

HOW DO EMOTIONS AFFECT SPORT PERFORMANCE?

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Playing sports can be filled with emotions. Athletes might feel nervous about try-outs or before a big competition, upset about losing or performing poorly, or excited and happy after a big win or a major accomplishment. To perform well in sport, athletes can learn to manage their emotions and cope with stress. However, some emotion regulation and coping strategies might be more useful than others. So, how can athletes learn to deal with their emotions and cope with stress in sport? In this article, we review what emotions are and how they influence athletes' thoughts and behaviors in sport, as well as their impact on sport performance. We also review types of coping strategies that athletes can use to deal with stress and emotions in sport, and we explore ways that athletes can learn to develop better coping skills for sport performance.

Athletes feel all kinds of emotions in sport. Some of these emotions feel bad or negative, like the feeling of being anxious, nervous, or scared before a big competition. Sometimes athletes feel so nervous

they do not know what to do, they just can't shake it off, and they end up having a bad performance as a result of their emotions. Other sport-related emotions feel great, like the feeling of happiness and the thrill of winning a game, or the feeling of pride after pulling off a new skill or move for the first time. The emotions athletes feel in sport can sometimes be helpful for performance, but sometimes they can be tough to deal with and can make them perform worse.

WHAT CAUSES US TO FEEL EMOTIONS IN SPORT?

Emotions arise when we are in situations that are important to us [1]. Some examples of important situations for athletes include trying out for a team, making friends with teammates, getting playing time in games, performing skills correctly, or winning competitions. In these situations, it is natural to want to be successful, and sometimes these situations can feel stressful because it seems like there is a lot at stake. We might worry about what will happen if we do not make the team, or if we make a mistake, or if we lose a competition. Some emotions, like anxiety or fear, can arise when we feel that we do not know what to do, or when we do not have the ability to deal with the situation. For example, a soccer player in a penalty shoot-out might think that the outcome of the game depends on her performance, and she might be unsure about whether she can succeed. If she believes that she is not very good at penalty shots, she might feel negative emotions like anxiety. Therefore, the first thing to know about emotions is that they arise when we are in situations that are important to us—our emotions give us valuable information about the things we care about.

HOW DO EMOTIONS AFFECT SPORT PERFORMANCE?

Emotions can affect our bodies as well as our minds. Imagine you have a big, important sport event coming up tomorrow, and maybe you feel pressure to perform well because you really want to win. If you feel pressure about the upcoming competition, you might notice changes in your body: your heart might beat faster, your breathing might quicken, you might feel butterflies in your stomach, your chest might feel tense—all of these bodily sensations are the result of emotions. At the same time, you might find it hard to stop thinking about the competition, and it might be very difficult to focus on anything else! You might find yourself extremely distracted during the days and hours leading up to the competition. Emotions such as anxiety often feel this way—they have physical effects in the body as well as effects on the mind [2]. In Table 1 and Figure 1, we highlight some key points about the ways that various emotions may affect our bodies and our minds.

Such emotional experiences can also impact how we behave or perform. For example, an anxious or fearful athlete might perform

Table 1

The effects of emotions on the body and mind, and common responses to emotions.

Emotion	Effects on our bodies	Effects on our minds	Common actions and responses
Anxious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Butterflies in the stomach • Feeling nauseous • Tingling sensations • Struggling to sit still or relax 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racing thoughts • Trouble focusing on one thing • Negative thoughts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor sport performance • Poor timing of sports skills
Sad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slumping shoulders • Moving slowly • Feeling fatigued or a loss of energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative thoughts: thinking that you are bad at something • Lack of confidence • Easily irritated or angry at people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trouble sleeping • Crying • Changes in appetite • Lack of motivation
Happy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving with lots of energy • Smiling and laughing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confident thoughts • Thinking things will work out well • Able to focus more easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good sport performance • Talkative
Fearful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling nauseous • Feeling too hot or too cold • Sweating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking one might be in danger • Racing thoughts • Struggling to focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying • Attempting to make the body small or trying to hide • Short, shallow breathing

Table 1

Figure 1

The effects of emotions on our minds and bodies. Our thoughts (top) and bodily feelings (bottom) change when we are (A) anxious, (B) happy, or (C) sad.

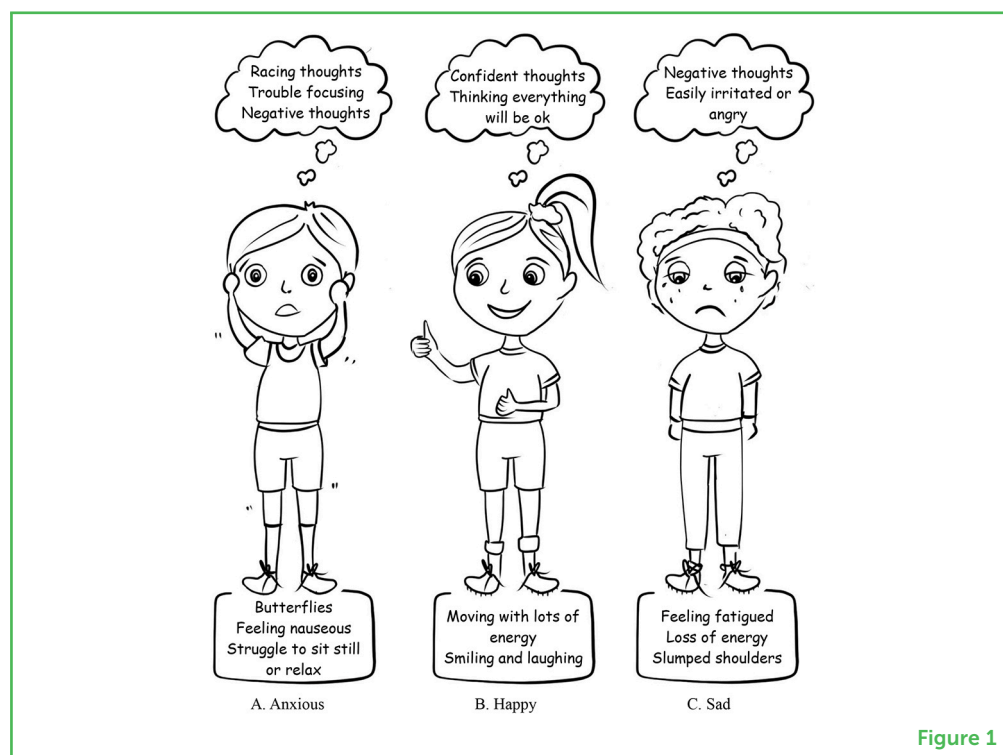


Figure 1

poorly or have poor timing for their kicking or catching skills. An athlete who feels sad might struggle to sleep the night before a competition and may cry during the game, while an athlete who feels happy might be very talkative, move with lots of energy, and perform well.

Emotions can also “spread” throughout a team or between people, which could impact sport performance. In some situations, the happiness and mood of players within a team has been “linked” to the moods of other players on the team, suggesting that emotions can have a ripple effect and spread to teammates [3]. This is important because it tells us that some people’s emotions can affect others. In your own sport experiences, have you ever been affected by someone else’s good or bad mood? The spread of emotions between teammates could also impact performance: if more athletes on a team are feeling good, then the team may perform better in competition. On the other hand, if lots of athletes on a team are feeling anxious, worried, or nervous, the team may perform worse.

MANAGING EMOTIONS FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE

When the feelings and thoughts associated with our emotions become overwhelming, we must find ways to manage the emotions. Trying to change or reduce the intensity of emotions is called **emotion regulation** [4]. Because emotions affect our bodies and our minds, this means that we must try to deal with the physical effects of emotions in our bodies, and we must also try to deal with the thoughts and effects of emotions in our minds.

How do I manage the physical effects of emotions in my body?

To manage the effects of emotions in the body, it can be helpful to first notice your bodily sensations and name them. For example, you might notice and name the feelings of “tension in my muscles,” “butterflies in my stomach,” or “jittery legs.” You can scan your body from head to toe notice your sensations, and gently name what is happening. Second, once you have noticed which physical sensations you are experiencing, take a few moments to breathe deeply. You can also focus on the sensations you are having and imagine you are breathing into that part of the body.

How do I manage the thoughts and effects of emotions in my mind?

One of the key things to do when trying to manage emotions is to recognize that they are normal, and they happen to everyone. In fact, these emotions are your body’s way of preparing you for action. So, first, try thinking differently about the situation. This is known as **reappraising** the situation. You can reappraise your emotions by viewing your body’s reactions and sensations as things that can *help* you in your sport, or by convincing yourself that they are not as important as they feel. Reappraising can help you to feel better. Second, you can think about some concrete steps you can take to fix the root of the problem. For example, if you feel overwhelmed and anxious because you are busy and have trouble keeping track of your schedule and your equipment, you could ask a parent to help you

EMOTION REGULATION

Emotion regulation refers to how people try to influence which emotions they feel, when they feel them, and how they show these emotions to others [3].

REAPPRAISAL

Reappraisal is when a person deliberately tries to change how they think about a situation in order to change the emotions that they are experiencing.

write a schedule. You could also plan strategies for organizing your equipment so that you are not rushed before practices or games.

Other ways of coping with stressful situations in sport

Here are a couple more strategies you could try to cope with the stressful effects of emotions. First, seek support. Ask a coach, parent, or teammate to help you address the problem. You could also try to change the situation or stressor. This might require you to ask a coach, parent, or teammate to help you change the situation to something you know you are able to manage. For example, you could ask your coach to teach you additional skills for beating a defender, you could ask your coach if you can sit out of the next play so that you can manage your emotions, or you could ask a teammate on the bench to help you calm down.

ARE SOME STRATEGIES BETTER THAN OTHERS?

As you can see, there are many different ways to manage emotions and cope with stress in sport. You might be wondering, “what is the *best* way to deal with my emotions for optimal sport performance?” Well, the answer is complicated, and it involves the idea of coping **effectiveness**, which means finding the best ways of coping with stressors and managing emotions. For example, in some sport situations, the stressor might be a referee who is making bad calls against you and your team, and you might be getting increasingly frustrated and angry with the referee. In this case, the best way of dealing with the situation might be to take a deep breath and remind yourself that you can keep trying hard, no matter what the referee does. Using strategies like relaxation, deep breathing, and positive self-talk can be very effective for managing your emotions in a situation like this. But actions like confronting the referee, yelling, or exploding with anger during the competition would probably *not* be very effective—these actions might make the situation even worse! Another example might be if you are feeling unsure about your performance or nervous about an upcoming game. In this situation, you could talk to your parents, grandparents, coaches, teammates, or friends to ask them for advice and support. Seeking support from the people around us is another very effective strategy for dealing with stressors and emotions in sport. If you would like to learn more about how stress affects us, you can read this *Frontiers for Young Minds* article [5]. To learn more about pressure in sport, you can read this *Frontiers for Young Minds* article [6].

In conclusion, athletes experience lots of emotions in sport. Sometimes emotions are positive and help performance, for example, feeling happy can help athletes to be more confident. However, sometimes emotions are negative and can harm performance, for example, a soccer player may forget how to perform a drill if they are feeling anxious. When athletes have negative emotions, they can

EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness refers to how useful emotion regulation or coping strategies are in helping to deal with a situation or to deal with your emotions. Using strategies effectively means that people are good at managing their emotions to feel the way they want, or they are good at managing stressful situations.

try to manage them in different ways. Athletes can try to change the situation, change how they think and feel about the situation, or ask a coach, parent, or teammate for support. The most important thing for athletes is to be aware of the emotions they are feeling, and the best ways that they can manage their emotions in sport. What emotions do you feel in sport? How do you think you could manage them in the future?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

B. D. BILLINGHURST MIDDLE SCHOOL, AGES: 11–13

This review was conducted with 3 classrooms at B. D. Billingshurst Middle School. Each class wanted to share their own story with the reader: 1. Our 1st period class is bussin, we enjoyed the article. 2. Second period is cool, and this article was rad. 3. Almost all of us do sports in 3rd period, the article is relatable, interesting, and appropriate for all reading levels.

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I am an associate professor at the University of Toronto. My research in sport psychology focuses on two main areas: (1) stress, coping, and emotion in sport; and (2) young athletes' experiences in sport. My current research examines how adolescent athletes learn to cope with stressors in sport, how parents and coaches influence athletes' coping, and parent-child communication in sport. *katherine.tamminen@utoronto.ca



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I am a Ph.D. candidate, supervised by Professor Tamminen. My research interests include the experiences of athletes and parents in youth sport, with a focus in positive youth development and sporting transitions.

