

Emotion Management Training for Athletes

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What are Emotions?

Emotions are psychological and physiological responses that may occur automatically or in response to a specific event (Levenson, 2011). People use emotions as information to guide their behaviors (Greenberg, 2008). Therefore, emotions serve the purpose of helping individuals adapt to their current environmental demands. During athletic performance, athletes experience a variety of types, intensities, and durations of emotions. Common emotions in sport include:



- *Excitement*: A high intensity of interest arising from activities or new challenges (e.g., a sprinter feels excitement after achieving a personal record).



- *Anxiety*: Feelings of fear, tension, nervousness, and apprehension from sensing a future threat in the environment (e.g., before an important match, a tennis player feels anxious, as their body is physiologically preparing for the upcoming performance).



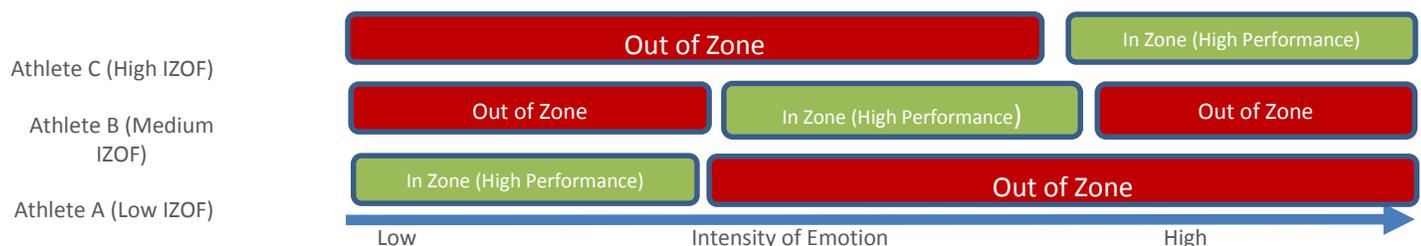
- *Anger*: A strong feeling of disapproval or dissatisfaction. (e.g., a basketball player feels anger after they believe the referee made a bad call).



- *Surprise*: A sudden pleasant or unpleasant feeling after an unexpected event occurs (e.g., a golfer realizing they hit a hole-in-one, or a football player receiving a hard tackle from behind).

How Emotions Impact Performance

Emotions can significantly impact performance by altering physiological and attentional states in a way that may enhance or harm an athlete's ability. Athletes have an **Individual Zone of Optimal Performance**. Therefore, specific emotions at certain intensities will influence performance (Hanin, 2000). If an athlete understands what emotional state helps them perform at their best, then they can use targeted emotion management strategies and significantly enhance their athletic performance.



Emotion Management for Athletes and Performers

There are numerous techniques that can aid in emotion regulation for athletes. Research has shown that when athletes are trained to improve, refine, and expand their routines and psychological skills they are successful in adjusting patterns of emotion and symptoms to increase level of performance (Robazza, Pellizzari, & Hanin, 2004). Techniques to help athletes achieve emotional control can be cognitive or physiological in nature (Jones, 2003).

Three Emotional Control Strategies for Athletes and Performers

Deep Belly Breathing

- **How to do it:** Inhale (4 seconds) and exhale (4 seconds) deeply, Allow the belly to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Repeat anywhere from 10 times to 10 minutes.
- **Why it works:** Slows down breathing, initiates a relaxation response, slows heart rate, increased oxygen to muscles and brain which reduces muscle tension and improves focus.
- **Tip:** Imagine a balloon in your belly that inflates as you inhale and deflates as you exhale.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation/ Body Scan

- **How to do it:** Starting with the muscles in your feet, progress through each muscle group in your body. Take a deep breathe and squeeze the muscles in your feet as tight as you can for about 5 seconds. Relax - exhale and let the tension drain out of your feet. Move onto the next muscle group and repeat for your calves, knees, thighs, buttocks, belly, back, hands, forearms, biceps, shoulders, neck, face, mouth, and eyes.
- **Why it works:** Reduces muscle tension, raises one's awareness of when they might be holding tension, initiates a relaxation response.
- **Tip:** Most effective if it can be done lying down on a flat surface.

Cue Words

- **How to do it:** Think about a time when you were relaxed and identify a word or phrase that identifies how you felt at that exact point; these are words and phrases that can be used to help remind yourself of what you want to achieve, accomplish, or feel while performing skills under pressure.
- **Why it works:** Our thoughts influence our emotions and feelings, which influence our behaviors/performance.
- **Examples:** Breathe, Center, Be in Control, Fight, Energy, Pow!, Attack, Strong.

Tips adapted from Williams & Krane (2014).

Where can I learn more about emotion management training for athletes?

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