The BASES Expert Statement on Emotion Regulation in Sport

Produced on behalf of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences by Prof Andy Lane FBASES, Dr Christopher Beedie, Dr Marc Jones, Dr Mark Uphill and Dr Tracey Devonport

Introduction

Emotions experienced before and during sports competition influence performance (Hanin, 2010). Appropriate emotional responses might be beneficial to an athlete by, for example, improving the economy of movement, improving the quality of interaction with teammates, reducing the risk of disciplinary action, and reducing the risk of injury. Emotion regulation is therefore regarded by sport psychologists as an important psychological skill. In the following expert statement, research findings from sport and relevant areas of psychology are reviewed prior to a discussion of the implications for athletes and practitioners.

Background and evidence

Emotion regulation is the automatic or deliberate use of strategies to initiate, maintain, modify or display emotions (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotions are subjective feelings experienced in response to events either in the athlete's environment, for example walking onto the field of play, or in the athlete's mind, for example anticipation of an upcoming event (Lazarus, 2000). Emotions usually encompass three types of response: physiological such as increased respiration and heart rates; cognitive such as the changes in attention, perception and information processing priorities; and behavioural such as aggression towards an opponent or displaying disgust at an official's decision.

Via these three types of response, emotions influence peoples' goals and motivations. Emotions can be functional, for example, the emotions of anger and fear can motivate individuals to deal with the causes of those emotions (the 'fight or flight response'). However, emotions can be dysfunctional, for example, an athlete might be angry about an official's decision, but recognise that an aggressive response might result in a penalty. In such a situation, maintaining the current emotion might not facilitate performance. Emotion regulation strategies are employed when such a discrepancy exists between current and desired emotions.

There are two distinct motivations to regulate emotion – hedonic and instrumental (Tamir, 2009). An athlete waking feeling angry and tense, who goes for a jog to make herself feel more positive, is regulating her emotions for hedonic reasons. In short, her motivation is to feel better. However, the same athlete, having learned from experience that she performs best when she feels angry, might use memories or imagery of anger-inducing events to up-regulate her anger prior to competition; she might even contrive an argument with a teammate, opponent or official to elicit the same effect. In this scenario she is regulating her emotions for instrumental reasons. Her motivation is to use her emotions to achieve a desired goal.

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Athletes are more likely to try to regulate an emotion if they believe that doing so will facilitate performance (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Athletes develop beliefs about emotions associated with optimal performance, and these beliefs play a role in emotion regulation in competition. For example, many athletes like to feel anxious before an event and will up-regulate that emotion accordingly (Lane *et al*., in press).

Many psychological strategies used by athletes serve to regulate emotion. For example, a marathon runner becoming aware of her muscles tightening during competition might use a relaxation strategy, or might direct her attention away from the muscles. At the same time, these strategies may also regulate her emotions by preventing her from becoming anxious or angry about the situation. These strategies may not be perceived by the athlete as emotion regulation per se. However, it is possible that, having relaxed her muscles and refocused her attention externally, her pace might drop and she might now be behind her race schedule. She might become anxious, and might consciously use a strategy such as self-talk or imagery to directly regulate that emotion. These latter strategies, aimed at anxiety reduction, would be perceived by the athlete as emotion regulation. Whether perceived as emotion regulation or not, most psychological skills interventions in sport have an effect on emotion.

The first two strategies above, relaxation and redirection of attention, prevented an emotional response; they are antecedent-focused. The third and fourth strategies, self-talk and imagery, regulated the emotion directly; they are response-focused. Gross and Thompson (2007) proposed a five-category model of antecedent- and response-focused emotion regulation strategies: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change and response modulation (the first four being antecedent-focused; the last, response-focused).

Situation selection refers to the process whereby an athlete actively chooses to place him/herself in one situation rather than another. Situation modification refers to attempts to modify external aspects of the environment. By doing either of these, an athlete may make it more likely that a desirable emotional state is attained or an undesirable one avoided (e.g., walking

Left: Arsene Wenger uses a lot of emotion in his coaching methods
Courtesy Action Images

away from an antagonistic opponent to prevent anger developing, or using humour to diffuse a tense situation). Attention deployment refers to the process whereby an athlete directs his/her attention to influence his/her emotions. That is, when it is difficult to change the situation, the athlete can choose to attend to stimuli that do not negatively impact on emotion (for example, listening to music on headphones to avoid listening to the crowd prior to an event). Cognitive change involves changing the meaning of an event or situation. For instance, a football player who has just missed a penalty may reappraise the extent of self-blame by saying, "It was a great shot, but an even better save by the keeper."

Response modulation refers to strategies designed to regulate the physiological and cognitive aspects of emotion as directly as possible. Regulating the physiological arousal associated with emotion makes intuitive sense in sport given that optimal arousal levels will vary substantially between sports, from the low arousal associated with sports such as archery to high arousal in sports such as power-lifting. Regulating strategies include progressive muscular relaxation, centring, imagery, listening to music and exercise.

Regulating the cognitive aspects of emotion, that is, emotionally driven thoughts, is another intuitively appealing strategy. However, when one attempts to suppress thoughts, particularly under the high cognitive load of competitive sport, the thoughts themselves may be exacerbated (Wegner, 1994). Ironically therefore, a conscious attempt to suppress angry thoughts may result in greater attention being paid to anger-related cues. Efforts to reduce thoughts associated with emotion might also intensify physiological arousal (Wegner, 1994). It has been proposed that there may be a cognitive cost to engaging in suppression, and that intense emotions might themselves interfere with cognitive regulatory processes (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007).

Conclusions and recommendations

Although research into emotion regulation in sport is in its relative infancy, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that athletes should use strategies that influence their appraisal of the situation to create the most appropriate emotional climate for competition. Research suggests that this approach is likely more effective than the suppression of emotions that have already happened. In short, where dysfunctional emotions in sport are concerned, prevention might be better than cure.

To enhance emotion regulation, athletes and practitioners should:

1. Identify emotional states associated with best and worst performance. These might vary from athlete to athlete.
2. Examine the use and effectiveness of athletes' emotion regulation strategies. A strategy an athlete believes to be effective may not be so.
3. Help athletes examine the perceived cause of their feelings. If change is desired, help them re-appraise the causes.
4. Recognise that many sport performance management strategies will also act as emotion regulation strategies. ■

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