TrueSport®

How to Regulate and Manage ALL Emotions

As the parent of a young athlete, you're probably used to seeing a whole range of emotions, from wild joy to intense anger to devastating sadness. While it's tempting to try to help your athlete ditch the anger and sadness, it's actually more important that you let your athlete experience, understand, and move through their range of emotions.

Here, TrueSport Expert Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders, explains exactly how you can support your emotional athlete so that you're setting them up for success on the field and in the real world. And remember: When we talk about emotions, it's not just about negative emotions. Being able to understand and regulate positive emotions is important as well.

Don't avoid emotions

You may have had a coach who told you to keep a stiff upper lip in the face of adversity, or maybe you're uncomfortable with big shows of emotion. But letting your athlete show their emotions in a nonjudgmental space is critical for their development.

"What I always try to reiterate to athletes, their parents, their families, and their coaches, is that all emotions serve an adaptive purpose," Chapman says. "Anger, frustration, excitement, disgust, sadness, grief in the event of a loss...all of those emotions are important. They're all trying to tell us to pay attention to what's going on internally and externally, and then to motivate us to engage in a specific action." In other words, emotions are trying to help us navigate our world successfully by helping us evolve our understanding of ourselves and how we relate to the world around us.

Understand the vocabulary

The crux of awareness training is recognizing that all emotions are complex, but Chapman explains that most people assume emotions are simply 'feelings.' "Athletes often say things like, 'I feel like I shouldn't have made that mistake,' or 'I feel like you shouldn't have said that to me,' but those aren't really feelings," Chapman points out.

It's important to understand what makes up an emotion:

- Thoughts—What I say to myself.
  - Example: "I'm so mad at my teammate."
- Feelings—Physical sensations.
  - Example: A higher heart rate or clenched fists.
- Behavior—What I do about it.
  - Example: The angry athlete may confront his teammate and yell at him.

Separate feelings from emotions
"If an athlete says, 'I feel anxious,' then a parent could ask them to explain the *feelings* of anxiety. And the kid might say, 'Well, my heart's beating fast.' Now that's an actual feeling," Chapman says.
From that point, you can work on changing the feeling. Start with those physical cues—in this case, a rapid heartbeat—by countering it with a physical stimulus, like pausing and taking a few deep breaths with the athlete's eyes closed. That's a start to control the feeling, so you can then shift focus to dealing with the thought that's causing the feeling.

Get out of emotional spirals by focusing on the present
Any emotion that your athlete is feeling has been triggered by a situation that happens before it. "It's important to teach athletes to become aware that how they respond with that emotion will lead to short and long-term consequences," Chapman says. Coming back to the present and focusing on the controllable elements of the situation, rather than giving in to an emotional reaction, is often easier said than done, but it's a critical skill to learn. "Can your athlete get focused on this pitch, this swing, this moment in time, as opposed to being concerned about what might happen in three days or what happened two hours ago?" Chapman asks.

Regulating emotion is important for positive emotion too
Emotional regulation is true for positive and negative emotional experiences, and successful athletes are good at regulating all strong emotion. Get too excited, and you could get ahead of yourself. Get too negative, and that could lead to a very poor performance. It's a balancing act and regulation will make it easier to find success.

"The classic example of too much positive emotion is anytime you watch a team performance, and they celebrate too early. One minute, you're celebrating your certain victory, the next minute, the other team gets the touchdown, you've lost, and you're crying," Chapman says.

Teach flexibility
Being flexible means being able to envision possible outcomes that are based on evidence. That's the key to emotional regulation: It's being able to say, "It could be _____. But then again, it could be _____." Or more specifically, "It could be that I'll never learn this skill. But then again, it could be that with practice, I'll get it eventually." Notice that the negative thought is still there, but the goal is to understand that there are also other possible outcomes.

Takeaway
Learning how to manage emotions, both the positive and negative, is key to success in sport and life beyond the field of play. These steps will help your athlete begin the journey to better understanding and controlling their emotions.

About TrueSport
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