consequences of associating rational versus irrational beliefs with triggering events. Numerous studies have underscored the adverse impact of irrational beliefs on athletes’ mental well-being, leading to compromised performance. The integration of REBT into sports psychology has emerged as a promising avenue, backed by research evidencing its effectiveness in reducing anxiety, perfectionism, and irrational beliefs among athletes.

The flexibility and swift implementation of REBT interventions present a key advantage, requiring a relatively short duration to yield impactful changes. These interventions, whether conducted individually or in group settings, have shown promising results in enhancing athletes’ mental resilience and performance. Sports psychologists and coaches are pivotal in recognizing and addressing irrational beliefs among athletes, fostering a rational mindset conducive to positive and stable performance. By integrating REBT into daily training and performance enhancement, athletes can develop a more stable mental foundation, enhancing self-confidence and stress management, ultimately optimizing sports performance. While coaches significantly contribute to promoting a rational mindset, it’s crucial to acknowledge their limitations as non-psychologists. Collaborating with specialized professionals like sports psychologists becomes imperative when faced with issues surpassing the coaches’ expertise.

CONCLUSION

In essence, the integration of REBT into sports psychology offers a promising path to fortify athletes’ mental fortitude, optimize their performance, and cultivate a balanced mental landscape conducive to achieve their goals.

Declaration of competing interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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