

Emotion and emotion regulation from the perspective of the practitioner

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17 Emotion and Emotion Regulation from the Perspective of the Practitioner

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Sport is an emotionally charged environment for competitors, officials, coaches, scientific practitioners, and fans alike (Dwyer & Weiner, 2017; Lane, Beedie, Jones, Uphill, & Devonport, 2012; Furley, 2020; Lee & Chelladurai, 2018; Ruiz, Bortoli, & Robazza, 2020). People experience a range of emotions, some of which are pleasant such as feeling happy, excited, and joyous, and some of which are unpleasant, such as feeling anxious, miserable, and sad (Hanin, 2000; Ruiz et al., 2020; Terry, 1995). Evidence shows that emotions influence performance with the general assumption that pleasant emotions tend to associate with good performance and unpleasant emotions associate with bad performance (Lane et al., 2012). However, these emotions-performance relationships do not hold and it is common for unpleasant emotions such as anger and anxiety/tension to associate with good performance (Lane & Terry, 2000), typically via increased effort (Lane et al., 2017). Pleasant emotions such as happiness can associate with poor performance. The present chapter examines emotions experienced by a practitioner and how the practitioner learns to recognise and regulate these emotions so that they can be not only effective, but also maintain emotional health.

In a review of emotion regulation and its link to emotions and sport, Lane et al. (2012) proposed that 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, all issues covered in detail in the chapters in this book. Applying this logic to how effective a practitioner could be, it is possible that appropriate emotional responses might lead to making better decisions, and/or having better interactions with fellow practitioners and clients, and so as a consequence, good emotion regulation might be necessary to become an effective practitioner.

A sport and exercise psychologist has to deal regularly with people who are currently or anticipating experiencing intense emotions (Aoyagi, Portenga, Poczwardowski, Cohen, & Statler, 2012; Tod, Andersen, & Marchant, 2009). A sport and exercise psychologist also has to manage her/his own emotions. These emotions can not only influence a sport and exercise psychologist's own thoughts and actions, but also influence others via the message that these emotions might transmit. Although research has not tested whether emotion contagion occurs with sport and exercise psychologists, evidence points to its occurrence between athletes and between athletes and coaches (Friesen et al., 2018, 2013; Friesen, Wolf, & Lee van Kleef, 2020; Tamminen & Neely, 2020). For example, a practitioner experiencing anxiety about some upcoming work might not want to look anxious, as clients might perceive this negatively. If the practitioner holds a belief that the client will expect an expert who makes decisions from a calm and confident emotional profile, then if he/she is feeling anxious self-regulation is needed (Ford & Gross, 2019; Weilenmann et al., 2018). As such, a practitioner might wish to present an image of feeling confident – in such a case, downregulating anxiety and upregulating positive emotions are required (Friesen, Devonport, Lane, & Sellars, 2015).

When people experience anxiety in sport it is important to have some understanding of why this is the case, what they are worried about, and what they believe are the consequences of feeling anxious. Beliefs, also called meta-experiences, surrounding the intensity of anxiety someone experiences and whether they perceive this helpful or harmful should be considered (Ford & Gross, 2019). The outcome of this belief influences whether someone chooses to try to reduce the intensity of anxious feelings or not (Ford & Gross, 2019; Hanin, 2010; Lane et al., 2012; Nadine, Vine & Harris, 2020). Nadine et al. (2020) discuss the sometimes fine balance between how situations might be perceived as threatening or perceived as a challenge, and how whether perception of challenge or threat might switch rapidly. Oscillating beliefs of whether anxiety is helpful or harmful tend to occur when the goal is extremely challenging and beliefs and confidence in success are also switching from positive to negative. This process is also important for a sport psychologist and how their anxiety influences how well they work. For example, if you believe that you are too anxious,

and this connects to occasions where you performed poorly or if you believe your client needs to see you looking calm, then you attempt to reduce the intensity of anxiety. In contrast, a positive meta-experience of anxiety can be seen if you believe anxiety helps you perform and sharpens your decision making, then you might not wish to down-regulate. However, if the belief is that you need to look calm, then the sport and exercise psychologist has the task of looking calm whilst feeling anxious and acting calm. Ford and Gross (2019) argue that it is not only beliefs in whether an emotion is either good or bad in a given context, but also whether it is possible to change. Arguably, strong beliefs that emotions are changeable are both fundamental and integral to a sport and exercise psychologist working with clients and managing their own inner states.

When going through this process, it is important to recognise the perceptual process that is occurring and that accurate information beyond a perception is nebulous. Your belief that anxiety hampered performance might not be correct; it might be that your performance as a psychologist felt poor, because if you were anxious, these anxious feelings would influence self-perceptions of current actions and so you are dealing with an anxious memory. It could be that you did actually perform poorly, but this could have been because of a decision made when you were calm, and therefore, how you acted when anxious was not the important behaviour in determining success. The perceptual aspect of this is very important in your decision on how to regulate anxiety. One option is that you could accept that anxiety is a signal of the importance and uncertainty of the situation (Baumeister et al., 2007) and that trying to reduce it will be difficult whilst accepting the task remains important and uncertain.

Sport is inherently uncertain. It is possible to accept the anxiety and reinterpret its effect as having the potential to be functional (Hanin, 2010). To be able to do this, you will need good emotion regulation skills, that is, once you realise that you are experiencing an emotion that you would prefer not to, and so engage in strategies to alter or regulate this (Lane et al., 2012). Further, you would also need to have a good internal awareness (Fink & Ruiz, 2020) of your emotions and thereby recognise regulation of intense emotions is warranted (see Petrides & Furnham, 2000). For example, consider a tennis player who loses her/his temper and shouts at an umpire and is disqualified; in this example, identifying an increase in anger, and being able to

manage that emotion before it is expressed dysfunctionally is what is needed. Another example would be a practitioner, who is nervous about giving a talk to a Performance Director who they anticipate will disagree with what is being said, and at the risk of feeling upset at such comments, does not complete their talk. In this case, the emotional experience could have influenced performance for the team negatively and could have reduced the effectiveness of the practitioner. Establishing what the psychologist would have said and whether it would have been effective or not involves a huge degree of speculation. In contrast, if the emotions experienced by the practitioner altered what he or she did next, then this could have been detrimental. In this instance, the ability to regulate emotions experienced as a direct effect of interactions with a colleague is what is needed. Gross and Thompson's (2007) work on anticipatory emotion regulation is relevant. The practitioner is anticipating and so can enact one of the four families of anticipatory emotion regulation, a point that will be discussed in great depth later in the chapter.

A key part of what is being presented here is that failure to regulate your emotions might lead to making poor decisions and poor performance that would reinforce beliefs on emotions and performance relationships (Ford & Gross, 2019; Ruiz et al., 2020). Emotional involvement, could for example, disrupt objectivity, resulting in poor judgment. In medicine, emotional involvement has led to a tendency to over-treat clients (see Weilenmann et al., 2018). A key factor is to separate work to regulate emotions, that is to help people feel happier or less anxious, from the effects of the treatment. The two will relate to each other as it is likely that you feel happier when you believe you are being treated effectively and getting better. Of course, it is not possible for medics to have a quick-fix solution to a physical condition as a strategy to improve emotions. Helping someone with her/his emotion regulation independently of the condition is preferable (Lane, 2015). One reason for this is that dysfunctional emotions can hamper efforts to improve health, via not taking medication and reducing physical activity, both of which are behavioural responses connected with depression. Failure to take medication is a common issue across a plethora of conditions (De Geest et al., 2019).

Theoretical Considerations

Emotion regulation is the automatic or deliberate use of strategies to initiate, maintain, modify or display emotions (Ford & Gross, 2019; Gross & Thompson, 2007). Emotions are subjective feelings experienced in response to events either in an individual's environment, for example an athlete being angry because of unfair public criticism, or in an individual's mind, for example anticipation of an upcoming event (Lane et al., 2012; 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 high activation either a fight or flight response or low activation, typically focused on conservation of energy (see Lane et al., 2012).

Via these three types of response, emotions influence the goals people set and their efforts to pursue these goals (Lane et al., 2012). Emotions can be functional, for example, anger and fear can motivate individuals to deal with the causes of those emotions (the 'fight or flight response'; see Hanin, 2010). Anger can lead to feeling energised and via increased effort, leading to more intense behaviour, possibly more aggressive and better performance (Lane et al., 2012). When athletes are feeling angry, and a sport and exercise psychologist identifies and recognises this intensity of anger, and holds the belief that feeling angry is beneficial, then trying to calm the players down might not be the appropriate response (Friesen et al., 2018; Lane, Beedie, Devonport, & Stanley, 2011). However, such an assumption assumes that the sport and exercise psychologist can not only accurately identify the emotions in others but also be aware of whether these emotions are perceived to be helpful. Therefore, a great deal of important information is needed here to ensure the sport and exercise psychologist is making the best decision.

The first step is to establish that athletes are genuinely experiencing anger, as it could be intense arousal and not necessarily anger. The second is the belief that anger is useful for performance. Knowledge that the athletes are not too angry, as evidence suggests anger helps in a curvilinear way is relevant (Lane & Terry, 2000). The practitioner will need to judge whether to try to help athletes increase or decrease the intensity of their emotions, and this positioning makes this a difficult choice (Lane et

al., 2011). Related to this is the possibility that the belief that anger helps performance is incorrect, and that anger acts as a dummy variable for other processes. Anger might co-occur with a third variable that is not being considered, and it is this third variable that is useful for performance, but the athlete attributes successful performance to feeling angry. Third, a practitioner will be aware that feeling angry is not good for an athlete's long term health. Therefore, if the athlete is to use anger, it needs to be done functionally. Accordingly, a practitioner should know that the athlete can downregulate the intensity of anger at a later point in time. However, this is knowledge not easily available for the practitioner and requires accurate perceptions of multiple pieces of information.

Emotions can be dysfunctional and reduce motivation, lead to poor performance and poor health (Hanin, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2020). For example, an athlete might be angry about an official's decision, but recognise that feeling very angry coupled with an urge to have an aggressive response might result in a penalty (Friesen et al., 2018). Here the athlete would need to recognise that he/she is too angry, and that unless the intensity of anger reduces, there could be negative consequences (Lane et al., 2011). In such a situation, maintaining the current emotion might not facilitate performance. In this context, emotion regulation strategies are needed. The goal of emotion regulation is to reduce the discrepancy between current and desired emotions, so that your emotional state is one you see as ideal (Hanin, 2010). Acknowledging that this is what is needed, the difficult aspect of this process is identifying the emotional state associated with best performance.

Knowledge of Gross and Thompson's (2007) model could provide a practitioner and athlete with a theoretical framework for suggesting or using emotion regulation strategies. As will be seen through a description of the strategies, this has many practical advantages as they are regulating their emotions by engaging with activities that they do regularly. We will also look at the notion that emotion regulation can be effortful (Baumeister, Tice, & Voss, 2018; Gross & Johns, 2007) and so if an individual is having to actively regulate emotions for lengthy periods, this can be tiring, and poor decisions could follow. The model specifies that emotions can be regulated via situation selection,

situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation.

Applied Recommendations

In this section I will use Gross and Thompson's (2007) five families of emotion regulation to explore how practitioners engage with emotion regulation strategies. It should be noted that many psychological strategies used by people also serve to regulate emotion (Lane et al., 2012). An example for an athlete is a marathon runner becoming aware of her muscles tightening during competition might use a relaxation strategy (response modulation), or might direct her attention away from the muscles (attention deployment, see Brick, Venhost, Robinson, & MacIntyre, 2020). A practitioner struggling to give a talk, might use centring to gain attentional control (response modulation) or imagery to see themselves (cognitive change) giving the talk successfully (see Watt & Morris, 2020). At the same time, these strategies may also regulate emotions by preventing her/him from becoming anxious or angry about the situation. These strategies may not be perceived by an athlete or a practitioner as emotion regulation per se.

A practitioner should be aware of the dual effects of encouraging athletes to use psychological skills (Lane et al., 2012). In the example above, the psychological skills are attentional control and relaxation, and whilst the focus of these should be changes in attention, there should also be changes in emotion. Evidence suggests that more frequent use of psychological skills is not necessarily better. If you wish to use self-talk to reduce the intensity of anxiety, then using your self-talk mantra should lead to a reduction in anxiety. Ideally, if you used the self-talk mantra once, then anxiety should begin to reduce. This is in contrast to having to repeat the self-talk mantra over and over to reduce anxiety. The notion is that knowing which strategies are effective for regulating emotions is important rather than the frequency that you need to use them (Devonport & Lane, 2014; Miles, Sheeran, & Webb, 2013; Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). Thereby, knowing what works and when to use it become the key skills. To get to that point, you need to have tried and tested different methods and have a personal evidence base on which to draw from.

Practitioners should consider the emotional effects of using psychological skills and also, the emotional state of the athlete before using them. Whether perceived as emotion regulation or not, most psychological skills interventions in sport have an effect on emotion. 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 being response-focused). Recent research has begun to look at emotional competence training (Laborde et al., 2020). Laborde et al. (2020) argue that emotional competence training should be in the practitioner's toolbox.

Situation selection refers to the process whereby you actively choose to place yourself in one situation rather than another. An example of situation selection could be that you recognise you get nervous when warming up with other athletes and so you chose to warm up alone. For situation selection to be effective, you need knowledge of how the environment affects your emotions, and using the previous example to illustrate, you recognise that warming up with other athletes makes you feel nervous and so consciously decide to warm up alone. Practitioners should be aware of the situational factors that influence the emotions of their clients and themselves. It should not be surprising that many professionals hold sessions in places they know well, which will be a decision largely driven by practical reasons.

Situation selection can be a very effective and relatively effortless way to regulate emotion. If you know that going to a certain place changes your emotions, and know that it does so in a reliable way, then this is very important knowledge. For example, a practitioner might be more confident when working in her/his office and ensures sessions are held there accordingly. For this to be useful, the practitioner needs evidence on how emotions vary from situation to situation. One method of gaining this information is to record thoughts and feelings in reflective diaries. From an emotion regulation perspective, this makes sense. Going somewhere which appears to change your emotions, makes you feel more comfortable and so does not require active use of psychological skills making it an effortless process. I have used situation selection to control anxiety with a number of clients. For example, athletes I work with are

endurance athletes. I encourage them to visit the course beforehand, go around the warm up area, the expo, and get a feel for the busyness of the environment. Taking this knowledge on board and using it as part of the planning, it is possible to replicate aspects of the pre-competition period where the athletes and team feel comfortable and so consequently, can alter emotions.

Situation modification refers to attempts to modify external aspects of the environment. By attempting to modify a situation, an athlete may make it more likely that a desirable emotional state is attained or an undesirable one avoided (e.g., walking away from an antagonistic opponent to prevent anger developing, or using humour to diffuse a tense situation). Sport and exercise psychologists can encourage athletes to use situation modification – and by outlining the number of possibilities in their immediate environment, it usually provides a straightforward method for regulating emotions. Sport and exercise psychologists could look to modify their environment to ensure their clients feel happy and comfortable. Often, athletes and practitioners do not feel that suggesting changes in the environment are worth making, thinking that they will ‘make do’ even if this connects with a less than desirable state. By recognising the environment has a negative effect on emotion, this signposts that some emotion regulation is needed. Therefore, actively encouraging athletes and fellow practitioners to consider their working environment and suggesting modifications that would enhance emotions is advisable.

Attention deployment refers to the process whereby an individual 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 (e.g., listening to music on headphones to avoid listening to the crowd prior to an event). A practitioner might select a different aspect of the situation on which to concentrate. A practitioner might get a wave of happiness on seeing an athlete performing well, and seemingly believe, if only for a moment, that was due to their work. It might be, but a psychologist feeling happy might not be how she/he wishes to feel as the competition is still ongoing. Attention deployment will occur by focusing on different aspects of the environment. At this point, a psychologist should be clear on

which emotion she/he wishes to feel. The ideal emotional state which should govern emotion regulation will not only be highly individualised but also vary by context.

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.” Cognitive change strategies can include psychological skills such as self-talk and goal-setting. Teaching an athlete how they talk to themselves via self-talk (see Fritsch, Latinjak, & Hatzigeorgiadis, 2020) either motivationally (‘you can do this’), or instructionally (‘relax arms, for an endurance runner) could enhance confidence to achieve a goal and help regulate emotions via that mechanisms. Self-talk could be focused directly on the emotions such as ‘you can stay calm’. Evidence shows that brief interventions, under 2 minutes in duration, can help athletes change emotions (Lane, et al., 2016) and therefore offer a quick strategy for helping athletes.

Teaching psychological skills is one role that sport and exercise psychologists typically fulfills, and whilst I am not offering a prescriptive approach in how a sport and exercise psychologist works, I do think it is reasonable to expect that the athlete could learn some psychological skills, and could hold the belief that learning such skills would be useful. Goal setting as a tool is now ubiquitous and the notion that people set specific, measurable, and attainable goals is commonplace. Relaxation skills and breathing exercises are commonly taught during pregnancy as a strategy in preparation for childbirth. Teaching a number of different psychological skills should not be seen as something remarkable or innovative but as something that is potentially useful. Each psychological skill could be used in many aspects of life, with skills such as goal setting and imagery being widely used across of application. And so I suggest that there is no need to wait for the client to flag this as an issue necessarily. Further, when emotion regulation benefits are added into the thought processes of what a practitioner should do with an athlete to help them perform and feel better. When considering how relatively straightforward the act of encouraging athletes to learn about psychological skills, then the act of encouraging them to learn independently and then supporting their development via feedback would seem to offer a highly effective way of working.

The emotion regulation strategies described above are anticipatory, whereas **response modulation** is a strategy to be used once the emotion has been experienced fully. 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 (see Middleton, Petersen, Giffin, & Schinke, 2020 on how music might be used to regulate emotions).

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

The evidence that emotions have powerful effects on thoughts and actions is compelling. Therefore, teaching athletes to regulate their emotions and helping a practitioner be capable at regulating emotions should be a highly desirable set of skills to learn. Sport and exercise psychologists and athletes alike 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 (Webb et al., 2012). 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 and within each athlete, from context to context.
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.

In conclusion, emotions act as information and colour our perceptions of experiences. Emotions can be functional and dysfunctional although whether they help or harm seem to be heavily influenced by our beliefs on such relationships. If we think anxiety is harmful, then it probably will be, because such a thought is not relevant to the cues needed to successfully deliver the task. Psychologists need good awareness of their emotions and what they can do to change their emotions. The Gross and Thompson (2007) model represents a framework to use. A limitation is that research examining practitioner effectiveness in sport and exercise psychology is sparse with even fewer studies on the potential role of emotion and emotion regulation. Future research could begin exploring such relationships.

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