

WANT A CURE FOR “THE YIPS”?

Most likely you're looking in the wrong place! Philip Moore, BSc Counselling & Psychotherapy and a member of Rathfarnham Golf Club.



Looking in the wrong place entails wasting valuable golfing years and pleasure trying every technical tip under the sun only to be disappointed. A horrible “Groundhog Day” experience of yip tips!

Why? Because what we golfers call “The Yips” is in fact a condition called “focal dystonia”, a psychological disorder that affects our ability to control fine movement. It is characterised by clumsy muscle control or even the inability to make any movement when in the form of LMS (Lost Move Syndrome). The Dystonia Medical Research Association likens the affected nerve transmission to a “computer virus” or “hard drive crash” of a person’s internal programming and movements.

Some time ago, Pat Geraghty, a friend of mine and a teaching professional with a background in psychology from his college days in the US, asked for my input in addressing the psychological issues behind “The Yips”.

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I’m a psychotherapist in private practice and I suffered “The Yips” myself a few years ago. I have also seen lots of evidence from my own club that it’s a condition that’s reasonably common. We started putting together a short intervention protocol, six to eight sessions, based around EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing). Ten volunteers agreed to be guinea pigs and I thank them for their valued input. The results were very positive which prompted me to write this article.

The underlying problem from my experience working with yips affected golfers arises from anxiety. Typically those affected are people who have used anxiety to help them in their careers and lives to be the best they can be with high standards and conscientiousness. Anxiety has somehow inappropriately seemed to work and become their friend. The second factor is “perfectionism”. For example, I must get this putt or I’ll be

negatively judged by myself or my playing partners, I’ll let myself down. Thirdly we “ruminate” off the course when we have “The Yips” with thoughts usually directed towards self-critical negative appraisal and worry over future putting failures. Finally “reinvestment” - practising with different techniques or putters without addressing the underlying relationship between long term anxiety and our bodies.

I nearly feel guilty about directing you to Youtube and the unfortunate Scott Boswell bowling a fateful over in the 2001 Cheltenham and Gloucester (C&G) trophy final. He got an attack of “The Yips”. He said it felt like the batsman was 50 yds away. He proceeded to bowl two 5ft wides, his third ball he couldn’t release and then he completely froze! I may not have the order exactly correct but you get the picture. This uncomfortable anecdote demonstrates that the yips is not about skill or technique. Scott Boswell’s bowling ability was well above average and had been for some time. It’s “The Yips” because someone fails miserably to perform a physical action they would normally execute to a much higher standard. Scott Boswell’s unconscious brain would not allow him to bowl because for some reason it deemed the act to be unsafe. Deep in our brains, we have an automatic fight, flight or freeze mechanism, which has served us well since our ancestors were reptiles. When threatened, the amygdala, a part of the brain that manages these situations, floods our bodies with the necessary chemicals we require to make us more alert, stronger and faster so we can best respond to a perceived threat.

Today thankfully we don’t normally have life-threatening situations that require an automatic physical response, but we have stressful lives that make us anxious and trigger this deep-rooted fight or flight response. How susceptible we are to anxiety is complicated and individual because we all have different personality characteristics and life experiences. But research suggests that just under 40% of reasonable to good golfers will suffer the yips at some time. Golf is one of the few sports to which we can apply “fixes” to limit the skills deficit caused by “The Yips” - long putters, different grips, various distraction techniques etc.. These “fixes” tend not to last and are unreliable under pressure for three reasons, (1) they don’t address the long term maladapted memories that make us react automatically, (2) we typically need to be calm in the first place to use them and (3) our automatic brain and present cognitive brain are sending contradictory instructions to our muscles.

Our response to anxiety doesn’t mean we’re weak but we will be weakened if we don’t deal with it. Dystonia and Lost Move Syndrome (the sudden inability to perform a movement executed without concern,

“choking”), are psychological conditions and nothing to do with the make of putter we use or our putting technique! In golf we call dystonia “The Yips”, but it presents under different names in diverse disciplines such as darts, basketball and ballet to name a few. Both “The Yips” and LMS (choking) have the capacity for ruining our enjoyment of golf and more seriously the capacity to end professional careers. In this way, a gifted golfing individual with a potentially lucrative professional career can be reduced to golfing incompetence by dystonia and/or LMS.

Most golfers with the yips have never been to a psychotherapist and would not think of doing so, yet, that’s where their best chance of a cure lies. I hope this article has given food for thought to yips sufferers and another option for them to explore in order to rid themselves of a very debilitating condition.