

Conquering the Yips

Rea Kowal R.N., R. Psych.

The term “yips” was coined by professional golfer Tommy Armour to describe a psychological/neuromuscular disorder that affected his ability to make short putts under pressure. This You Tube video portrays the yips in a humorous fashion; however, it is not a laughing matter for competitive and recreational participants alike. Mr. Armour was eventually forced into early retirement from the golf circuit because he was unable to conquer this problem. While the term yips is unique to golf, being unable to perform a routine skill under situations of high stress is manifested in other sports. Examples of this phenomenon include but are not limited to the hockey player in a slump, baseball pitcher who throws errant pitches, and figure skater who “pops” jumps during a competition. The yips is accompanied by highly critical self talk which won’t go away in spite of positive affirmations to the contrary.

Individuals who suffer from this affliction try various remedies such as adjusting their biomechanics, trying new equipment, and consulting with experts in sport psychology - to no avail. If success is experienced it is limited as the yips often returns with a vengeance. If not with the same skill, it appears in another movement that is similar. For example, the “driving yips” has been reported by some golfers. Amazingly, the yips can transfer from one sport to another: A competitive tennis player may be completely stymied by the reappearance of this affliction when golf is taken up. This occurrence suggests that the yips is more psychological in nature.

I propose that the yips is psychological and neuromuscular in nature only in that the brain and body are interconnected. When people think of the brain they only consider the white and grey matter between their ears. In reality, the brain extends from the top of the head to the tips of the fingers and toes. So a problem in one area simultaneously affects a problem in the other and vice versa. Moreover, I believe that trauma is at the root of the yips, in whatever way it occurs.

When I mention to my clients that “trauma” is at the source of their distress, they look at me in disbelief. They automatically think of trauma as a major event like fighting in the Afghani war or being involved in a car accident. Actually, trauma is anything (and everything) that impinges in a hurtful way on a person; to the point that it triggers difficult emotions, physical symptoms, negative beliefs, and/or dissociation. Dissociation is a mental state in which there is a disruption in conscious awareness. It involves the splitting off of a group of mental processes from the main body of consciousness under situations of extreme stress or trauma, and serves as a psychological escape from fear. The affected person may experience distortion of memory, affect, perception, somatic sensation, and time. As such, things like poor sport performance or sport injury constitute trauma.

I believe that the yips is an outcome of a “keystone event” that snowballs. Here’s how it works. During a game, tournament, or competition, an athlete performs really poorly for

any number of reasons. I remember having one of these performances as a competitive figure skater a really long time ago. In hindsight, I clearly experienced dissociation. I couldn't feel my limbs and didn't have any control over my body. Sense of time was absent and cognitive efforts to focus on what I was doing failed completely. It was humiliating and I secretly wished the ice would open up and swallow me whole. This experience could otherwise be termed "a bag over your head" performance. It's difficult to recover from this kind of a performance here's why. During such a catastrophe, the stress level is over the top and elements of the event are imputed into the brain in a state specific form. High arousal level at the time prevents these elements from being processed effectively by the brain. As a result, these unmetabolized elements replay themselves over and over again in subsequent games or competitions, leading to poorer performance and even more stress! Stress begets stress, and creates a negative spiral which simply cannot be interrupted without specialized treatment and resolution (we'll get to that later). High arousal is associated with danger which evokes the "fight or flight" response. The frontal cortex (sight of executive function and conscious decision making) shuts down; thus, preventing adaptive dissociation. Adaptive dissociation (compared to maladaptive dissociation described above) is vital to peak performance. It enables the athlete to focus inwards on the task at hand while blocking things like anticipatory anxiety, crowd noise and pain from consciousness. Here's the kicker, trauma is cumulative. With each poor performance, a reservoir of unprocessed trauma gets created.

When seeking help, athletes and helpers want instant relief: They focus only on the presenting concern, and typically use cognitive behavioral strategies to minimal effect. I suggest to my clients that this approach is ultimately misguided in that it does not take into account the "dandelion effect". Anyone who has ever tried to get rid of the dandelions in their yard knows how pointless it is to lob off the top of the dandelion. Without digging deeply to get at the deep root, the dandelion will return with a vengeance. Similarly, it is not possible to eliminate the presenting trauma without going deeply into the brain where the root of the problem exists and is represented by the keystone event. Whereas cognitive behavioral strategies are akin to lobbing off the flower, EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) bypasses the frontal cortex and gets deeper into the brain where all relevant root memories are stored. In essence, it drains the reservoir.

EMDR is highly effective in treating the yips as a trauma disorder. EMDR has been widely acknowledged and recommended in numerous international guidelines as a treatment for trauma. It is based on a theoretical information processing model developed by Francine Shapiro and posits as already noted, that symptoms arise when events are inadequately processed. Eradication of symptoms occurs when memories are fully processed and integrated. Negative sense of self, inappropriate emotional responses and self-destructive behaviors are also manifestations of inadequate processing and can be transformed using this therapy. Recent research using SPECT scans has shown that EMDR results in neurobiological changes in the brain, as evidenced by alterations in resting regional cerebral blood flow. Mental health professionals who incorporate this treatment into trauma therapy and performance enhancement are able to assist clients to

become “unstuck” from repetitive maladaptive behavior. Function and performance improve as a result.

GOLF is a game that can be played from the earliest years well into the 80s or 90s. There is evidence of individuals playing into their 100s! Golf, or any sport for that matter, ultimately must be fun. Given the longevity of the game, it makes no sense to continue to suffer from the yips, or any other performance related issue. Whether you are a competitive athlete or recreational player, EMDR will definitely help you to get your game back on track.

Rea Kowal is a registered Psychologist in private practice. She specializes in performance enhancement and the treatment of trauma. Visit www.reakowal.com or phone (403) 860-7247 for more information, professional speaking, or counselling.