

An educational placebo effect intervention reduces the likelihood of athletes using performance enhancing drugs

Background

Recent research has reported that placebo effects can significantly improve sport performance. However, while research has generated knowledge about placebo effects on sport performance, there is limited research devoted to how this can support applied practice. In light of this, it has been suggested that placebo effect research could be harnessed and used as a tool to prevent drug use in sport. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of an educational placebo effect intervention on an athlete's decision to use performance enhancing drugs.

Method

Elite athletes ($N=169$; 56% male, age= 18.2 ± 0.4 yrs) attended a one-hour educational placebo effect intervention. The session was delivered by a facilitator using Power-point in a university classroom. The session introduced participants to placebo effects, the role expectations and prior experiences can have on the effectiveness of performance enhancing drugs and placebo effect research on sport performance. Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to critically examine the need to use performance enhancing drugs and to consider the role of placebo effects. Participants completed measures of performance enhancing drug use pre and one-week post intervention.

Results

Data indicated that participants were less likely to use performance enhancing drugs following the intervention ($p<.001$, $d=0.42$).

Conclusion

The results of this study provide novel evidence to suggest that an educational placebo effect intervention may be an effective in preventing drug use in sport. Future research should aim to harness knowledge of placebo effects to prevent other drug use behaviours.