

**KINGS’ SP**

ADVERSITY, MENTAL FLEXIBILITY AND MENTAL TOUGHNESS

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We can move with changes by maintaining a flexible attitude. A flexible attitude is like a free-flowing stream. Now imagine a boulder in the water, stopping the flow. This is a rigid mind-set. Flow with changes by being curious about how you can navigate around (or even move or profit from) each obstruction instead of being discouraged by it. Mental flexibility, often referred to as psychological or cognitive flexibility, is the mental ability to adapt your thoughts and behavior quickly in response to changing circumstances, especially during high-pressure situations like competitions. For athletes, mental flexibility is crucial as it allows them to remain effective even when faced with unexpected challenges or setbacks

Major changes encountered by athletes can include

* Getting cut from tryouts
* Transition to college for a freshman student-athlete
* Losing one’s starting position on a team
* An unexpected coaching change
* Dealing with major injury
* A midseason trade to another team
* Retirement from competitive sports

Non-sports-related hardships can include:

* Parent’s divorce
* A death in the family
* A relationship breakup
* Financial difficulties
* Roommate issues
* Geographic changes or homesickness
* Academic challenges
* A change in peer relationships

In the face of adversity, people are often racked with shame, guilt, anxiety and stop taking care of themselves. Sometimes they direct their anger inwards and become self-destructive by abusing alcohol or other drugs, procrastinating or neglecting their personal health.

Here are several ways athletes can build mental flexibility:

* Diverse Training Environments:
  + Train in various conditions and settings to adapt to different types of stressors and stimuli.
  + Practice under different scenarios, including adverse weather conditions, different times of the day, or with unexpected distractions.
* Cognitive Training:
  + Engage in exercises designed to improve cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving.
  + Use brain training apps or games that are designed to enhance cognitive agility.
* Scenario Planning:
  + Imagine different scenarios that could occur during competition and plan responses to them.
  + Role-play or mentally rehearse adjusting to various challenges, such as falling behind or equipment failure.
* Mindfulness and Meditation:
  + Practice mindfulness to stay present and adapt more quickly to the unfolding events.
  + Use meditation to improve focus and the ability to regulate emotional responses.
* Improvisation Exercises:
  + Engage in sports drills that require quick decision-making and adaptation.
  + Participate in non-sport-related improvisation activities that encourage spontaneity and adaptability.
* Reflection and Analysis:
  + After training or competition, reflect on performance and consider how different approaches could have been taken.
  + Analyze game or performance footage to identify areas for cognitive flexibility improvement.
* Focus on Process Over Outcome:
  + Concentrate on the process of performance (technique, effort, strategy) rather than the outcome (winning or losing).
  + This approach helps in adapting to the moment-to-moment requirements of the performance.
* Emotional Regulation:
  + Learn techniques to manage emotions effectively, which is vital for remaining flexible under pressure.
  + Techniques can include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and positive self-talk.
* Develop a Growth Mindset:
  + Embrace challenges as opportunities for learning and growth.
  + View mistakes and setbacks as valuable feedback, not as failures.
* Psychological Skills Training:
  + Work with a sports psychologist to develop skills that enhance mental flexibility, such as resilience and grit.
* Self-Compassion:
  + Practice self-compassion to bounce back from setbacks more quickly.
  + Understand that perfection is unattainable and that setbacks are part of the growth process.
* Exposure Therapy:
  + Gradually and systematically face fears and learn to deal with them, which can enhance adaptability.
  + Building mental flexibility is not a one-time task but an ongoing process. Regularly engaging in practices that challenge cognitive patterns and emotional responses can help athletes become more adaptable over time. This adaptability not only benefits performance but also contributes to overall mental well-being.