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

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ABSTRACT

This case 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 imagery, a trigger control technique, and a preshot routine. Golf performance data were analyzed using a single-subject design. The results indicated that the player's mean stroke average decreased from baseline to postintervention. The qualitative data suggests that the hypnotic intervention may help golfers regulate emotions, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions associated with a clutch state experience.

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Introduction

Traditionally, sports psychologists have attributed peak performances to an athlete's mental skills (self-talk, imagery ability, and goal setting) and ability to control a mental state described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as flow. Although many studies support the existence of flow, recently the literature on flow has been criticized for only partially explaining the peak performance experience (see Swann et al., 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 in clutch situations (see Hibbs, 2010) 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 who needs to hole a putt to win a competition. This involves deliberate concentration, intense effort, and a heightened state of awareness (Swann et al., 2017).

Interestingly, research shows that clutch states and flow states share similar characteristics, namely confidence, absorption, perceptions of control, enhanced motivation, enjoyment, and altered sensory perceptions (Swann et al., 2017). The likely association between clutch states and flow states suggests that interventions designed to enhance flow may also be used to heighten a clutch-state experience. Several studies indicate hypnosis may be an effective intervention strategy for enhancing flow states in golfers (Pates, 2013; J. K. Pates, Oliver et al., 2001), basketball players (Kendall et al., 1990; Pates et al., 2002), badminton players (Pates & Palmi, 2002), and cyclists (Lindsay et al., 2005). Pates (2013), for example,

found that a hypnotic intervention consisting of hypnosis, regression, and a trigger control technique improved the performance and flow-state experience of an elite golfer. The current study reports on the utility of a hypnotic intervention on the performance and clutch-state experiences of an elite golfer playing on the Senior PGA tour.

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 5 years had received technical training. His main goal was to win tournaments; however, he felt during competitions he could not achieve this objective, because he struggled to perform 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 might help him improve his performance in clutch situations. Mr. B had no experience with hypnosis training administered by a qualified practitioner. It should be noted here that Mr. B provided informed consent after the practitioner had explained the general purpose of the study.

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 three 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. Performance data were analyzed by comparing the scores obtained in the baseline sessions to the scores obtained during the intervention phase of the experiment. Based on the recommendations of Barlow and Hersen (1973, 1984) and Kazdin (1992), data were collected on 11 senior PGA tournaments over a time period of 16 weeks.

Internal Experience Questionnaire

During the 11 senior PGA tournaments, the internal experience of the participant was also monitored using an assessment questionnaire that included the following questions: *How did you feel during the performance? What were you thinking during the performance? What were your general beliefs about your performance?* The list of questions was adapted from Kazdin (1992) and Pates (2013). This information permitted an 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.

In this study, stroke average was used to measure general performance, while the internal experience questionnaire provided information on clutch performance. However, it is worth noting that golfers who perform better in clutch situations will notably have a lower stroke-average score than those who don't. The stroke-average data may therefore be viewed as a measure of both general performance and clutch performance.

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, he was instructed to breathe deeply and to release air slowly while counting backward from Number 10. He was then given a 15-minute session involving progressive muscle 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 the water.

In the second stage, a staircase induction (Hammond, 1990) was utilized. 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 “let’s hole this shot.” He was then asked to play a round of golf in his mind and include a multisensory image of holing all of his approach shots from the fairways, holing every chip shot from around the greens, and holing all of his 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 that as he ascended the staircase 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 were 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 preshot routine that involved using the trigger before every approach shot, chip shot, and putt in a preshot routine. The training was considered complete when the participant felt the feelings associated with the clutch state could be accessed under normal playing conditions.

It should be noted here that during this stage of the training, the participant used the trigger-control technique in situations that did not require a clutch performance; it should, therefore, be acknowledged that the intervention may affect general performance as well as clutch performance.

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 seven 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 participant's experiences was assessed by examining his thoughts, feelings, and cognitions immediately after each session.

Throughout the intervention phase, the participant continued to listen to the audiotape every day until the intervention phase was terminated. In total, the player was given one live session and seven audiotape sessions before the intervention phase and approximately 21 audiotape sessions during the intervention. Finally, it should be noted that during the intervention phase the participant was not under hypnosis, instead, he was merely using the trigger as part of his preshot routine.

Data Analysis

A single-subject AB research design (Kazdin, 1992) was implemented to examine the effects of the clutch-based hypnotic intervention on golf performance. Based on the guidelines put forward by Hrycaiko and Martin (1996), an experimental effect was analyzed through a visual inspection of the plotted data. According to these researchers, the intervention has an effect when (a) baseline performance is stable or in a direction opposite to that predicted for the effects of treatment, (b) the greater the number of times that an effect is replicated within the subject's data (c) the fewer the number of overlapping data points between baseline and intervention phase, (d) the sooner the effect occurs following the introduction of treatment, and (e) the larger the size of the effect in comparison to baseline. In this study, baseline data were gathered from four PGA competitions, and intervention data were collected from seven PGA competitions.

Results

Performance Data

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.

Internal Experience Data

After finishing each tournament, the participant responded to the practical assessment questionnaire. This helped the researcher examine his 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 several emotions that included excitement, confidence, and fun. The participant also reported a change in his perception during clutch situations, when he had to make a putt to save par or make a birdie. 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."

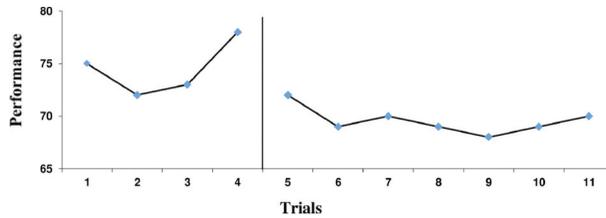


Figure 1. Stroke Average for Mr. B On Each Trial

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that a clutch-based hypnosis intervention encompassing hypnosis, regression, a trigger-control technique, and a preshot 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 Lindsay et al., 2005; Pates, 2013; Pates et al., 2002; Pates & Maynard, 2000; J. K. Pates, Maynard et al., 2001). 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 suggest that the intervention enhanced several variables associated with clutch states, namely, 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 golfer's perceptions during clutch situations. Taken together, these findings are consistent with the outcomes of clinical experiments wherein hypnosis induced positive emotions, thoughts, feelings, and fluctuations in perceptions (Nash & Barnier, 2008).

This study reports on positive outcomes from a hypnotic intervention assessed during professional golf tournaments. However, the possibility remains that the positive results may be 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).

In summary, the results of the study indicate that a hypnosis-intervention strategy encompassing hypnosis, regression, a trigger-control technique, and a preshot routine may be an effective way of preparing professional golfers for significant competitions. More research on these techniques on athletic performance is needed.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Fallstudie

JOHN PATES

Zusammenfassung: In dieser Fallstudie werden die Effekte einer clutch-basierten hypnotischen Intervention auf die Leistung und Erfahrung eines Senior PGA Tour Golfers untersucht. Die Intervention umfasste Hypnose, Regressions-Imagination, eine Trigger Kontroll Technik sowie Abschlag Routine. Die Leistungswerte beim Golf wurden unter Verwendung eines Einzelfall Designs analysiert. Die Ergebnisse zeigten, dass die durchschnittliche Anzahl der Schläge des Golfspielers von der Baseline bis zur Post-Intervention abnahm. Die qualitativen Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass die hypnotische Intervention dem Golfer helfen kann, seine Emotionen, Gedanken, Gefühle und Wahrnehmungen im Zusammenhang mit dem Erleben des clutch^{*)}-Zustands zu steuern.

^{*)} Für den Begriff „clutch“ scheint es keinen passenden deutschen Ausdruck zu geben. Es handelt sich um die Fähigkeit, unter Druck Ressourcen zu mobilisieren, in der Drucksituation des Wettkampfs fokussiert und in der Lage zu sein, alle Energien zu bündeln.

ALIDA IOST-PETER, DIPL.-PSYCH.

Intervention hypnotique basée sur l’embrayage pour améliorer les performances du golf: une étude de cas

JOHN PATES

Résumé: Cette étude de cas a examiné les effets d’une intervention hypnotique basée sur l’embrayage sur les performances et l’expérience d’un golfeur PGA senior. L’intervention comprenait l’hypnose, l’imagerie de régression, une technique de contrôle des déclencheurs et une routine de pré-injection. Les données de performance de golf ont été analysées en utilisant une conception à un seul sujet. Les résultats ont indiqué que la moyenne des coups du joueur a diminué de la ligne de base à la post-intervention. Les données qualitatives suggèrent que l’intervention hypnotique peut aider les golfeurs à réguler les émotions, les pensées, les sentiments et les perceptions associés à une expérience d’état d’embrayage.

GERARD FITOUSSI, M.D.

Président of the European Society of Hypnosis

Intervención hipnótica basada en el “clutch” para mejorar el desempeño en el golf: Un estudio de caso.

JOHN PATES

Resumen: Este estudio de caso examinó los efectos de una intervención hipnótica basada en el “clutch” sobre el desempeño y experiencia de un golfista veterano en el Tour PGA. La intervención incorporó hipnosis, visualizaciones de regresión, una técnica de control de gatillo y una rutina pre tiro. Se analizó el desempeño en el golf mediante un diseño de caso único. Los resultados indicaron que el promedio del golpe medio del jugador disminuyó de la línea basal a la post intervención. Los datos cualitativos sugieren que la intervención hipnótica podría ayudar a golfistas a regular sus emociones, pensamientos, sensaciones y percepciones asociadas con la experiencia del estado “clutch”.

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