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Why great athletes are great liars



by: [Lindsey Wilson](#) In this article:

- Explore why self-deception is an evolutionary advantage that leads to higher performance.
- Positive Performance's Lindsey Wilson shares her experience with self-deception
- Learn how self-deception works, and how to determine if it's right for you or your team.
- Implement a simple, four-step process to practicing self-deception and using it to improve your team's self image and overall performance.

Great athletes are great liars. It's the unspoken superpower of top tier performers. When I played, I was full on Pinocchio. Whether it was during practice or during a competition, I'd lie to myself constantly, saying things like:

- **"I never get tired."** Humanly impossible and 100% *not* true... for anyone.
- **"I only have so many misses in me,"** when I was missing shots. Sort of true

(maybe?) but there is no statistical reason I couldn't keep missing, forever and ever. Science, after all, plays no favorites.

- **"We can beat them, we can beat them, we can beat them..."** I chanted like The Little Engine That Could when we were up against a team 'better' than us. Upsets happened all the time to other teams. Why couldn't they happen to us?
- **"I'm not nervous to play that team. I'm excited!"** Is there a difference? I suppose so... mostly in my mind, though. It fed my athlete's pride that, even if the opponent were superior, I had the potential to beat them.
- **"We got this!"** Even if we were down by 10 with two minutes to go, the other team had momentum, and we obviously didn't. But, never say die!

While it didn't work all that well for Pinocchio, lying is a necessary tactic in athletics. In a new book, *"Denial: Self-Deception, False Beliefs, and the Origins of the Human Mind,"* by Dr. Ajit Varki, he contends that our unique ability to deny or deceive reality may also be the key to our success on the evolutionary ladder.

Varki goes to point out several examples of the fact that, "humans employ denial on many levels — political, social and religious". Furthermore, he said, "In some case the denials are actually good, because they help us get through the day and get things done." Ironically, the better you are at self-deception the more likely you are to be successful because let's face it, we all face overwhelming challenges that seem unbeatable. Yet time and time again, we manage to overcome and even excel against overwhelming odds.

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Sports are a battle of wills

Willpower is about having a stubborn resilience that ignores the facts of a situation. If you believe in your abilities, despite all odds, you have a better chance of winning. When you are down, getting crushed by your opponent, you cannot get up and triumph without lying to yourself that you can win this...

that you *will* win this. Of course, there is a down side (and not just the obvious examples of people like Lance Armstrong). Even for people like myself who relied mostly on self-deception to succeed, I sometimes had to suffer the ill consequences of such an approach:

- **Denial.** It was very difficult for me to admit when I was exhausted or hurt, even to

myself. Refusal to acknowledge physical limitations can easily lead to overtraining or injury.

- **Knowing when to turn it off.** After competition, an athlete must stop lying to themselves and be brutally honest in order to improve. Honesty isn't always easy to face, but turning off the lies and opening up to corrective criticism will help your game in the long run.
- **Suspending reality can contribute to negative habits, like gambling or excessive risk-taking.** When you think hard numbers don't apply to you it's easy to ignore the odds against you.
- **Substance abuse.** Reality must hit at some point. An athlete can either regroup and recharge, or seek a quicker (and more dangerous) route to delusion.

I love having a strong will (e.g. occasionally lying to myself). I think all the great feats in history have been accomplished by someone who was able to believe in something that wasn't real or wasn't true or wasn't easily obtainable. But I also think it's important to take a broader look at self-deception and realize that it is neither good nor bad—it's both and neither—and, like any great superpower, it's all about how one applies it.

For whom does self-deception work?

Self-deception isn't for everyone, but we've found these three guidelines work well in determining if it will work for a particular athlete:

- 1) It has to fit close to an athlete's or team's *current* viewpoint.** You can't change perspective through self-deception if what you're imagining is radically different from the existing reality. Practice visualization and affirmations beforehand to expand the current viewpoint.
- 2) It should come in small doses, not large ones.** For instance, if you have trouble with fundamental skills, it will be difficult to believe you will be a superstar in the future. However, you will probably be able to imagine having success, even if you can't do it today. Smaller, more believable steps are much more convincing than huge leaps and bounds.
- 3) It has to be practiced.** Don't expect to surprise your team with this! Implement self-deception during practices with visualization and positive affirmations. This is not a method to be introduced in high-pressure situations.

Will self-deception help your team?

Take a look at your athletes' view of themselves. Do they believe they are capable of coming back, overcoming a big deficit, etc.?

- If the answer is **"yes"**, then self-deception from themselves, other teammates, or from you can be a powerful, moving force.
- If the answer is **"no"**, help your athletes change their viewpoint with visualization, goal setting, confidence building, and support.

How to practice self-deception (case study)

Self-deception requires a particular series of actions in order to be successful. Athletes' limited performance is often due to the view they have of themselves, not their physical fitness or actual skill level. This happens time and time again with athletes, but the hindering mental state can be easily overcome by use of a simple process that I have broken down into four easy steps.

For this example, we had a football kicker who had never made a field goal from past the 35-yard line, but was physically capable of making the goal from farther away.

- 1) Specifically identify the athlete's self-imposed limitations.** In this case, not being able to make a field goal over 35 yards.
- 2) Have the kicker visualize kicking from 40 yards.** It is critical that they actually see and *feel* the whole process of being successful at it. Increasing the yardage by only five at a time is a small dose of realistic improvement and less intimidating than if the kicker was to imagine kicking from 50.
- 3) Practice visualizing for a week.** Click here for an overview of our [easy visualization technique](#).
- 4) After a week, have the athlete attempt a 40-yard field goal.** It might take a few tries keep a positive and reinforcing attitude. In this case, by the 5th try, the athlete kicked a beautiful goal right down the center of the uprights. We could see right away what a huge block this had been and what a relief he felt.
 - *Note: If he hadn't made this, we would have continued the visualization process so they get more 'reps' and mental experience with being successful from that distance.*
- 5) Follow-up with further reinforcement to establish this new state.** Continuing

to foster further success will lead to more and more confidence with this “new reality”. Additionally, this confidence translates into a higher likelihood that they will push through other mental barriers.

Does self-deception always work?

No, of course not. Reality can't exceed someone's physical or skill limitations; you can't force miracles to happen. But, if it doesn't work the first time, keep at it. Try making self-deception a regular part of practices to see where it will lead you.

It can take two or three attempts of using the self-deception process but, it only takes one success for an athlete to create a new self-image, thereby propelling them to perform in ways they never before imagined.

We'd love to hear your insights and experiences with self-deception below.



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As the Co-Founder and product guru for Positive Performance, Lindsey works with athletes and coaches to unlock coach, athlete, and team potential through mental performance training.