

# seeing RED?

## anger management

Although golf is known as a chivalrous game with numerous rules of etiquette to follow, there are times when it is hard to restrain your emotions. This is a game that can infuriate and frustrate, often bringing out the worst side of your personality. Swearing, throwing clubs, breaking clubs - once 'golf rage' takes hold - it is hard to overcome!

The triggers of self destruction are clear. We can all play the game of golf, but when things start to fall apart it becomes a personal drama that feels befitting of a lead role in a Shakespearean tragedy.

Golf is about rhythm and tempo, not temper and tension. Easier said than done when you miss your fifth tap in from two feet or shank yet another ball off the tee and out of bounds. Unless you possess the most easy going personality you may experience feelings of anger no matter what level of golf you play.

Many golf professionals seek help from a golf psychologist to improve their mental toughness. *EAT GOLF!* met with Allison Dyer, a BASES Accredited Sport Psychologist and BPS Chartered Psychologist to find out what assistance she can give and how to get yourself out of the habit of only seeing red. If you can relate to Adam Sandler's performance in the golfing comedy *Happy Gilmore*, then keep reading!





**Allison Dyer is a trained sports psychologist who works with both professional and amateur golfers to help them improve their mental toughness on the golf course. She provides practical and easy to use guidelines that enable the golfer to create effective solutions to deal with their problems on the course and improve their game.**

**Do you find that seeing a sports psychologist carries a certain stigma?**

No I don't. In the past it did but public awareness of the direct link between performance success and sport psychology has risen. Most people know that the top golf professionals have a sports psychologist. I don't think the term "sports psychology" is an unusual term any more. Golfers are used to hearing it. Most golfers who are serious about their golf have a basic understanding of what sports psychology is - they are just not sure how it can help them. You do occasionally come across individuals who ask if I'm going to question them about their childhood or they think I'll turn up in a white jacket and ask strange

questions or bleat on constantly about positive thinking and being a winner, but that doesn't happen so much now because people are more clued up about it.

Getting started was quite difficult because there were people who didn't really understand what sports psychology is. They presumed you had to be at your wits end to see a sports psychologist. Slowly but surely I've educated people and showed them I can help them. I don't have a magic wand though! Sometimes I get people coming to see me for literally one hour - and that's probably my worst kind of client because they come in with unrealistic expectations. Psychology doesn't work like that. There is no quick fix. I usually

use the analogy that your mind is a muscle. You wouldn't go to the gym, ask for an upper body programme, do it once and then expect to walk out feeling buff. It's exactly the same with your brain. You've got to learn the techniques and then you have to practice them and use them regularly.

**Do you get involved in the physical training side or is it related in any way?**

When you work with a golfer or an athlete it makes sense to look at them from a holistic perspective as opposed to solely from a mental perspective. Where possible, I like to work in conjunction with the golfers coach. It is all very well the individual coming to me and talking about the mental side of their game

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Do you find it difficult working with an amateur golfer? They may think they need to see a sports psychologist when in reality there is a fundamental problem with their swing? Amateur golfers tend to have an untrained swing and an untrained brain. Ideally you want a trained swing and a trained brain. More often than not, pros will have a trained swing and an untrained brain. At the end of the day with amateurs, if you haven't got a trained swing you've got to work on that first. That's the priority. With all the psychology and mental control in the world, if you can't hit it down the fairway then it doesn't matter how mentally tough you are, you're not going to score well.

**Is there a figure on a handicap that you would put before somebody should come and see you?**

That's quite a tricky question because everybody is so different. I've got a guy at the moment who has a 16 handicap. His priority is to work on the technical side of things but he's using me to help plan his practice sessions, for example. For the past 7 years he has been bashing balls on the driving range. So I ask are these quality practice sessions? No they are not. He is engaging in quantity not quality. He has been bashing balls whereas he needs to work on the quality and content of his practice sessions and place more emphasis on his short game. Working with beginners can be great because you are starting with a blank slate. Before the beginner falls into bad habits I can get in there first. Rather than spending time undoing bad habits, together we can create good ones, right from the start. Although I work predominantly with pros, I can do as good a job with somebody who has just started playing golf. I can't promise to make them the next Tiger or Annika but I can help them to enjoy their golf more and potentially lower their handicap.

**Do you begin work more on motivation?**

No not at all. Sometimes motivation is not even an issue. Typically a client will come to see me and we will sit down and complete what is known as a needs analysis. We identify their specific golfing strengths and weaknesses. It might be that they have all the motivation in the world but they haven't got good concentration or they're unclear about what their practice plan should be, or they are rubbish at coping with pressure. Basically I'll do an interview with them to find out from the client what they think they need to work on and build a picture in my mind of what areas of mental toughness they most need to work on. We will then formulate a structured Mental Toughness Programme based on their needs. It's very individualised. There is no set way of starting work with a client.

**Do you think golfers in general create their own pressures?**

Definitely. Typically the individual will focus on the outcome - what they want to achieve. I've got to win. I've got to get this putt. I must make the cut. Instead of focusing on the outcome it is better that they focus on the process - what they need to do - to achieve that outcome. This way you've got smaller, more manageable tasks to focus on so there is less pressure. Yes the score is what you want, and it's good to know what you want, but it's more important to focus on how you're going to do it.

**Do you find that people who are focusing on the outcome rather than playing the game are losing enjoyment because of this?**

Yes absolutely. The whole point of going out and playing golf is that it's supposed to be a challenge and enjoyable and a lot of people get so caught up in the mechanics and the outcome that they lose focus on what they are doing - and that you should be enjoying yourself and taking confidence from the things that have gone well or the things you have achieved.

**Do you find a lot of people come to see you for that reason?**

Yes that comes up a lot, especially with the pros. Each and every shot can be a calculation of how much money it is costing them. If they're thinking about that they are less likely to play the kind of golf they want to play. That is all to do with the state of mind they are in. If you play a casual round with friends for example, you are probably more relaxed and play better. Focusing on money can cause you to tense up and lose your tempo and rhythm and so on.

**Is thinking of the money a common problem for professional golfers?**

Oh yes! Especially for the guys on the EuroPro and Challenge Tours because they've got the pressure that maybe their parents or friends are helping them with money - to pay for them to be in the tournament. Or they've got a sponsor and they've got to do well in this tournament in order to get onto the Order of Merit they have to make money. It's a difficult task to take your focus away from that, but the guys who make it tend to be the ones who are able to do that.

**What sort of clients do you deal with in the professional section? Do you work with any high profile players on the European Tour?**

The highest profile tournament I am working with at the moment is the Challenge Tour. I had a couple of guys who didn't make the European Tour last year. There was one guy who didn't make it by two, and I felt really sorry for him - he worked really hard. He will be better prepared this year though having had the experience. He learned a lot.

**Once you get higher up into the rankings and money is not so much of an issue, are the pressures then only wanting to succeed?**

The costs of entering some of the competitions are so high

now, plus travel, accommodation, your psychologist, dieticians, etc etc, the outgoings are incredible. They say the more money you've got the more money you spend, and I would guess that it is still a massive pressure.

**Temper is something that a large majority of golfers experience at some point, if not everybody. What are some of the worst scenarios you have come across?**

Out of all the pros I have worked with, I have never worked on a serious anger management issue. I've worked with quite a few club level golfers and youngsters on anger management, but not pros, and that for me is quite an important indicator that actually there is no room for anger in top level golf. It's quite cheesy but anger is one letter away from danger. There is no room for snapping and throwing clubs in top level golf!

**It does happen though and perhaps it is anger born out of frustration?**

Yes. I suppose when I do come up against anger issues, typically what we do is sit down and talk about this behavioural pattern. It is important for the golfer to acknowledge that losing their temper is a habit or routine. What they must ask themselves is does this particular habit help them play better golf? If it does then fantastic, and for some golfers they can thrive on this anger, but for the vast majority of people it doesn't work. So if it doesn't make you play better golf, then we have to find some way of disrupting the habit.

Another thing we look at is how to control our state. We can control how we are feeling. There are four main areas I tend to look at. First we identify what kinds of things we are thinking - our self talk, secondly what kind of things we are seeing - images in our mind, the third is our breathing patterns and the fourth our body language. If we can control these four areas, then we can control our state. On the thinking side of things, the bottom line is that if you are standing over a putt thinking I can't believe I've just missed that last putt or this hole has been terrible so far - your temper is likely to build. These thoughts will make you feel angry, frustrated and annoyed. These feelings affect your rhythm and your tempo can go. Perfect ingredients for ruining the next shot. A sequence of events has occurred that began with how you were thinking and ended with a negative change in performance. I can't stop the thoughts coming into your head, but I can help you deal with them effectively. You can take control of your thoughts. Your mind should be your greatest asset, not your worst enemy!

Replacement routines can also be effective in this instance. I recommend a four stage routine. Typically when something goes wrong on the course and you feel frustrated, annoyed or angry the first thing I recommend is that you acknowledge your anger - but not dwell on it! Then we must go into the second fix phase. When we are angry we tend to speed up and make knee jerk reactions. I'll get the golfer to take a nice even breath to help gain control and slow the situation down again. Sometimes I'll get them to use a physical cue such as snapping a wrist band,

pinching their nose or tweaking their cap. This becomes symbolic of slowing down and taking control of the situation. The third phase is the forget phase. I'll get the golfer to challenge their rationality and logic. They must acknowledge that the shot is finished and they cannot play it again. There is no benefit in dwelling on a bad shot. The final phase is to choose a constructive focus. Now you have a fresh shot and a fresh opportunity to play the kind of shot you want to play. So you replace your bad anger habit with a new and more helpful habit.

Ultimately what we want to achieve is consistent golf, and this new routine will help you to achieve that. To begin with you'll forget to do the routine, but that goes back to learning and practicing these techniques. Your bad habits have been ingrained for years, and you have to spend time undoing and changing them. Eventually through constantly challenging yourself the new habits will come, and you will gain the composure you are looking for.

I will also work on a pre-shot routine. For me that is the anchor to any good golfer. Most people think they have a routine, but usually they haven't got the psychology side of it. The whole point of the pre-shot routine is to get you physically and mentally ready to take a shot. Physically you might be ready but if you are still dwelling on the last bad shot you are not mentally ready. I help my golfers to develop a signal as they approach a shot that cues them into concentrating on the task at hand. This will help them to focus their attention on the fresh challenge ahead of them, rather than what has gone on in the past.

Another thing I get people to do is to go through what if? scenarios. What if I play three bad shots in a row? What if I stuff up the first two shots? What is going to be my strategy if this happens? I get them to think through these types of scenarios, create an appropriate action plan and then visualise themselves completing this strategy. If you allow yourself to see yourself dealing with the situation effectively then you are more likely to manage should it happen.

**Sounds useful to any golfer...**

Sports psychology can help a golfer play consistently, overcome the yips, increase confidence, cope with pressure effectively. The list goes on and on. Sports psychology techniques and strategies are also useful for life in general. In day to day life, you can get hacked off in the supermarket or with your boss, you can be nervous about an interview, lose concentration in a meeting. I think sports psychology techniques and strategies can work for life, not just golf.

To identify your problems on the golf course and work out effective strategies to improve your game or attitude contact:

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Allison will be making a regular contribution to the magazine, starting next issue with advice on how to create a sound pre shot routine.

