

Original article

# Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) Program and Coping with Performance Anxiety: A case study

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to research the subjective experiences of an athlete during practice match competitions and to examine the potential usefulness of an adapted MAC intervention in addressing the emotional difficulties of the athlete. We investigated the usefulness of a 12-session MAC program altered for educational purposes and presented data as a case study. The case study suggested that the athlete experienced a multitude of anxiety while practicing match competitions; the athlete typically avoided these emotional difficulties and engaged in avoidant behaviors; an adapted MAC approach for educational purposes could be helpful to help the athletes accept private events, commit to performance-related behaviors, and engage more frequently to performance under pressure. More could be done to address the needs of athletes experiencing performance anxiety beyond the structure of our 12-session educational intervention. We concluded that the MAC-based intervention, to a certain extent, educated the athlete about how to meet the challenges of performance difficulties, commit to values-driven behavior, and exhibit behaviors that would potentially permit optimal performance.

**Keywords:** MAC, performance anxiety, mindfulness.

## 1. Introduction

In a sporting context, performance anxiety is a fear of one's ability to perform skill tasks at certain athletic events like competitions. Athletes experiencing performance anxiety are primarily afraid of failure due to predicting humiliation and rejection by their coach, teammates, and parents. While certain features of anxiety, for example, arousal, could enhance performance, they could engage athletes with negative thought patterns and expectations of failure, which can bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Various psychological interventions could be used in the context of athletic performance to address the psychological and emotional difficulties before or during the performance. For example, much research shows mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) could reduce anxiety in sports (Gardner & Moore, 2007). Mindfulness is a psychological skill that helps people improve their awareness by paying non-judgmental attention to the present moment (Arch & Craske, 2008). In the field of sport psychology, mindfulness encompasses the critical concepts of acceptance and commitment derived from the work of Gardner and Moore (Gardner & Moore, 2004), namely Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC). Practicing MAC is primarily based on a program initially formalized as an intervention to improve athletic performance (Josefsson et al., 2020). In support of this, Gross et al.'s (Gross et al., 2016) randomized controlled trial showed that MAC could reduce generalized anxiety, eating concerns, and psychological distress and increase psychological flexibility from post-intervention to one-month follow-up in female collegiate athletes. In addition to this, based on coaches' reports, participants experienced performance improvement from the pre-test to the post-test.

Moreover, a study examining the effectiveness of MAC in enhancing sports performance and reducing anxiety supported the purpose of the study (Dehghani et al., 2018). This study included a randomized clinical trial on 31 students, an experimental group (= 15 students), and a control group (= 16 students). The results indicated that MAC participants experienced a significant performance improvement in playing basketball and a meaningful reduction in experiential avoidance and sport anxiety compared with the control participants. As a final note on the support for the efficacy of MAC intervention in the sporting context, Josefsson et al. (2019) showed the mediating effects of emotion regulation and sport-specific dispositional mindfulness on self-rated athletic training performance. Findings showed that MAC intervention indirectly affected self-rated through changes in dispositional mindfulness and emotion regulation. Also, the MAC participants reported more significant improvements in athletic

mindfulness, emotion regulation abilities, and perceived performance in the post-test compared to the psychological skills training (PST) intervention. The present study aims to investigate the MAC program and its effectiveness in reducing the performance anxiety of an athlete. This may improve the knowledge and intervention skills of sports psychologists who work with athletes experiencing performance anxiety in different athletic events.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A male athlete (18) was recruited from a sports academy in Shiraz, Iran. A more in-depth description of the participant can be found in the case study section below:

### 2.2. Demographic Questionnaire

Researchers developed a demographic questionnaire to have a better understanding of the overall history of the participant, athletic history, and history of performance anxiety.

### 2.3. Revised Competitive State Anxiety-2 (CSAI-2R)

The CSAI-2R is a 17-item scale that measures cognitive state anxiety (5 items), somatic state anxiety (7 items), and self-confidence (5 items) in a competitive setting. Participants rate their feelings before the competition (e.g., I feel jittery, I am concerned about losing) on a scale anchored by 1 = not at all and 4 = very much so. Subscale scores are calculated by summing items in each subscale, dividing by the number of items, and multiplying by 10. The score range is 10 - 40 for each subscale. This scale's Persian version was validated, and its reliability was reported based on the alpha coefficients from Cronbach = .85 (Mostafayi, 2018).

### 2.4. Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)

MAAS is a 15-item self-report questionnaire that measures individuals' general tendencies for attentiveness and awareness of the present moment on a one-dimensional scale. MAAS assesses the individuals' tendency to be in a mindless state, inversely representing mindfulness. Responses are recorded on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (almost always) to 6 (almost never). High scores indicate a higher ability to be attentive and aware of the present moment. A high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) was reported for MAAS, along with promising convergent and discriminant validity findings (Brown & Ryan, 2003). On MAAS, the introductory part explains how to answer each item separately from every other item indicating how frequently or infrequently respondents currently have each of the experiences mentioned on MAAS



and answer according to what reflects their experience rather than what they think their experience should be (MacKillop & Anderson, 2007). Specifically, MAAS has proved to be significantly positively correlated with openness to experience, emotional intelligence, and well-being, negatively correlated with rumination and social anxiety, and unrelated to self-monitoring. A sample item is 'I find it difficult to stay focused on what is happening in the present.' This scale's Persian version was validated, and its reliability was reported based on the alpha coefficients from Cronbach (Nooripour et al., 2021).

### 3- Procedure

The participant attended weekly one-on-one education sessions six weeks after the training program. A program of 12 sessions was considered appropriate due to the nature of the intervention, which is based on seven modules of the intervention and the academic commitments of the participant. He first took part in a semi-structured interview to let the researcher better understand his experiences of performance anxiety and predictions about his return to actual competitions. In the same session, the participant received an informed consent form and a fact sheet on the seven modules of the MAC intervention. The participant then completed a series of questionnaires, including the demographic questionnaire, CAIS-2R, and MAAS. After the 12 sessions of intervention, the participant filled out this series of questionnaires again. A second semi-structured interview was also conducted at the end of the last session to examine his perceptions of the MAC intervention. Once the data collection was completed, the participant received a debriefing form and had an opportunity to ask the researcher questions.

#### 3.1. MAC Intervention

Throughout the 12 sessions, the researcher introduced each MAC component to the participant in individual sessions. The program reflected an educational intervention consistent with the previous research, which demonstrated the effectiveness of such approaches (De Petrillo et al., 2009; Cathcart, McGregor, Groundwater, 2014). In order of delivery process, the components of the 12 MAC-based sessions were as follows in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) Protocol

|                    |                                                                                                       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Psychoeducation | 2. Provides the rationale of the intervention and conceptualizes issues into a new explanatory system |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

|                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                     | (Alavizadeh, Gharamaleki, Mami, Mohammadzadeh, & Ahmadi, 2020)                                                                                                                                                   |
| 3. Mindfulness and cognitive diffusion              | 4. Introduces mindfulness awareness, mindfulness attention, and cognitive diffusion and engages the participant in mindfulness practices (Mohebi et al., 2022).                                                  |
| 5. Values identification and Values-driven behavior | 6. Identifies performance values and links up values and day-to-day choices and behaviors of the participant (Josefsson et al., 2020).                                                                           |
| 7. Introducing Acceptance                           | 8. Introduces the concept of acceptance and experiential avoidance. Also, informing the participant of undesired and unpleasant inner processes is part of the competitive nature of sport (Schwanhauser, 2009). |
| 9. Enhancing Commitment                             | 10. Cultivates an ongoing commitment to the participant's behaviors which are directly related to the performance task (Alavizadeh, Sobhi Gharamaleki, Mami, Mohammadzadeh)                                      |



|                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                         | h, & Ahmadi, 2021).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 11. Integration and Skill Consolidation | 12. Consolidates acquired skills and combines mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment (Moore, 2009).                                                                                                                                                                |
| 13. Practice and Maintenance            | 14. Reviews mindfulness skills to (a) promote self-awareness and task-focused attention, (b) promote the acceptance of dysfunctional inner processes, and (c) commit to the consistent use of the necessary choices guided by values-driven behavior (Moore, 2009). |

#### 4- Case Study

Confidentiality was maintained in this study by reference to the pseudonymous case study.

##### 4.1. Case Introduction

Arya was an 18-year-old Persian male who participated in kickboxing at a competitive level. Arya stated that he had been practicing his primary sport for 12 years and was now in his highest physical preparation. He spent 14 hours weekly in kickboxing training and practice match competitions to prepare for the next competition session. Arya was recruited for this study through his coach, who trained him for four years. He had not experienced intense performance anxiety during the practice match competitions before his current difficulty. Furthermore, in his sporting history, he had not experienced other psychological and emotional difficulties driving him out of the competition. According to the information we received from his coach, at the start of the MAC intervention and because of his recent experience of performance anxiety, Arya was asked several times not to participate in any competition.

##### 4.2. Assessment and Results

Arya's scores on the MAAS indicated that before the commencement of the intervention, he was not accepting and mindful of performance anxiety experiences. His preintervention CSAI-2R score indicated that Arya was highly anxious about practice match competitions. Following the intervention, Arya's scores on the MAAS increased moderately. Similarly, his cognitive and somatic anxiety decreased slightly. However, the self-confidence score showed a considerable increase. We argued that there were changes in acceptance and mindfulness scores in addition to a change in cognitive and somatic anxiety and a noticeable increase in self-confidence scores from time 1 to time 2 (see Figure 1).

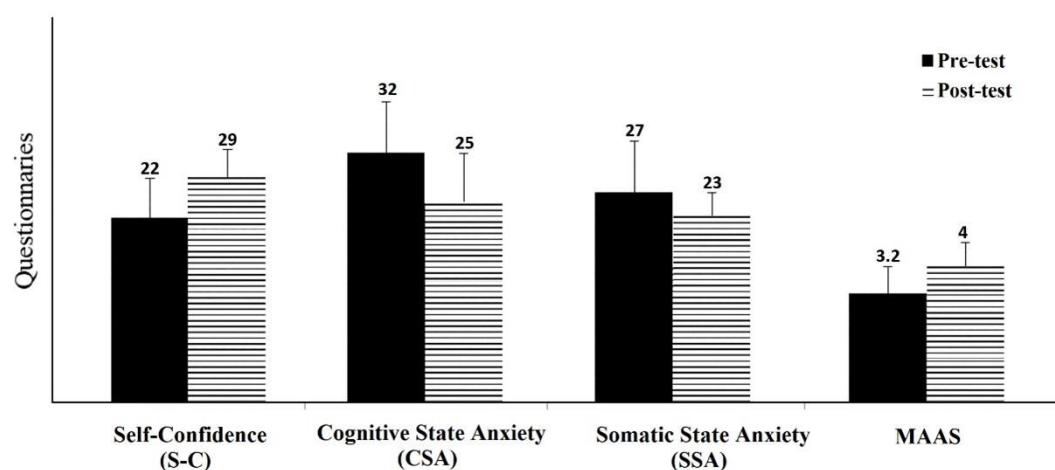


Figure 1. Arya's pre-postintervention scores



#### 4.3. Pre-intervention Interview

During the intake session, Arya emphasized the sense of anxiety that he had experienced a month ago until the date of the session at the beginning of the practice match competitions. He described that at first after intense anxiety began, he was uncertain about the influence of the anxiety on his performance. However, he immediately found out about the destructive influence of such feelings on his performance. He commented, "For the first time, I hoped it [anxiety] would be temporary, and I could focus my attention on my performance." However, when Arya realized that his anxiety during the performance continued (highly intense) and forced him to leave competitive environments, he felt panic. Arya's initial shock was coupled with difficulties talking about his emotional experiences to his coach and accepting the limitations that difficulties would impose on his performance improvement when he had to prepare for the upcoming competition session. He commented that "the yawning gap between my goals and current reality was deeply worrying . . ." He also acknowledged that he is pretty interested in meeting a sport psychologist and that it was a difficult task not to have his peak performance for sessions designed for practice match competitions he needed the most: "I have no idea what would happen during the time I am not engaged in practices and meeting you at your office . . . I need to accept to balance my desire to achieve optimal performance and the time I need to reduce my anxiety. However, it is hard to make this balance." Arya also showed considerable interest in his reentry to actual competition following the end of the MAC intervention sessions: "I wonder if at the end of our session, when I go back to the games, I would be as good as I was before the anxiety experience."

#### 4.4. Post-intervention Interview

During the post-intervention interview, Arya provided an understanding of the skills learned during the MAC sessions. Regarding mindfulness and cognitive diffusion, Arya commented, "It's truly amazing to observe thoughts and feelings without engagement. Trying to change all those *thoughts and feelings* takes too much *psychic* energy. Now, I know they are just inner processes, not a part of me." Cognitive diffusion seemed to be a practical skill learned by Arya during the MAC sessions: "I was surprised at the time when I learned it is possible to look at my thoughts rather than from my thoughts. It helped me to let thoughts come and go rather than holding them." Arya also identified the importance

of values identification and values-driven behavior learned from the sessions: "I realized that identifying my performance-related values and their role in improving performance develops a link between the values and being committed to the sessions I had with you and choices that helped me to get back to competitions. It also helped me be more positive in looking at our sessions and restored my faith in myself." As for the acceptance component of the MAC intervention, Arya stated, "I realized that what you called experiential avoidance doesn't let me have a realistic understanding of performance-related consequences. Now, I know in the real world that many unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations are inevitable, and there is no way but to face and accept them all." Regarding the commitment component of the MAC intervention, Arya commented, "One of the most important things I learned was how not to engage with inner processes but to have a laser focus on my performance and related behaviors." About applying the skills of the MAC intervention at the kickboxing club, Arya commented, "Consolidating what I have learned let me cultivate a greater sense of flexibility in my performance-related behaviors, and it contributed to the adaptation of the skills to performance situations more effectively."

### 5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the experiences of an athlete with performance anxiety during his practice match competitions and examine the potential effectiveness of an altered MAC-based educational intervention in addressing an athlete's emotional difficulties.

First, this study provided information about the participant's experiencing many problematic thoughts and feelings immediately after the feeling of anxiety throughout his performance while trying to approach full-contact practice match competitions. Second, the participant often chose an avoidant response regarding these dysfunctional thoughts and feelings and engaged in different emotion-driven behaviors, including withdrawal, aggression, or flight. Third, a MAC approach altered for educational purposes could be helpful in helping the participant to accept dysfunctional thoughts and feelings, commit to the aims of the intervention sessions, and strengthen his certainty about participating in actual competitions. Last but not least, we could do more to meet the needs of athletes with anxiety beyond the framework of this 12-session educational intervention.

The participant in our study commented that experiences of performance anxiety and participation in practice match competitions were full of numerous uncomfortable and undesirable thoughts and feelings. According to the participant, immediately after experiencing anxiety, he was



shocked and developed doubts about what would happen in preparing for the following competition event. The persistent experience of anxiety caused the participant's emotions to get worse and turned into frustration surrounding his efforts to change his dysfunctional thoughts and deny involvement with practice match competitions then and now. Finally, the participant mentioned a fear of anxiety and a great desire to avoid going through another experience of performance anxiety in each training session. This fear has repeatedly increased the experience of more intensity of my anxiety. As the participant reported, participating in the MAC intervention sessions helped him have different feelings in terms of the experience of anxiety. His experiences became less intense, more concerned with commitment, and focused on his performance-related goals. The MAC assisted the athlete in choosing different types of strategies in terms of approaching the problematic thoughts and feelings that mainly arose during the performance. In addition, approaching strategies were linked with reducing emotion-driven behaviors predominantly through committing to practice match competitions. These findings show that the MAC intervention could help reduce violent changes in an emotional state and increase the participant's tendency to employ approaching-based strategies and engage in performance goals.

The participant mentioned that the skills learned during the educational MAC intervention might help him accept having those dysfunctional thoughts and feelings encountered throughout practice match competitions and provide him with methods that helped him to be committed to optimal performance. Also, the participant reported that the skills-particularly mindfulness, integration, and skill consolidation- were helpful in accepting emotions such as anxiety and fear of anxiety. The skills cultivated value-driven performance-related behaviors. These findings hypothetically suggested that a MAC-based educational intervention may help the development of mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment behaviors and reduce the participant's performance anxiety.

Some limitations in this investigation need to be highlighted, and some areas that future research should address to ensure that athletes with performance anxiety receive appropriate support. The main limitations of this study were the limited number of participants, which included only one athlete, and the educational approach employed to communicate the core MAC principles. As regards the first limitation, because this investigation covers only one participant, it would not be possible to determine whether the case study examination is representative of the larger samples of similar cases. In other words, because of the nature of the case study design of this study, it may cause a lack of

scientific rigor. Therefore, it provides only a little basis for generalizing the results to the broader population. In addition, because some parts of this study are based on the analysis of qualitative information, it depends on how the researcher interprets the acquired information. This means that there are many possibilities for observer bias and that the subjective opinions of the researcher could interfere with interpreting the meaning of the qualitative data. As regards the second limitation, considering the strong argument of Moore (Moore, 2009) about the experiential nature of mindfulness-acceptance-based interventions, they encourage participants to engage in behavioral tasks that provoke dysfunctional and unwanted thoughts and feelings while the use of mindfulness and acceptance techniques encourage them to experience such inner processes patiently in the pursuit of personal values. Based on the previous research (Mahoney & Hanrahan, 2011), the result of this study could be more promising in case experiential tasks associated with the avoidance of certain competition-based events associated with the employed educational approach.

In terms of the study recommendations, future research would continue to study the potential effectiveness of the MAC approach to address the needs of athletes who experience performance anxiety. In addition to the duration of the intervention program, future research should focus on a more significant number of participants to significantly alter the intensity of performance-related anxiety and improve the athletes' performance. Particularly given that performance anxiety was the primary concern of the participant in this study, future research could also be expanded to focus on the competitive anxiety of athletes preparing for competitions. Finally, MAC-based intervention programs should employ all seven MAC modules. Using the seven modules ensures a comprehensive MAC-based intervention program that fully considers the theoretical framework of the intervention to enhance intervention gains.

## 6. Conclusions

This study examined the potential effectiveness of the MAC-based intervention for meeting the needs of an athlete with performance anxiety. The educational approach was the primary strategy in using the intervention to focus on accepting uncomfortable and problematic thoughts and feelings and commitment to value-driven performance behaviors. Overall, this study pointed out that during practice match competitions, the participant experienced intense performance anxiety that is typically challenging to be accepted. Therefore, it had a diverse effect on the participant's level of commitment to his optimal performance. Our 12-session educational intervention showed that the MAC could be an effective



psychological intervention to educate athletes who experience anxiety during a performance in terms of the effectiveness of mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment. The MAC-based intervention appears to allow athletes to address the anxiety they experience during the performance. Also, the intervention sets the stage for cultivating the level of commitment athletes' value-driven behaviors related to performance and return to competition.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## مداخله مبتنی بر ذهن آگاهی پذیرش تعهد و مقابله با اضطراب اجرا: مطالعه‌ای موردی

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**چکیده:** هدف از این مطالعه، تحقیق در مورد تجربیات ذهنی یک ورزشکار در طول تمرینات آمادگی رقابتی و بررسی تأثیر بالقوه مداخله مک در پرداختن به مشکلات هیجانی ورزشکار بود. در این مطالعه سودمندی یک برنامه ۱۲-هفته‌ای مک را که برای اهداف روان-آموزشی تهیه شده بود بررسی و داده‌ها به عنوان مطالعه موردی ارائه شدند. این مطالعه موردی نشان داد که ورزشکار اضطراب زیادی را در حین تمرینات آمادگی رقابتی تجربه می‌کرد و به عنوان یک سبک رفتاری معمولاً از این مشکلات عاطفی اجتناب می‌کرد و اینکه، رویکرد مک برای اهداف روان-آموزشی می‌تواند برای کمک به ورزشکاران جهت پذیرش فرآیندهای درونی نامطلوب، متعهد شدن به رفتارهای مرتبط با عملکرد، و مشارکت بیشتر در عملکرد تحت فشار مفید باشد. این مطالعه موردی نشان داد که مداخله مبتنی بر مک، تا حد قابل توجهی به ورزشکار آموزش می‌دهد که چگونه با چالش‌های مربوط به اجرا مقابله کند و چگونه به اجرای ارزش محور متعهد شود، و همچنین رفتارهایی را در پیش بگیرد که به طور بالقوه عملکرد مطلوب را ممکن می‌سازند. برای رفع نیازهای ورزشکارانی که اضطراب عملکرد را تجربه می‌کنند می‌توان مداخلات بیشتری فراتر از ساختار مداخله آموزشی ۱۲ جلسه‌ای به کار رفته در این مطالعه انجام داد.

واژه‌های کلیدی: مک، اضطراب اجرا، ذهن آگاهی

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این نماد به معنای مجوز استفاده از اثر با دو شرط است یکی استناد به نویسنده و دیگری استفاده برای مقاصد غیرتجاری.