

Clutch-Based Hypnotic Intervention to Improve Golf Performance: A Case Study

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The effects of a clutch-based hypnotic intervention on golf performance: A single-case study.

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of a clutch-based hypnotic intervention on the performance and experience of a senior PGA tour golfer. The intervention encompassed hypnosis, regression, a trigger control technique and a pre-shot routine. The experimental effect was assessed during 11 golf tournaments. Golf performance data were analyzed using a single-subject design combined with a procedure to monitor the player's internal experience. The results indicated that the players mean stroke average decreased from baseline to intervention. There were no overlapping data points between baseline and intervention conditions. The qualitative data revealed that the hypnotic intervention may help golfers regulate emotions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions associated with clutch state experiences.

Key words: Clutch States, Hypnosis, Regression, Triggers, Pres-shot routines.

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Traditionally sports psychologists have attributed peak performances to an athlete's mental skills (self-talk, imagery ability and goal setting), and their ability to control a mental state described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as flow. Although there are many studies supporting the existence of flow, but recently the literature on flow has been criticized for only partially explaining the peak performance experience (see Swann, Crust, Jackman, Vella, Allen, & Keegan, 2017). Indeed, qualitative studies involving event focused interviews have suggested optimal performance is also associated with a mental state called the 'clutch state' (Swann et al., 2017).

According to Swann, et al., (2017) a clutch state occurs in competitive pressure situations where the success or failure of the athlete to perform optimally has a significant impact on the outcome of the contest. Clutch states transpire when athletes have to 'make something happen', for example, a basketball player who needs to sink a three-point shot to win a game or a golfer that needs to hole a putt to win a competition.

Hibbs (2010) describes a successful clutch performer as someone who has the ability to be aware, they are in a clutch situation, possess the capacity to get into a clutch state, cares about the outcome of the competitions and succeeds due to skill rather than luck or cheating. It is possible many of the skills clutch performers possess may be acquired with specialized training. However, to the authors knowledge, there are no intervention programs that train athletes to develop these skills. The strong association between clutch states and flow states (see Swann et

al., 2017) suggests interventions designed to facilitate flow may also be used to facilitate the clutch state experience. Numerous studies show Hypnotic training activate Flow states and improve athletic performance (see Lyndsay, Maynard & Thomas, 2005; Pates, Cummings, & Maynard, 2002; Pates & Maynard, 2000; Pates, Maynard, & Westbury, 2001; Pates, Oliver, & Maynard, 2001; Pates & Palmi, 2002; Pates, 2013). The current study attempted to extend this research by evaluating the effectiveness of a clutch-based hypnotic intervention in facilitating clutch states and the performance of an elite golfer.

Case study

Mr. B was a male golfer aged 50 years. He was in his first year of playing on the Senior Professional Golf Tour. Mr. B had a swing coach and over the past five years he had received only technical training. His main goal was to win tournaments; however, he felt during competitions he could not achieve this objective because he struggled performing in clutch situations. Indeed, he would miss putts or play poor shots when he had a chance to win. It was therefore deemed appropriate to give this golfer an intervention that may help him control clutch states and clutch performances. Mr. B had no experience of hypnosis training administered by a qualified practitioner.

Measures

Performance analysis. Stroke average was selected as the performance indicator because it represents a global measure of the participant's overall performance. Stroke average is the average score taken from two or four rounds of stroke-play golf. A round of stroke-play golf consists of 18 holes wherein the participant records the number of strokes taken to complete each

hole. At the end of the round, the scores from each hole are summed to give a total stroke-play score. The reliability of the stroke-play scores was assessed by comparing the judgments of the participant against an independent observer, who was the participant's playing partner.

The reliability assessment took place after each round and resulted in a correlation of 1.00 for the scores of the participant and the independent observer. It is worth noting that a failure to score stroke-play correctly would result in a disqualification of the participant from the tournament. Scores were obtained from the official championship scorekeeper. A single-subject AB design was implemented to examine the effects of a clutch-based hypnotic intervention on golf performance. The design required the observation of baseline performance and an intervention phase for the player. The intervention was introduced when a stable baseline or a trend in the opposite direction of the change anticipated became apparent for the participant. Based on the recommendations of Barlow and Hersen (1973, 1984) and Kazdin (1992), data were collected on 11 occasions over 16 weeks of tournament golf.

Practical Assessment Questionnaire. During the 11 tournaments, the internal experience of the participant was monitored using an assessment questionnaire that included the following questions: *How did you feel during the performance? What were you thinking during the performance? Were there any outside thoughts distracting you? What were your general beliefs about your performance?* The list of questions was adapted from Kazdin (1992), Kendall, Hrycaiko, Martin, and Kendall (1990), Pates (2013) and Pates et al. (2001). This information permitted ongoing assessment of the quality of the participant's feelings, thoughts, and cognitions across the baseline and treatment phases. The data were analyzed by comparing the comments obtained in the baseline sessions to the comments obtained during the intervention phase of the experiment.

Clutch-based hypnotic intervention

In this study the training of the participant took place immediately after the completion of the baseline and was divided into four stages. In the first stage of the intervention, the participant was encouraged to sit in a comfortable position and then was asked to focus on his breathing. Specifically, they were instructed to breathe deeply and to release air slowly while counting backwards from the Number 10. They were then given a 15-minute session involving progressive muscular relaxation (PMR). The technique, originally pioneered by Jacobson (1938), involved the participant tensing and relaxing parts of his body while deeply inhaling. Suggestions asking the participant to contrast the differences between the tense and the relaxed muscles were given along with instructions to direct their attention to images of situations that were associated with relaxation. For example, the external image of a warm comfortable beach or the internal sensation of floating in water.

In the second stage, an Ericksonian hypnosis technique known as a staircase induction (Hammond, 1990) was applied. The staircase induction consisted of a journey, one step at a time, down a flight of 20 stairs. As the participant took the journey, he was told to see each stair in front of him and feel the stair under his feet. At the bottom of the stairs, he was told he would see a door and beyond the door he would see a room with a comfortable chair. The participant was then asked to sit down in the chair and to focus on a small cinema screen on which appeared a relaxing scene. Throughout this stage, suggestions were given to reinforce both the experience of the PMR, the deep breathing, and imagery techniques.

In the third stage, suggestions were given to help the participant regress and remember a multisensory experience of a multisensory image of a clutch situation where he had to make a

putt or shot to win an important event. The clutch performance was then conditioned to be released by a trigger. The trigger used was a verbal phrase “lets hole this shot”. He was then asked to play a round of golf in his mind and include multisensory image of holing all of his approach shots from the fairways, holing every chip shot from around the greens and holing all of their putts on the green using the trigger.

The participant was then told to see himself rising from the chair and proceeding out the door and up the staircase. He was told as he ascended the staircase that he would feel refreshed and alert. Once the participant reacclimatized to the environment, he was asked to access his clutch performance state by utilizing the trigger. This stage of the training was considered complete when the participant felt that feelings associated with the clutch state was under conscious control.

In the final stage of the training, the participant was led to the golf course and encouraged to play 18 holes using a pre-shot routine that involved using the trigger before every approach shot, chip shot and putt in a pre-shot routine. Training was considered complete when the participant felt the feelings associated with the clutch state could be accessed under normal playing conditions.

After completing the training, the participant was asked to commit himself to practice the techniques by playing a 40-minute audiotape of the live hypnosis session, and playing a round of golf every day, over a 7-day interval between the first baseline and intervention phase of the study. In total, the player was given one live session, seven audiotape sessions and 7 rounds of golf before the intervention phase. To ensure that the participant had listened to the audiotape recording, the player was contacted daily. The quality of the participants’ experiences was assessed by examining their thoughts, feelings, and cognitions immediately after each session.

Finally, it should be noted that during the intervention stage the participant was not under hypnosis, instead he was merely using the trigger as part of his pre-shot routine.

Results

Upon receiving the intervention, the participant experienced an immediate performance effect with no overlapping data points between the baseline and the intervention phase. Specifically, the participant improved his performance from a mean of 74.5 during the baseline to a mean of 69.5 during the intervention phase, (see Figure 1). The results suggest that the clutch-based hypnotic intervention consistently improved golf performance during real competitions.

Practical Assessment Data

After finishing each tournament, the participant responded to the practical assessment questionnaire. This helped the researcher examine the players internal experience during tournament golf. The participant indicated that during the tournaments (the intervention phase) he felt “more focused on the task,” experienced “improved concentration,” “intensity”, “effort” and “commitment” to his shots”. He also reported a number of emotions that included excitement, confidence and fun. The participant also reported a change in his perception. For example, he perceived his mind was controlling the ball “I felt I could will the ball into the hole...there were times when all I had to do is think about holing the shot and it would happen, it was the strangest thing”.

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that a clutch-based hypnosis intervention encompassing hypnosis, regression, a trigger control technique and a pre-shot routine may have a positive effect

on the performance elite golfers. The results are consistent with previous research that showed improved performances can be achieved with Hypnosis techniques designed to activate mental states that are associated with optimal performance (see Lyndsay, et al., 2005; Pates, 2013; Pates et al., 2001: 2002; and Pates & Maynard, 2000) The findings are clearly relevant to sport psychology practitioners because they suggest a hypnotic intervention strategy, can be used to prepare elite golfers for real competitions.

The qualitative data revealed some interesting findings. First, the data show that the intervention enhanced a number of variables associated with clutch states, namely, pressure, concentration, intensity and effort. Second, the intervention appeared to augment positive emotions such as excitement, confidence and fun, and third, the technique seemed to alter the golfers' perceptions making him believe his will was controlling the ball. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the outcomes of a number of experiments wherein hypnosis positively controlled emotions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (see Nash & Barnier, 2008).

A clear strength of this study is its ecological validity; rarely has an elite golfer using a hypnotic intervention strategy been studied during professional golf tournaments. The possibility remains, of course, that the positive results are an artifact of both participant and experimenter bias. Indeed, neither were blind to the outcome and so experimenter expectations or the demand characteristics of the experiment may have influenced the results (Kazdin, 1992). There may also have been either a Hawthorne or Rosenthal effect (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2008). As in all studies involving psychological intervention, a placebo effect should not be counted out. Studies reveal that a client's beliefs and perceptions of a psychological intervention have a significant effect on performance outcomes. Researchers exploring the effects of hypnosis for example (see Kirsch, 1994) suggest that hypnosis may be thought of as a nondeceptive form of placebo. Kirsch depicts

hypnosis as a nondeceptive placebo, because, like placebo pills, it may change client expectancies about the future. In spite of these considerations, I believe the techniques I employed played an important role in Mr. B's performance.

In summary, the results of the study indicate that a hypnosis intervention strategy encompassing hypnosis, regression, a trigger control technique and a pre-shot routine may be an effective way of preparing professional golfers for significant competitions. This study needs to be replicated using different athletic populations.

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