

Enhancing Athletes' Resilience through Counseling: A Phenomenological Approach to Balanced Lifestyle Education

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Abstract

This study explores the psychological and existential challenges athletes face —with a particular focus on how counseling and phenomenological approaches can effectively support them —, in maintaining a balanced lifestyle that fosters long-term resilience in their career. As athletes face the inevitable physical decline and identity crises during their professional career, counseling becomes crucial in helping them navigate these transitions. Employing hermeneutic and phenomenological perspectives, our approach interprets athlete discomfort as a symbolic text, engaging deeply with bodily experiences and suffering. This method facilitates a critical yet compassionate self-dialogue, enabling athletes to view physical decline not as an end but as an opportunity for growth and personal development. Specific counseling techniques, such as phenomenological diary, body mapping, and narrative restructuring, are highlighted for their effectiveness in promoting a holistic understanding of the athlete's identity and self-value. These interventions are tailored to support athletes at all stages of their careers—preparing them for the challenges ahead, supporting them during peaks, and assisting in the transition post-career. By fostering a balanced and conscious approach to sports practice, counseling plays a pivotal role in building lifelong resilience education, ensuring athletes can adapt and thrive in all aspects of their professional and personal lives.

Keywords:

athlete, counseling, phenomenology, resilience, education

1. Introduction

In the contemporary context, sport has acquired unprecedented relevance as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon. The figure of the athlete has become a symbol of success, discipline and self-improvement, embodying values deeply rooted in modern society. However, behind the idealised image of the athlete lies a universe of psychological tensions, emotional vulnerabilities and physical challenges that are often minimised or ignored. This essay aims to reveal the hidden dimensions of the athlete's discomfort, examining the psychic and physical illnesses that arise in sports practice from a psychoanalytic, hermeneutic, and phenomenological perspective.

From the perspective of sports psychoanalysis, figures such as Bauche (2003), Antonelli and Salvini (1978) have highlighted the emotional complexity inherent in sports practice. The athlete's body is not only an instrument of performance, but also a symbolic space loaded with unconscious meanings. It is an object of narcissistic investment, where desires,

fears and anxieties related to identity and social recognition are projected. Thus, the body in sport becomes a "stage" where internal conflicts are represented, from the desire for success to the fear of failure and obsolescence.

Sports psychology, on the other hand, has provided a comprehensive analysis of the emotional dynamics that run through the athlete, highlighting the impact of competition, social expectations and self-imposed pressures (Smith & Smoll, 1991). For this reason, sport practice can be seen as a psychological laboratory, where tensions between performance and emotional well-being reveal unconscious processes and behavioural patterns that demand clinical attention. In this sense, psychological distress and illnesses such as pre-competitive anxiety, body image disorders, post-success depression and addictions (to training, doping or perfection) are expressions of a deeper malaise, rooted in the construction of the athlete's identity.

2. Psychological illnesses related to sports



Athletes, in general, and top-level athletes in particular, are under extreme psychological pressure, stemming not only from the need to achieve and maintain excellent performance, but also from the constant public scrutiny and expectations of their coaches, sponsors, and fans. This constant pressure can contribute to the development of some psychological illnesses. Among the main illnesses that can appear among athletes are the following.

1) *Anxiety*. Performance anxiety is one of the most common psychological disorders among athletes. It can appear before, during, and after competition, and may be related to a fear of failure, fear of disappointing others, or fear of losing control over one's own body. For example, athletes playing individual sports tend to develop higher levels of performance anxiety than team athletes, due to perceived isolation and greater personal responsibility in competition. Performance anxiety can lead not only to decreased athletic performance, but also to serious psychological consequences, such as insomnia, irritability and lack of concentration.

2) *Depression* is another common psychological illness among athletes, although it is often underestimated. Causes may include physical decline, injury, lack of recognition and retirement from sport. Newman, Howells and Fletcher (2016) conducted a study on elite athletes, revealing that many of them face depressive episodes related to the perception that they can no longer maintain expected levels of performance. Depression can manifest itself in different ways, from loss of motivation and interest in sport to total alienation and social isolation.

3) *Burnout* is a syndrome of psychophysical exhaustion resulting from chronic uncontrolled stress, and manifests itself with symptoms such as chronic fatigue, emotional distancing and reduced professional effectiveness. Athletes who are under constant pressure to maintain high levels of performance are particularly vulnerable to developing burnout. Monfared et al. (2020) demonstrated how changes in biophysiological markers, such as cortisol levels, correlate with the perception of burnout in athletes, suggesting that burnout is not only a psychological condition, but also a biological response to prolonged stress. Burnout develops when the athlete, despite physical and mental exhaustion, continues to push themselves beyond their limits, often due to external expectations or their dependence on achieving a high level of performance. This behaviour, if prolonged over time, can lead to a loss of interest in sport, a

feeling of personal failure and more serious psychological disorders.

4) *Eating disorders* are particularly prevalent among athletes, especially in disciplines where weight control is crucial to performance, such as gymnastics, swimming, and track and field. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia are common disorders among these athletes, who often face extreme pressures to maintain a specific body weight. Gross et al. (2016) demonstrated that female collegiate athletes, in particular, are at increased risk of developing eating disorders due to a combination of social pressure, the need to maintain a "perfect" body image, and competition-related stress (Andersen & Williams, 1988). Eating disorders can be interpreted as an attempt by the athlete to exert control over an aspect of their life, when he or she feel that they are losing control over his or her performance or body. These disorders not only compromise the athlete's physical health but can also have severe psychological consequences, worsening the clinical picture of anxiety and depression.

5) *Addictions*. Another worrying phenomenon in the world of sport is the development of addictions, whether to doping substances or to drugs to control pain or stress. Often, the use of doping substances is a strategy to cope with performance anxiety and the fear of not living up to expectations. However, at the same time, it exposes athletes to serious health risks and compromises their psychological integrity. Addictions, which can also include the abuse of painkillers and stimulants, become a way for the athlete to continue to push himself beyond his body's natural limits, ignoring the signs of physical overload and deterioration. However, prolonged use of these substances not only damages physical health but further aggravates the psychological picture of the athlete, who becomes trapped in a spiral of addiction and deterioration.

3. Understanding and interpreting the athlete's discomfort

The psychological illnesses listed in the previous paragraph lead to forms of discomfort that have repercussions on the athlete's affective and psychological life, as well as their social relations with themselves and others. To interpret this malaise, we can use a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. From hermeneutics, malaise is analysed as a symbolic text, the interpretation of which allows us to decipher the hidden meanings behind the visible symptoms. Freudian psychoanalysis provides tools for reading these symptoms as manifestations of inner conflicts,

while phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the lived experience of the body and suffering.

Starting from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, we can highlight how the athlete's body is experienced not only as a physical object, but as a being-in-the-world. This existential reality integrates emotions, perceptions and subjective meanings. From this perspective, the athlete's body not only experiences physical pain or fatigue, but also faces symbolic tensions linked to self-image, failure, alienation and fear of decline. The athlete, caught up in the quest for perfection and performance, risks losing connection with their deepest identity, experiencing a dissociation between the body as a tool for success and the body as a source of pleasure and well-being. This fragmentation, as Antonelli and Salvini (1978) point out, can lead to states of depersonalization, in which the athlete no longer recognizes himself outside the competitive context.

The athlete's discomfort must be approached not only from a biomedical perspective, but also from a psychological and existential approach that allows access to the deeper meanings of the sporting experience. The analysis focuses on how psychic and physical illnesses reflect deeper tensions related to identity, desire and the meaning of existence. Psychoanalysis and phenomenology offer valuable tools for interpreting these phenomena and proposing therapeutic strategies oriented towards the resignification of the body and the emotional reconciliation of the athlete with themselves.

In the world of high-level sport, the relentless pursuit of performance often leads athletes to develop a complex and often painful relationship with their bodies. It is not only an instrument of performance, but an "object of love" through which ambitions, ideals of perfection and the construction of personal identity are manifested. From this perspective, the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches to counseling and philosophy can offer a deeper understanding of the existential discomfort and psychological illnesses that may arise during a sporting career, particularly in phases of decline, injury, or withdrawal from competitive activity (Balague & Andersen, 1993).

The phenomenological and hermeneutic approach is beneficial for exploring these dynamics. Phenomenology enables us to examine the athlete's lived experience of their body, focusing not only on the physical aspects but also on the subjective and

psychological ones. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, enables us to interpret the meaning that the athlete attributes to these experiences, providing a key to understanding how the body and performance influence the construction of their identity and sense of self in the world. This approach becomes crucial when the athlete faces crises, as it allows understanding psychological distress not only as a pathological reaction, but as a phenomenon intrinsic to the human condition (Stryer et al., 1998).

4. The athlete's body and its vulnerability

In high-level sport, for example, the athlete's body is charged with meanings that go beyond mere physical functionality. The body becomes a symbol, an object of love and a projection of the athlete's identity, through which ambitions, ideals of perfection and desires for recognition are expressed. In this context, narcissism plays a fundamental role in the construction of the athlete's self-image, as the athlete's personal and social value is deeply linked to their ability to excel and maintain a performing body (Miller & Kerr, 2002). That creates a complex psychological dynamic, which can lead to a profound crisis when the body begins to fail or the competitive career comes to an end (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001).

According to the phenomenological perspective, the athlete's body is not simply an instrument of performance, but a "center of lived experience" that reflects the athlete's identity and subjectivity. This concept becomes clear in the phenomenology of the body, which views the body not as an external object, but as a personally experienced entity through which the athlete interacts with the world and with others. The athlete identifies with their body, considering it not only as a means to achieve sporting results, but also as the embodiment of their ideals and personal worth. From this point of view, the body is charged with constant love and attention, but also with unrealistic expectations that can generate anxiety and stress.

The narcissistic relationship with the body is especially evident in elite athletes, who invest their identity and self-esteem in their ability to maintain a strong, high-performance body. In this context, narcissism is not simply a personality trait, but a psychological dynamic that arises from the interplay between the body, performance, and social recognition. Athletes constantly strive to excel not only to achieve success, but also to confirm their identity through the admiration and recognition of others (Hector et al., 2018).

One of the central aspects of the relationship between the athlete and their body is the vulnerability that emerges when the body begins to exhibit signs of decline, whether due to age, injury, or the intensity of physical activity. That is a crucial moment when the athlete is confronted with the reality of physical decline and the shattering of the idealized self-image. Since the athlete's identity is strongly linked to the ability to maintain high performance, physical vulnerability often leads to an existential crisis and narcissistic collapse.

High-level athletes perceive physical pain and body failure not only as a functional problem, but as a threat to the entire value system upon which they have built their self-esteem. Research has shown that the injured or failing body is not simply an obstacle to performance, but undermines the athlete's identity, leading him or her to experience profound performance anxiety and develop symptoms of depression.

In addition, sport psychology suggests that this narcissistic relationship with the body can lead athletes to self-destructive behaviors, such as overtraining, the use of doping substances or the refusal to accept their physical limits. The inability to accept one's vulnerability and the limits of the body can lead the athlete to an escalation of psychological suffering, often characterized by addictions and mood disorders.

When the athlete's body no longer responds to the demands of performance, the athlete experiences a trauma that can be compared to mourning. The narcissistic identification with the performing body is shattered, leading the athlete to face a profound identity crisis. Phenomenological studies have shown that the perception of physical decline is experienced as a loss not only of athletic ability, but also of a sense of self. Athletes are compelled to reconstruct their identity, as they are unable to rely on their body as the primary vehicle for social recognition (Aydoğan et al., 2022).

Hermeneutics applied to sport psychology enables us to interpret the process of accepting physical decline as a narrative through which the athlete reworks the meaning of their body and identity. Counseling, in this case, provides a space for reflection that enables the athlete to confront the trauma of decline and develop a new understanding of themselves, one that is no longer exclusively linked to performance.

Finally, it is important to note how society and the sporting context contribute to reinforcing athletes' bodily narcissism. Modern sports culture celebrates the body as a symbol of perfection and success, which in turn pushes athletes to develop unrealistic expectations of themselves. The obsession with physical perfection and the constant pressure to maintain a high level of performance fuels bodily narcissism, making athletes vulnerable to psychological crises when they can no longer maintain those standards.

In a study by Newman et al. (2016), it was found that many athletes experience a duality: on the one hand, the body and performance act as a vehicle to achieve success and escape depressive symptoms; on the other hand, pressure and overidentification with performance lead to an intensification of depressive symptoms, as the athlete can no longer maintain the expected level of performance. This paradox creates a dangerous psychological dynamic that can lead the athlete towards psychophysical exhaustion and a loss of meaning.

Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that the elite athlete's body is not only a means of performance but also becomes a central symbol in the construction of personal and social identity. Narcissism linked to the performance of the body can give rise to complex psychological dynamics, especially when the body begins to fail or the competitive career comes to an end. The phenomenological and hermeneutic approach offers valuable tools for understanding these dynamics and helping athletes navigate identity crises and the trauma of physical decline, fostering greater awareness of their relationship to their body and the world.

5. The trauma of decline and performance anxiety

Physical decline represents another of the most complex and traumatic challenges for top-level athletes. The athlete, whose body has long been the primary source of identity and self-esteem, is forced to come to terms with their vulnerability and the progressive loss of those physical capacities that have enabled them to achieve success and recognition. The trauma of decline manifests itself not only at the physical level, but also at the psychological level, as the athlete sees his or her self-image as a strong and invincible individual shattered. Performance anxiety, closely linked to this experience, intensifies as the athlete perceives the inability to maintain the level that had characterized their career.

The athlete experiences the loss of physical capacities as a genuine mourning. According to the phenomenological perspective, this experience can be compared to a process of separation not only from the performing body, but also from the whole identity that the athlete has built around it. In athletes, the fear of no longer being able to express their potential generates an intense sense of loss and frustration, like the stages of classical grief, which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance (Aydođan et al., 2022).

The athlete may experience feelings of disorientation, a loss of meaning, and a lack of purpose. The body, which had been perceived as an extension of one's identity, now becomes a source of anxiety and uncertainty. Physical decline, therefore, is not just a matter of injury or diminished performance but involves a more profound identity crisis.

Performance anxiety is one of the main psychological consequences of physical decline. The athlete, aware of his or her progressive decline in efficiency, constantly lives with the fear of not living up to expectations, both his or her own and others'. Hector, Raabe and Wrisberg (2018) highlighted how performance anxiety in athletes can be amplified by the need to continuously confirm one's value through tangible results, creating a spiral of stress and frustration that can lead to psychological burnout.

Performance anxiety can manifest itself both during the decline phase and when attempting to return from injury. Athletes are forced to prove, both to themselves and others, that they are still capable of competing at a high level. However, the body no longer responds as it did in the past, which fuels the fear of failure. Studies show that the pressure to maintain high performance can lead to significant deterioration of the athlete's mental health, with symptoms of anxiety, insomnia and, in extreme cases, depression (Monfared et al., 2020).

One of the key elements of the trauma of physical decline is the rupture with the idealized self-image. For many athletes, their self-image has been constructed around physical abilities and athletic performance. The body becomes a symbolic representation of one's value and strength, not only in the eyes of others, but especially in the eyes of the athlete himself. When the body begins to fail, this image is shattered and the athlete is forced to confront a version of himself or herself that no longer meets personal and social expectations.

6. Psychological dependence on performance

High-level athletes often develop a form of psychological dependence on performance, a phenomenon that arises from the constant need to confirm their value through excellent sporting results. This addiction can become dangerous, as it not only affects the psychological well-being of the athlete, but can also lead to physical overload, exhaustion and even self-destructive behavior. The athlete no longer perceives himself as a complete person, but as an individual whose value is closely linked to his ability to achieve and maintain a high level of performance. This constant need for recognition and affirmation contributes to a vicious cycle of anxiety, stress and pressure.

Performance addiction has deep roots in the psychology of sport. Athletes, especially high-level competitive athletes, often build their identity around their sporting achievements. This process intensifies throughout their careers, as social, economic and media pressure fuels the perception that their value is intrinsically linked to sporting success.

This form of psychological dependence manifests itself mainly in two ways: on the one hand, through the constant search for recognition from the public, the media and coaches; on the other hand, through a continuous need for internal self-validation, which leads the athlete to measure their value in terms of ability to maintain a high level of performance. This dynamic can become a psychological trap, as the athlete finds himself constantly pursuing the perfect performance, neglecting his psychophysical well-being.

Psychological dependence on performance is closely related to the phenomena of performance anxiety and burnout. Chronic performance anxiety can lead to burnout, a syndrome characterized by physical and emotional exhaustion, loss of motivation and decreased performance. Monfared et al. (2020) demonstrated in their study on biocognitive markers of burnout in athletes that burnout is not only a consequence of physical exhaustion but is also fueled by a continuous feeling of inadequacy and failure to maintain high levels of performance. Athletes who develop this syndrome no longer find pleasure in competition and experience a form of psychological exhaustion that can lead to premature retirement (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000) or self-destructive behaviors.

7. The athlete's unconscious and the conflict with the ideal self

One of the most complex and profound aspects of the psychological experience of high-level athletes concerns the conflict between the authentic self and the ideal self. The ideal self represents the athlete's image of what he/she would like to become, a perfect version of himself/herself that satisfies external expectations, such as those of the public, coaches and the media, but also internal ones, such as the standards that the athlete imposes on himself/herself. This conflict between the authentic self, with its limitations and vulnerabilities, and the ideal self can be a source of enormous psychological stress, especially when the body is no longer able to respond to these expectations.

In the lives of athletes, the ideal self often coincides with the image of a perfect and invincible individual, capable of achieving exceptional results and maintaining a very high level of performance. However, the real body and mind of the athlete, like those of any human being, are subject to vulnerability, fatigue and limitations. The conflict between the authentic self and the ideal self also manifests itself in obsessive behaviors, such as the continuous improvement of the body through intensive training and the adoption of extreme diets or exaggerated recovery techniques. In some cases, the fear of not measuring up may push athletes toward the use of doping substances or other dangerous behaviors. This constant pressure can lead to psychophysical overload, with devastating consequences for the athlete's mental and physical health.

In the sport context, the unconscious plays a crucial role in maintaining and nurturing the conflict between the real self and the ideal self. According to the psychoanalytic perspective, many of the psychological tensions experienced by athletes' stem from unconscious dynamics, which influence their choices and behaviours in subtle but powerful ways.

The unconscious can be seen as a silent engine that drives the athlete to strive for the ideal Self, but often without being fully aware of the extent to which external expectations or unresolved internal conflicts influence this goal. In many cases, the athlete develops a sense of self-doubt because they are unable to bridge the gap between the authentic Self and the ideal Self. This state of frustration may manifest itself in dreams, repetitive behaviors or performance anxiety. It may even lead to episodes of depression, as the athlete perceives him/herself as a failure not only in his/her sports career, but also in his/her existence in general.

According to the hermeneutic approach, this tension can be understood as a narrative process in which the athlete constructs their identity based on what they believe they should be, rather than what they are, and tells themselves a story about it. Many athletes in these situations may experience a disconnect between their inner experience and the outer image they are forced to maintain. This process can lead to an existential crisis, in which the athlete can no longer distinguish between who they truly are and who they need to be in order to succeed.

8. The contribution of the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to the athlete's discomfort

Phenomenology and hermeneutics offer valuable tools to help athletes cope with physical decline, rework their lived experience, and construct an identity that integrates their vulnerabilities, thereby preventing the decline in performance from being experienced as an unbearable personal failure (Hanin, 2000). Phenomenology focuses on the subjective perception of the body, exploring how the athlete not only considers it in terms of functional capacities, but also as an element loaded with existential meaning. At the same time, hermeneutics intervenes in the interpretation of decline, inscribing physical limitations within the normal cyclical nature of life and the athletic career: suffering and loss of performance are no longer understood as indicators of inadequacy, but as stages on a path of growth. Through philosophical counseling or phenomenological counseling, the athlete can redefine their self-worth and identity, reducing performance anxiety and mitigating the identity crises that arise when performance is no longer at its highest level. This reworking is also crucial in understanding and preventing self-destructive behaviors, such as resorting to doping substances, which often represent a desperate attempt to react to external pressure and fear of losing competitive position.

When psychological disorders related to anxiety, depression or burnout arise, an integrated approach of counseling and psychotherapy, which also includes Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) techniques, can foster acceptance of negative emotions and the development of greater psychological flexibility. Similarly, hermeneutics helps athletes reread their painful experiences—from injury to natural physical decline—within a broader existential narrative, facilitating detachment from an exclusive

identification with competitive outcomes. In this sense, phenomenological counseling enables an in-depth exploration of the conflict between the real Self and the ideal Self, often exacerbated by unrealistic expectations and a sports culture that prioritises victory above all else. Finally, in the delicate moment of transition that accompanies the exit from the competitive circuit, the hermeneutic and dialogical support of psychology is decisive in preventing the sense of emptiness and mourning that can arise when social recognition linked to sporting results is lost: reformulating identity beyond performance means rediscovering new possibilities of fulfillment, allowing the body and mind to find a new sustainable and broader balance that integrates the sporting experience with a global and harmonious vision of the self (Weinberg, & Gould, 2014).

9. An itinerary of hermeneutic-phenomenological counseling for athletes

In cases of discomfort and malaise on the part of the athlete which, however, are not related to physical or mental illnesses or pathologies, it is possible to think of the development and implementation of an assistance itinerary centered on counseling and built on hermeneutic and phenomenological principles aimed at guiding the athlete towards a deeper understanding of his or her sporting experience, integrating the physical, emotional and symbolic experiences that arise during training, competitions and moments of transition. In the initial phase, the focus is on welcoming and defining objectives: in a climate of trust, the athlete exposes his or her problems (performance anxiety, identity crisis, injuries, fear of physical decline), laying the groundwork for a non-judgmental exploration.

The phenomenological exploration phase is fundamental to understanding how the athlete experiences their body, successes, and failures. Through the detailed description of feelings, emotions and thoughts, a more authentic picture of the relationship to performance emerges. In parallel, the hermeneutic approach enables interpretation and understanding of key events in a sports career; it is not only about analysing victories and defeats, but also about capturing the values, symbols, and personal narratives that influence self-perception (Fig. 1).

Subsequently, work is done on reworking the experience and constructing a new narrative. In this phase, the athlete is encouraged to review their sporting history, reconciling the self with its limitations and uncertainties, as well as with the ideal

self, often fueled by external expectations. An injury or a drop in performance can thus become moments of growth and reflection, rather than insurmountable obstacles. This path of "rewriting" also allows for more serene preparation for possible future changes, such as retirement from competitive sport (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Figure 1

The phases of the counseling process

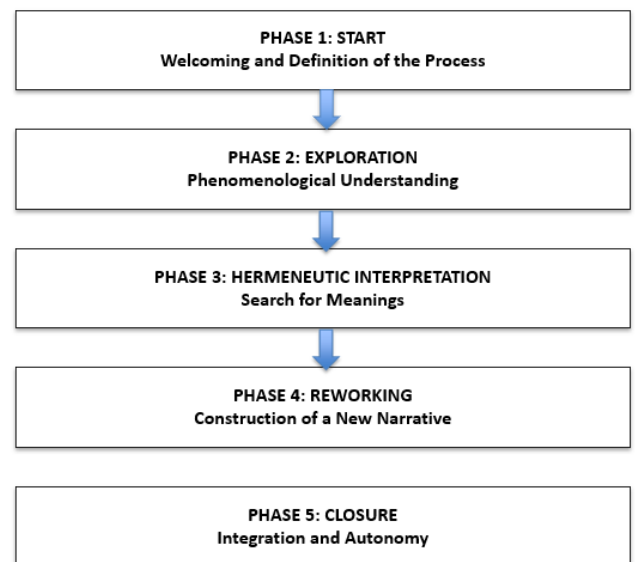
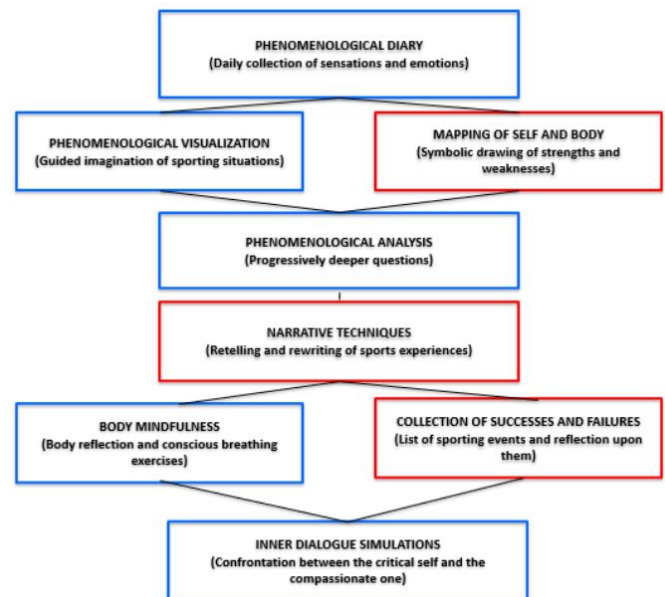


Figure 2

Techniques and tools of counseling process



To facilitate this process, various techniques and practical tools are proposed. The phenomenological diary encourages daily self-reflection, while guided visualisation and body mindfulness help explore internal sensations and tensions. The map of the self and body allows for representing strengths and fragilities. The dialogue between the critical and

compassionate self highlights internal conflicts. Finally, the closing phase aims to consolidate the athlete's autonomy by comparing what has emerged and applying the techniques acquired. This process enables the athlete to develop a renewed self-awareness, learning to integrate their sporting identity into a broader and more harmonious vision of life (Fig. 2).

10. Conclusions

High-level athletes face not only physical challenges, but also psychological and existential difficulties rooted in the pressures of performance and the construction of an ideal self-image. The phenomenological and hermeneutic approach reveals itself as an essential tool for deconstructing these tensions, offering athletes the opportunity to re-signify their body as an integral part of their overall identity, rather than merely as a means to achieve success. In this framework, moments of decline, injury or transition are no longer experienced as irreparable failures, but as stages in a personal journey of growth and awareness.

Through integrated psychological interventions, it is possible to reduce the adverse effects of anxiety, depression and addictions, and to promote a more balanced view of one's sporting identity. This interdisciplinary approach not only promotes lasting psychological well-being but also lays the foundation for an identity that transcends mere competitive achievement, embracing a broader and more sustainable perspective on personal fulfilment.

Finally, the support offered by hermeneutic-phenomenological counseling guides athletes in constructing an existential narrative that values their experiences, accepting limits and vulnerabilities as part of their being. This reworking not only facilitates overcoming identity crises linked to withdrawal from competitive activity but also contributes to resizing the role of performance in defining personal value. In this way, the athlete can rediscover new possibilities for fulfilment and build a harmonious relationship with their body and life experience.

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