

Sports Psychology on Ice

Sarah Fenwick provides a vivid and honest account of providing applied support in challenging circumstances



Tarka L'Herpiniere and Katie-Jane Cooper

“It’s awful, the worst day of our lives”, and a tearful “if it wasn’t for Tarka, I’d quit.” were the statements (by satellite phone from the top of the world’s third largest ice cap) that led me to the most intense and challenging seven minutes I’ve ever had in my sport psychology career.

The objective was to provide psychological support to Tarka L’Herpiniere and Katie-Jane Cooper in the lead up to, and during, their Rivers of Ice expedition.

Their challenge was to be the first successful fully unsupported (using only human power and no food caches) north-to-south crossing of the largely unexplored Southern Patagonian ice cap.

Tarka has a lifetime of expedition experience, whereas Katie quit her career as a fashion model to join Tarka on expeditions when they met four years ago. One of their goals is to perpetually discover how resilient, resourceful, determined and flexible they can be. For

many different reasons and on many different levels, this was to be the most extreme and challenging expedition for both of them, especially as they rated their chances of success at less than 40%.

My challenges included: Having less than a month to work with them individually, as a team and as a couple before they left; finding out what research is available on teams functioning in extreme environments; and, whilst they were on the expedition, the satellite phone support, which was restricted to 5–10 minutes, often with a poor connection (the longest connection was 12 minutes).

Getting to know them

Tarka and Katie were very aware that the Rivers of Ice expedition would be, both physically and mentally, a very high risk. To develop their self-awareness and that of each other (e.g., how they might [dys] function and put themselves and the expedition at risk, especially when under

extreme pressure), we assessed their “bright” and “dark” side personality styles using Hogan Development Survey and Hogan Personality Inventory (Hogan & Hogan, 1997). We focused on how they could best manage themselves and each other to maximise their ability to function effectively as individuals, a team and a couple. And we identified and practised tools and techniques they might find useful. We also explored and put into practice tools and techniques to help them manage themselves and significant others in the build-up to departure. The topics covered included managing their own and others’ expectations and fears, managing stress, “what-if?” scenarios and last-minute changes to plans.

The research

I found a few articles that were available on the psychological effects of this type of environment. I also owe thanks to Paula Brown who shared her learning from working with Team QinetiQ (Cracknell, Fogle and Coats) in the 2009 South Pole Race.

Key moments

Day 7: Katie: “It’s physically OK, but mentally horrible, I’m miserable. If only we had visibility and could talk, it would be so much better.” Tarka was just ahead but her gregarious personality was struggling with the perceived isolation due to the strong wind and poor visibility. The focus was on reviewing previously identified and practised techniques (e.g., distraction techniques, setting mini goals/rewards).

Day 12: After days of zero visibility, Tarka lost his temper because the weather was either making or breaking the expedition and “you have the pressure of everybody watching and wanting us to succeed.” We focused on controlling the “controllables” by refocusing energy and perceptions of others.

Katie-Jane tackles an ice climb



COURTESY OF TARKA L'HERPINIERE AND KATIE-JANE COOPER



Tarka on Jorge Montt Glacier

Day 12: Katie: "Why am I doing this? What is the point? It's boredom, monotonous, miserable, wet and cold." We worked on goals, refocusing on why she/they were doing it, memorable moments and the support she'd like from Tarka (and reviewing her positive mantra).

Day 15: Katie: "Last night, I reached the biggest low on the trip and burst into tears." She also reported a mild panic attack. The satellite signal only allowed us time to review using deep abdominal breathing to manage her anxiety.

Day 18: Tarka: "It's awful, the worst day of our lives." The conditions had got even worse. Tarka also reported being extremely frustrated so I worked with him on how he could manage his frustration with the uncontrollable weather (e.g., giving it personality and giving himself permission to vent his frustrations (though not on Katie!).

Day 18: Katie (tearfully): "If it wasn't for Tarka, I'd quit." This was one of the most intense and challenging seven minutes I've had in my coaching career. We refocused Katie on the reasons she was there, what success meant to her, and reviewed her strengths. Seven minutes, later she commented: "Just talking I feel so much better. I won't quit."

Day 26: Tarka's frustration built up again as hunger, cold and fatigue began to get to them and the weather closed in again. They were at beginning of the most technically challenging point: An 8km stretch of crevasses, seracs and ice cliffs that required not only good visibility, but also absolute mental and physical readiness. We focused on how they could make best use of their strengths to tackle this section.

Day 31: Tarka: "All gone very wrong"; Katie: "This morning, I was terrified and, today, we are fighting for our lives and the end doesn't matter any more." They were in a survival situation; their tent had been shredded and crushed in a storm of 60-knot winds and over 4m of snowfall within 48 hours. This brief session focused on dealing with survival decisions, "what-if?" scenarios and leveraging Tarka's strength to remain calm and rational in such stressful situations.

The outcome: Tarka and Katie travelled across the ice cap for 30 days, making good progress towards their goal. Although the conditions were challenging, they were still

within their physical capabilities and the fastest to reach the Fella Reichert Cerro Mayo section (75% of the distance) when their tent was destroyed. Their decision to descend the Spagazzini Glacier was their best exit strategy.

Tarka: "I think it worked brilliantly." This was his reflection on the impact of working with a sport psychologist. He has also suggested that, for future expeditions, he would like all team members to be both bright and dark side personality profiled as he thought this really contributed to team effectiveness.

Katie: "I truly believe the bits we did together made a difference. The work we did together certainly helped me." She reports that on the expedition "I became a different person" and that this was helped by psychological tools and techniques. Katie sums up her experiences with "I was absolutely thrilled with how I coped and I didn't feel like a hindrance to Tarka." From the outset I was concerned about how I would coach effectively in 5–10 minutes; however, this was helped by focusing on really getting to know them before they left the UK. I was fortunate that they made this easy for me by both being incredibly open and honest. So when they phoned in during the expedition, we quickly got to the point and were very focused. Rather than replicating Whitmore's coaching model (Whitmore, 1996) Goal, Reality, Options, What to do (GROW), it became RGOW as the opening comment typically described the reality of the situation. At times, it was difficult not to be distracted by concerns of quality and the length of the connection (several phone conversations were conducted during a howling gale).

After the call on Day 31, I found myself particularly emotional and stressed by their now "survival" situation. It rekindled memories of my own helicopter evacuation from a mountain, where I'd incurred serious back injuries. I sought supervision around this, which highlighted: (a) My very strong empathy; and (b) I was frustrated at not being able to provide a solution (it wasn't my role) and that it was out of my control!

Overall, this has been a fascinating project to be involved in, and I am delighted to be working with Katie and Tarka on their future expeditions.

For more information on the coaching work, see: www.rivers-of-ice.com/updates/psychological/ and www.rivers-of-ice.com/updates/psychological/assessment/ Katie and Tarka's motivation to complete this challenge is still strong, and they have announced they will make another attempt next year "fitter, fatter and faster"; (for more information and contact details, visit www.rivers-of-ice.com).

Learnings

What worked for me:

- Given the physical, environmental and psychological stresses Katie and Tarka would encounter, knowing their bright and dark sides was key to maximising strengths and managing potentially dysfunctional behaviours
- Having an appreciation of the potential physical, environmental and psychological stressors built the clients' confidence and added value in me as their sport psychologist
- Given the short lead-in time, openness and honesty were key to a successful relationship
- Working through "what-if?" scenarios in advance facilitated decision making at critical times
- Reflection and supervision are crucial to becoming a great sport psychologist.

What to address before the Katie and Tarka's next attempt:

- Identify and practise a wider range of tools and techniques in greater depth so they will know which ones work best and use them automatically before they really need them
- Work on appropriate and effective coping strategies
- More in-depth work with similarities and differences (e.g., motivations, goals, personalities, etc) between the team and the couple. ■

References

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Sarah Fenwick (CPsychol, CBC, AC, MSCP)



Sarah is a BASES Accredited Sport and Exercise Scientist and a business/executive coach. For more information, visit www.sarah-fenwick.com; e-mail sarah@sarah-fenwick.com or telephone 07974 829955.