

Partner Case Study 4: Kathi

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Intake

The intake process will be exploratory in nature as this is the first time meeting Kathi. From the difficulties mentioned, Kathi is currently experiencing anxiety, relationship issues, and career hardships, and it would be appropriate for the SPC to explore her attachments. Questions from the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Sá, 2024) are meant to help the client explore relational experiences throughout their lifespan with their parents and how they may impact her currently (Sá, 2024). While this is psychodynamic in nature, it can provide insight into Kathi's rationale for her training and the difficulties she is perceiving in her relationship. The AAI pairs well with Erikson's approach as the interviewing will allow the SPC to see if she has been able to resolve the various conflicts mentioned in the psychosocial approach: trust vs mistrust, autonomy vs shame, initiative vs guilt, industry vs inferiority, identity vs confusion, intimacy vs isolation, generativity vs stagnation, and integrity vs despair (McLeod, 2025). Providing the SPC with a fuller understanding of Kathi's life experience.

It is equally important to note that Kathi experiences anxiety-like symptoms outside the performance context. There is a potential to ensure best practice by working in conjunction with a counselor to determine the potential of anxiety disorders. This is an ethical obligation of the SPC to ensure care for the client (AASP, 2024). In order to provide a basis for referral, while gauging the severity of Kathi's anxiety experience, the SPC may utilize the competitive state anxiety inventory (CSAI-2) (Dingley, 2021). Exploration into her identity will be essential to understand her motivation to engage in competition while also facing several life difficulties.

Needs Analysis

1. Presenting Problems

Kathi's presenting problem stems from her limited ability to compete in the swimming portion of the triathlon and anxious symptoms during job interviews. During the triathlon, her focus is on her difficulties in the swimming event, which have led to a DNF. This label reduces her confidence as a performer. Kathi attributes her abilities as a performer to empower her in other facets of her life. Her self-talk during swimming and interviews typically undermines her abilities and reflects a poor self-image.

2. Predisposing Factors

Kathi has a deep connection with her performance background as an endurance runner. She states that she feels empowered by her success, placing a high value on performance, which transfers into her personal life. Within her personal life, she is a woman in STEM, a predominantly male field. During interviews, she describes having to prove her worth in a field where she is knowledgeable; however, she feels she must break the glass ceiling in both her performance and her work. Kathi wants to feel that she can contribute to both her team and her work. This aligns with Erikson's model stage seven (generativity vs stagnation). Where she feels useless if she can not perform.

3. Precipitating Factors

Kathi has competed in shorter triathlons, so with her aspirations to transition to Ironman, this will place greater psychological and physiological demands on her training. Her experiences with DNF affect her confidence and carry a sense of shame, as she feels she lets down her teammates. Additionally, her recent hardships in the job search have placed some strain on her marriage.

4. Perpetuating Factors -

Factors that continue to impact her well-being include Kathi's self-talk, predominantly towards her perceptions of swimming. She mentions that as soon as she begins the race, she reflects on her past negative experiences. This perpetuates a cycle of thinking that may limit her ability to maintain present-moment focus.

5. Protective Factors -

Kathi is committed to training for the Ironman and hiring a coach to help her prepare for the race. She mentions the support she receives from her triathlon team and seeks marriage counseling to work on her relationship. She is willing to seek help and support. While she worries about her Ironman performance, she recognizes her success in her previous triathlons.

Performance Enhancement Needs

Kathi's needs require a whole-person approach that would work towards establishing confidence in her identity and values. Actions to aid in this process would be to reduce current perceptions of her past performances, while creating helpful coping strategies that allow her to maintain present moment focus. Additionally, her experiences affect her ability to interview for jobs. There is potential that this anxiety could impact her daily living, with the potential to work in conjunction with a clinical psychologist, if an anxiety disorder is confirmed.

Case Formulation

Kathi is a triathlete in her 40's, who is self-referred, seeking support with continual difficulties in training for Ironman races, specifically in the swimming segment of the race, where anxiety and crowd contact trigger distress. She experiences self-doubt and reduced confidence, especially when she DNF's in her races. Her stress extends beyond the race, as she experiences career and relationship difficulties. These combined experiences impact her

confidence and sense of self. She hopes that success in her performance will provide momentum in relieving her additional life hardships.

Conceptualizing this case through a psychosocial lens, Kathi's case falls under stage seven of Erikson's model, generativity vs stagnation, this being where productivity, purpose, and contribution are central concerns in her life (McLeod, 2025). Her desire to compete in the Ironman may represent her ability to feel competent and accomplished following personal and professional setbacks. The SPC will work to develop compassion, providing Kathi with the space to develop her identity, values, and solidify her motivations for competing in the Ironman race. Assessments that may aid the SPC being the CSAI-2, and elements of the AAI may be used to explore her experiences with anxiety and relational patterns that may influence her performance.

Through a collaborative process, the SPC and Kathi will work to develop self-awareness of anxiety triggers, clarify values, develop identity alignment, and develop performance and life goals that allow for balance in all facets of her life. A consideration for the SPC being that her anxiety may extend beyond performance, potential consultation with a counselor will be helpful to rule-out anxiety disorders, and ensure comprehensive support. The goals of the consulting relationship will be to help Kathi rebuild confidence in her abilities, reconnect with her reasons for competing, and translate the resilience developed through sport into other areas of her life.

Intervention Selection (Strategies)

A person-centered, developmental lens is congruent with Kathi's age because she is mature enough to have the self-awareness to seek out help and has also already established much of her identity (Makepeace & Young, 2021). Although she is now experiencing some identity disruption after her job loss, the SPC can capitalize on past strengths to help her navigate this new stage of development. The Adult Attachment Interview (George et al., 1985) is relevant for

non-clinical populations because greater exposure to adverse childhood experiences is associated with unresolved trauma or loss (Thompson & Jaque, 2017). Part of exploring Kathi's identity is determining whether her childhood attachments have influenced her current motivation to complete an Ironman race. Thompson and Jaque (2017) also found that many individuals who were highly exposed were still classified as securely attached in the AAI interview. This likely meant that the adversity encouraged resilience mediated by secure attachments, education, and engaging in meaningful activities. The AAI is most useful in triangulation with clarifying her current values and identity composition. Makepeace and Young (2021) found that SPCs working with masters athletes benefitted from considering the complexity of their identities and values because they often have multiple roles involving work, family, and activities. The **values cards (Think2perform, 2025)** will help us examine the alignment between her athletic pursuits, professional identity, and marital/family role. Where current values and past experiences merge is in the composition of her identity. Filling out an identity pie chart will create a visual map of the interaction between past and present and to what extent the past is informing the present. It will also give a visual of the stakes in each of her roles, whether she is relying on one significantly more than the others.

Next the SPC will need to address the anxiety piece of her performance challenges. Leveraging her life experience is still an important part of changing her behavior (Makepeace & Young, 2021). Here again, the SPC will let Kathi lead the process by engaging in a **performance profile (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2009)**, which will enable her to self-reflect and identify her own priorities. Because Kathi is feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the Ironman race and the elusive goal of completion, the SPC will need to help her bridge the gaps in her performance profile with small steps. These steps need to be informed by the identity results to make sure we

are being productive in her goals. Breaking down the large Ironman goal into smaller, more manageable goals can also act as exposure exercises to help her handle the triggering portions of the race. We can break down each portion of the race and gradually start exposing her to more stimuli with increasing discomfort factors. The goals should be prioritized based on what benefits her sport the most but can also include non-specific goals to enhance her enjoyment of the sport (Bird et al., 2025). For example, the SPC may ask her to go for a more enjoyable swim or bike distance and environment to build her confidence and remind her that it can be a pleasurable activity. A final exercise will be the culmination of the intervention plan to pull together all previous work. She will write a letter to her younger self detailing how her life experiences have given her strength and all of her accomplishments so far. She will give her younger self advice on how to accomplish her goals and acknowledge her past experiences, both good and bad. Therapeutic Letter Writing has been identified as a good self-help tool because it gives the client the latitude and freedom to control their own story (Wright & Chung, 2001).

Intervention Plan & Design

The first stage in Kathi's intervention plan is storytelling. In order to ground the work in her priorities, the SPC needs to allow her space as the expert in her own story. This will take place in the first couple of sessions, where the SPC will also administer the AAI interview. At the end of the storytelling period, the SPC can administer the **values cards (Think2perform, 2025)** to open the discussion about whether her current pursuits and emotional states are in alignment with her narrative. The triangulation will be completed with the identity pie chart to create a composite visual of her identity data. It is important for the SPC to engage in this work first to ensure that Kathi feels autonomous in pursuing the behavioral changes because she can use these results to set the priorities for the next steps.

Once we have identified Kathi's motivations for pursuing the Ironman, we can better help her take the next steps to accomplish that goal. However, it is important that she maintains control over the process. As an adult, she is likely more self-reflective than an adolescent client and can handle a more nuanced goals setting process (Makepeace & Young 2021). So after her storytelling sessions, we will engage her in practical sessions to help her initiate behavior change. Thus, goal setting will begin with her performance profile so that it can inform her bottom-up goal breakdown. This will likely take a few sessions as it involves taking time to self-reflect and determine her ideal characteristics. Once we identify her small goals, she can begin implementing the small measures within her training routine. The SPC may choose to introduce the Therapeutic Letter Writing activity at any point in the behavioral module as dependent upon Kathi's available time and whether it would benefit her to use it as a culminating activity or to boost her confidence in her new behaviors.

Monitoring & Evaluation

The monitoring process will rely on Kathi's perceptions of progress and success. If she feels that improvement in her anxiety supersedes performance results, then the SPC must also use that as their gauge. This type of monitoring will rely heavily on her feedback about the each step of the plan and how she is feeling in the moment when trying to expose herself to more challenging stimuli. It may be beneficial to collaborate with her coaching staff, with her permission, to receive feedback on her training. If we are still working with Kathi when she makes her next Ironman attempt or competes in a smaller race, a post-event reflection would help us monitor the efficacy of the intervention plan (Chow & Luzzi, 2019). Lastly, we should revisit the identity pie chart during the behavior phase to check for any changes because she may have a shift in priorities if her professional life becomes more stable or she continues to get

rejections. If her professional identity starts increasing in percentage, then we will need to work with her on balancing her training with her new position and how that may affect her athletic identity salience. If she decides to work collaboratively with a licensed mental health provider, then we would need to have periodic check-ins with that person to ensure alignment between treatment and the intervention plan. With the person-centered developmental approach, it is most important that the SPC stays dynamic and is able to pivot if Kathi's priorities change.

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