EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

COPING WITH EMOTIONS

SHARINGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Scientific research

1.1.1. Definition

Emotions are a natural part of playing sports. The physical actions of running, competing, and interacting with teammates and opponents create continuous emotional responses such as joy, frustration, excitement, disappointment, or anger. These emotional reactions influence players' behaviour, decision-making, and performance during training and competition.

Coping with emotions refers to how players deal with these emotional experiences, especially in challenging or stressful situations. It includes the ability to recognise emotions, understand their impact, and respond in a way that allows continued participation, learning, and interaction with others.

From a scientific perspective, emotional regulation describes the process through which individuals influence which emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how these emotions are expressed (Gross, 1998; Gross, 2015). Closely related, coping refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals use to manage internal and external demands that are perceived as challenging or exceeding their resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In sport, coping with emotions therefore involves managing emotional intensity, directing attention, and choosing appropriate behavioural responses in situations such as mistakes, pressure, success, failure, or interaction with others. These processes are closely linked to performance, learning, and social interaction, as players who are able to regulate their emotions are more likely to remain engaged, make effective decisions, and contribute positively to the team environment (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

Rather than eliminating emotions, effective coping enables players to respond constructively to emotional experiences and to stay involved in the game and the learning process. Coping with emotions is not a single skill, but a set of strategies that develop over time and can be trained and supported within the sporting environment (Gross, 2015; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

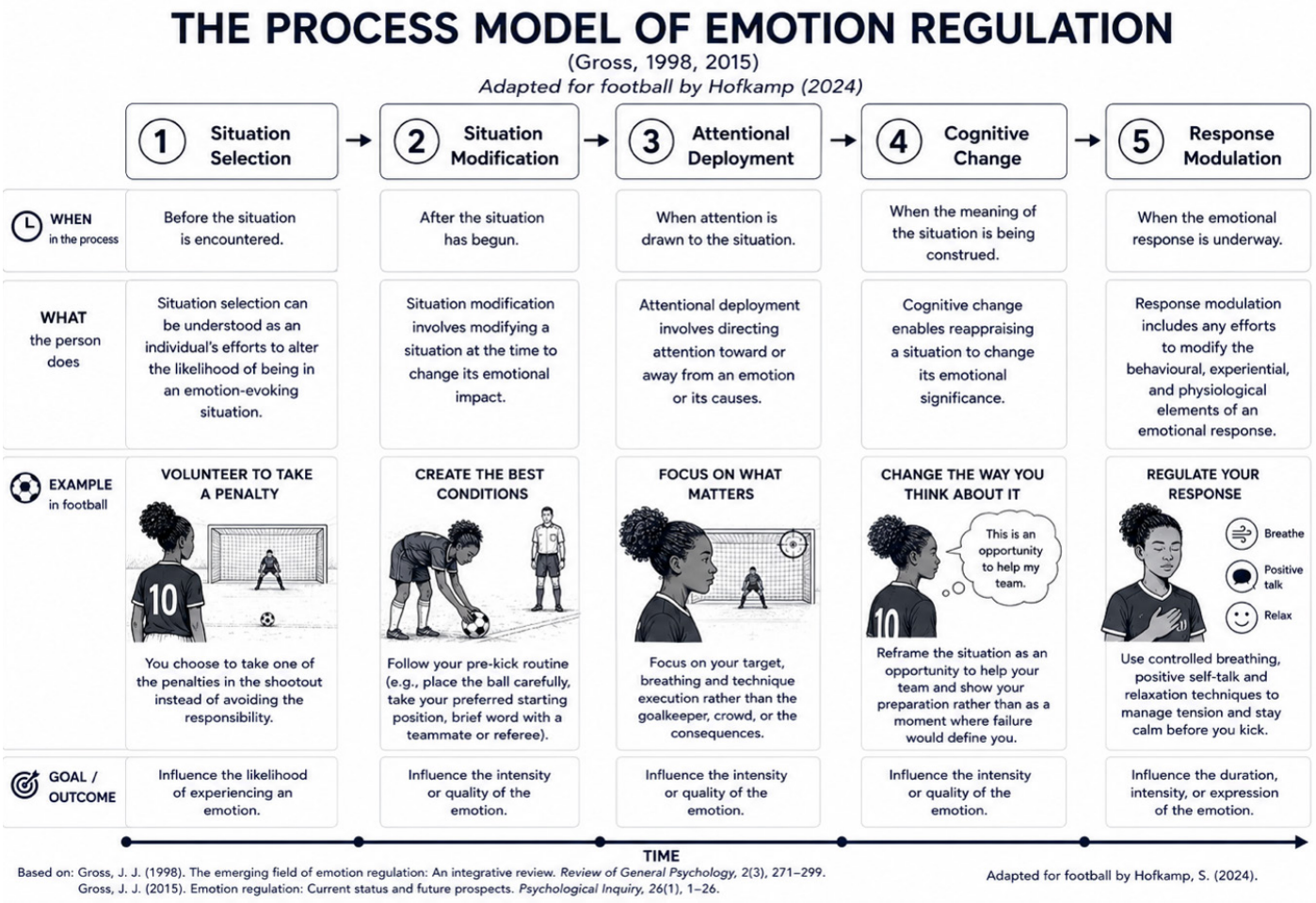
1.1.2. Scientific Research and Models

Coping with emotions in sport can be explained through several scientific models that describe how emotional responses arise, are experienced, and are regulated in challenging situations. These models help to understand why players react differently to similar situations, and how emotional responses influence both performance and interaction within a team. This section presents the models themselves; the practical strategies that follow from them are described later, in From Science to Practice and in the training chapter.

Emotional responses in sport are closely linked to physiological arousal. Situations such as competition, mistakes, or pressure increase activation of the nervous system, which affects concentration, decision-making, and physical performance. The Individual Zones of Optimal Functioning (IZOF) model describes this relationship in individual terms: each player has a personal range of emotional intensity within which they perform at their best, and performance declines when activation falls below or rises above that range (Hanin, 2000). This explains why the same level of tension can be productive for one player and disruptive for another, and why there is no single optimal arousal level for a whole team.

Coping with emotions is also explained through the transactional model of stress and coping, which holds that emotional reactions depend not on events themselves but on how individuals interpret them. The central mechanism of this model is cognitive appraisal: players first evaluate what a situation means for them, and then evaluate what resources they have available to deal with it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1999). When a situation is appraised as a challenge, it can support engagement and performance; when it is appraised as a threat, it is more likely to produce anxiety, frustration, or withdrawal. This appraisal process is the foundation of the challenge and threat states discussed in the next section (Jones et al., 2009).

The process model of emotion regulation describes the points at which an emotional response can be influenced (Gross, 1998; Gross, 2015). It distinguishes strategies applied before an emotion has fully developed, such as choosing or changing a situation, directing attention elsewhere, or reinterpreting what a situation means, from strategies applied afterwards, such as altering how an emotion is expressed. This model is useful in football because it shows that regulation is not a single act but a sequence of opportunities, and that intervening earlier in that sequence is generally more effective than trying to suppress an emotion once it has taken hold.



In team environments, emotions are not only individual but also shared. Emotional contagion describes how emotions spread between players and coaches through facial expressions, tone of voice, and behaviour, shaping the overall emotional climate of the team (Hatfield et al., 1994). A player's visible reaction to a mistake is therefore never only an individual event: it is information that the rest of the team responds to.

Closely related is interpersonal emotion regulation, also described as communal coping, which refers to the ways players deliberately influence each other's emotions rather than only their own. Research with team-sport athletes shows that this happens routinely through encouragement, reassurance, humour, and shared routines, and that athletes describe regulating their emotions partly for the sake of the team rather than only for themselves (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013; Tamminen et al., 2016). Survey work across competitive team sports indicates that both self-regulation and regulation received from teammates are related to athletes' anxiety and goal achievement in competition (Tamminen et al., 2021). Coping with emotions is therefore an individual and a collective process at the same time.

These models describe how emotional responses arise and where they can be influenced. They also point directly to the methods used in practice: breathing regulation, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery, self-talk, pre-performance routines, and mindfulness-based approaches each target one or more of the mechanisms above. Because these belong to application rather than to theory, they are not described here. The evidence for their effectiveness is summarised in Impact on Performance, and their use with players is set out in From Science to Practice and across the six developmental stages of the training chapter.

Taken together, these models show that coping with emotions is a dynamic process with physiological, cognitive, and social components. A player's emotional response is shaped by their level of activation, by the meaning they assign to the situation, by where and when they intervene in their own emotional response, and by the emotions of the people around them. Understanding these mechanisms provides the foundation for the practical strategies described in the following sections.

1.1.3. Impact on performance

Coping with emotions has a direct impact on performance in football, as emotional states influence perception, attention, decision-making, and motor execution (Lazarus, 2000; Uphill et al., 2014). Players are constantly exposed to emotionally demanding situations such as mistakes, pressure, physical fatigue, and rapidly changing game contexts. The way they regulate these emotional responses determines whether they can continue to act effectively.

One key mechanism is the relationship between emotions and physiological arousal. Emotional states are closely linked to activation of the nervous system, which affects concentration, coordination, and reaction time. Both very low and very high levels of activation can impair performance, while an individually optimal level supports focus and execution (Hanin, 2000). Importantly, emotional activation is not inherently negative. Research on challenge and threat states shows that when players believe they have the resources to meet the demands of a situation, they are more likely to enter a challenge state, associated with more efficient physiological responses and better use of attention; when demands are perceived to outweigh resources, a threat state becomes more likely and performance tends to suffer (Jones et al., 2009; Meijen et al., 2020). A study of U17 and U19 football players found exactly this pattern: those who appraised an upcoming match as a challenge reported more positive emotions and greater perceived control than those who appraised it as a threat (Gomes et al., 2022). The same match situation can therefore lead to very different outcomes depending on how a player appraises it (Lazarus, 2000).

Research in sport psychology shows that the way athletes cope with stress is related to performance outcomes. A systematic review of the coping literature found that task-oriented strategies, such as focusing on the next action, regulating breathing, or using structured self-talk, are reported by athletes as more effective than distraction- or disengagement-oriented strategies (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). A subsequent meta-analysis of sport-specific coping confirmed that task-oriented coping is positively associated with adaptive outcomes, including performance, whereas disengagement-oriented coping shows the opposite pattern (Nicholls et al., 2016). Longitudinal work with English Premier League academy players indicates that these relationships also apply in elite youth football, where coping style predicts burnout and well-being across a season (Nicholls et al., 2022). Research with young elite athletes points in the same direction: habitual reappraisal is protective, whereas habitually suppressing emotions is associated with poorer mental health (Regborn et al., 2025).

Emotional regulation also affects cognitive functioning, particularly attention and decision-making. Attentional control theory proposes that anxiety weakens goal-directed attention and strengthens stimulus-driven attention, so anxious performers are more easily captured by threatening or task-irrelevant cues (Eysenck et al., 2007). This has been demonstrated directly in football: when penalty takers were made anxious, they fixated earlier and for longer on the goalkeeper, placed their shots closer to the centre of the goal, and were saved more often (Wilson et al., 2009). Reviews of choking under pressure describe comparable mechanisms, identifying distraction and reduced perceived control as central to sudden performance breakdowns (Hill et al., 2010). Players who are able to regulate their emotions can keep attention on task-relevant cues and respond more effectively under pressure (Gross, 2015). This is especially relevant in football, where successful performance depends on continuous perception–action coupling and rapid decision-making.

In addition, psychological skills training provides practical strategies to support emotional regulation and performance. A meta-analysis of 32 self-talk intervention studies found a moderate positive effect on task performance (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2011). Mindfulness- and acceptance-based approaches have likewise been associated with improvements in performance-relevant parameters such as attention and anxiety, and in some studies with performance itself (Bühlmayer et al., 2017; Noetel et al., 2019), including an intervention study with elite football players reporting gains in resilience, self-confidence, and emotion regulation (Oguntuase & Sun, 2022). Not every regulation strategy is equally helpful, however: experimental work shows that suppressing emotions is effortful and can impair subsequent physical performance while increasing perceived exertion (Wagstaff, 2014). This supports teaching players strategies that change how a situation is interpreted or where attention is directed, rather than simply hiding what they feel (Gross, 2015; Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

Overall, coping with emotions supports performance by enabling players to regulate arousal, maintain attention, make effective decisions, and remain behaviourally engaged. Players who develop these skills are more likely to perform consistently and adapt successfully to the demands of training and competition. It should be noted that much of the evidence above comes from adult or mixed-sport samples, and that football-specific and youth-specific research is still developing. The recommendations that follow are therefore based on converging evidence

across sports rather than on football-only trials.

1.1.4. Impact on social cohesion

Coping with emotions also has a significant impact on team cohesion, as emotions influence communication, relationships, and the overall functioning of the team. In football, emotional experiences are shared within the group, and individual emotional responses can affect the collective emotional climate.

The concept of emotional contagion explains how emotions can spread between individuals, meaning that the emotional state of one player or coach can influence others (Hatfield et al., 1994). Positive emotions such as confidence, enthusiasm, and encouragement can strengthen cohesion and cooperation, while negative emotions such as frustration or anger can disrupt communication and reduce collective effectiveness.

Coping with emotions is therefore not only an individual process but also an interpersonal one. Research highlights that athletes regulate emotions through social interaction, including communication, reassurance, and mutual support. This process, often referred to as interpersonal or communal coping, contributes to shared emotional regulation within teams (Tamminen & Neely, 2020; Tamminen et al., 2016). Teams that are able to cope with emotional challenges collectively are better able to maintain cohesion under pressure.

The way players regulate emotions also affects their behaviour toward teammates. Players who manage their emotions effectively are more likely to communicate constructively, support others, and contribute to problem-solving during difficult situations. In contrast, poor emotional regulation can lead to blaming behaviour, withdrawal, or conflict, which negatively impacts team cohesion (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013; Tamminen et al., 2016).

Cohesion is particularly challenged during moments of adversity, such as conceding goals, repeated mistakes, or perceived unfair decisions. In these situations, teams that regulate emotions effectively are more likely to remain connected, maintain trust, and continue working together toward shared goals. Research suggests that adaptive coping patterns are associated with better stress perception, stronger emotional competence, and more effective interpersonal functioning in team environments (Doron et al., 2023).

Coaches also play a central role in shaping the emotional climate of the team. Their emotional behaviour influences how players perceive situations and respond to challenges. Coaches who model emotional control and constructive communication contribute to a positive and stable team environment, while negative emotional reactions can increase tension and reduce cohesion.

Overall, coping with emotions contributes to team cohesion by shaping how players interact, communicate, and respond to challenging situations together. Effective emotional regulation supports positive emotional climates, constructive relationships, and collective resilience, all of which are essential for team functioning in football.

1.1.5. Correlations with private and family life, academic and work career

Coping with emotions extends beyond sport and has a significant impact on players' private and family life, as well as their academic and later professional development. Emotional experiences in football, such as dealing with success, failure, pressure, or interpersonal challenges, are closely related to situations players encounter in everyday life. The ability to regulate emotions in sport can therefore transfer to other life domains.

One important aspect is the role of emotional regulation in mental health and well-being. Research shows that adaptive coping strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and problem-focused coping, are associated with higher levels of psychological well-being and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Gross, 2015; Compas et al., 2001). In contrast, maladaptive strategies such as avoidance or emotional suppression are linked to increased psychological distress and reduced well-being (Kim & Tamminen, 2022). Developing effective coping skills in sport can therefore support players in managing emotional challenges in everyday life.

Coping with emotions also influences relationships and social functioning. Players who are able to regulate their emotions are more likely to communicate constructively, manage conflicts, and show empathy toward others. This is relevant in family environments, friendships, and school contexts, where emotional situations require cooperation and understanding. Positive emotional regulation supports respectful interaction and strengthens social relationships, while poor regulation can lead to conflict, withdrawal, or misunderstanding.

In academic and work contexts, emotional regulation plays an important role in motivation, persistence, and performance under pressure. Students and

professionals frequently encounter stress, evaluation, deadlines, and setbacks. The ability to cope with these demands by maintaining focus, managing frustration, and continuing effort is closely linked to successful learning and performance outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls et al., 2022). Skills such as attentional control, self-talk, and emotional awareness, developed in sport, can therefore transfer directly to academic and professional settings.

Furthermore, coping with emotions contributes to the development of resilience, defined as the ability to adapt positively to adversity. Players who learn to deal constructively with setbacks, mistakes, and pressure in sport are more likely to develop resilience that supports them in other areas of life (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). This includes the ability to recover from difficulties, maintain perspective, and continue pursuing goals despite challenges.

Finally, sport provides a structured environment in which players can repeatedly experience and practice emotional situations in a safe and guided context. This creates opportunities to develop coping strategies that are transferable to everyday life. Through this process, sport can contribute not only to athletic development but also to personal growth and long-term well-being.

Overall, coping with emotions supports functioning across multiple life domains by enhancing well-being, strengthening relationships, improving performance in academic and professional contexts, and fostering resilience. These transferable skills highlight the broader value of emotional regulation beyond sport.

1.1.6. Development of coping with emotions

Coping with emotions develops through the acquisition and refinement of a range of strategies that enable individuals to manage emotional responses in demanding situations. In sport, this development is shaped by repeated exposure to emotionally challenging experiences such as mistakes, pressure, competition, and interpersonal interactions. Over time, players build a repertoire of strategies that allows them to regulate emotional intensity, maintain focus, and respond constructively to these situations.

From a scientific perspective, coping and emotional regulation involve multiple interacting processes. Emotional regulation refers to the ways in which individuals influence the experience and expression of emotions (Gross, 1998; Gross, 2015), while coping describes the cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage demands that are perceived as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In sport, these processes are closely connected and are reflected in the strategies players use to deal with emotionally demanding situations (Nicholls & Polman, 2007).

Coping with emotions can be understood through several categories of strategies that develop and interact over time. These categories are not isolated, but often work together in practice.

Cognitive strategies influence how players interpret and evaluate situations. A central mechanism is cognitive appraisal, which determines whether a situation is perceived as a challenge or a threat (Lazarus, 1999). Strategies such as cognitive reappraisal allow players to reinterpret situations in a more constructive way, for example by viewing mistakes as part of the learning process. Research shows that cognitive reappraisal is associated with more positive emotional outcomes and better psychological functioning in athletes, whereas maladaptive strategies such as rumination or negative thinking are linked to increased stress and poorer adjustment (Doron et al., 2023; Kim & Tamminen, 2022). Self-talk is another important cognitive strategy that helps direct attention, regulate emotions, and guide behaviour during performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

Attentional and behavioural strategies focus on how players manage their focus and actions in response to emotional situations. Emotional experiences can disrupt attention and lead to disengagement or impulsive reactions. Strategies such as attentional refocusing and task-oriented behaviour help players redirect attention to relevant cues and remain engaged in the activity (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). Behavioural responses, such as continuing play after mistakes or using structured reset actions, support the regulation of emotions through action and help prevent negative emotional spirals.

Physiological strategies regulate the body's response to emotional experiences. Emotional reactions are closely linked to physiological processes such as heart rate, muscle tension, and breathing. Techniques such as breathing regulation and progressive muscle relaxation help to reduce excessive arousal, control tension, and support concentration (Hanin, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Effective regulation of physiological responses is particularly important in high-pressure situations, where elevated stress levels can impair performance.

Social strategies highlight that coping with emotions is not only an individual process but also occurs through interaction with others. In team sports, players influence each other's emotional states

through communication, behaviour, and shared experiences. Concepts such as emotional contagion demonstrate how emotions can spread within a group (Hatfield et al., 1994), while research on interpersonal and communal coping shows that athletes regulate emotions together by providing support, encouragement, and reassurance (Tamminen & Neely, 2020; Tamminen et al., 2016). Positive social interactions can therefore stabilise emotional responses and strengthen team functioning.

In addition to these categories, players can develop integrated mental skills that combine multiple regulatory processes. These include strategies such as imagery, routines, and mindfulness. Imagery allows players to mentally rehearse situations and prepare for emotional challenges, while routines provide structured sequences that support focus and emotional control. Mindfulness-based approaches promote awareness and acceptance of emotional experiences without immediate reaction, which has been shown to support attention and emotional regulation in athletes (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Josefsson et al., 2017).

The development of coping with emotions is therefore characterized by the expansion of a player's strategy repertoire and the increasing ability to apply these strategies flexibly. Research suggests that athletes who use a wider range of adaptive coping strategies show better emotional outcomes, greater perceived control, and more effective responses to stress (Nicholls et al., 2022; Doron et al., 2023). In contrast, reliance on a limited set of maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance or suppression, is associated with poorer psychological and performance outcomes (Kim & Tamminen, 2022).

Overall, coping with emotions develops as players learn to combine cognitive, behavioural, physiological, and social strategies in response to different demands. This growing flexibility allows them to regulate emotional experiences more effectively, remain engaged in performance, and adapt to the complex and dynamic nature of sport and everyday life.

The whole-player coping model

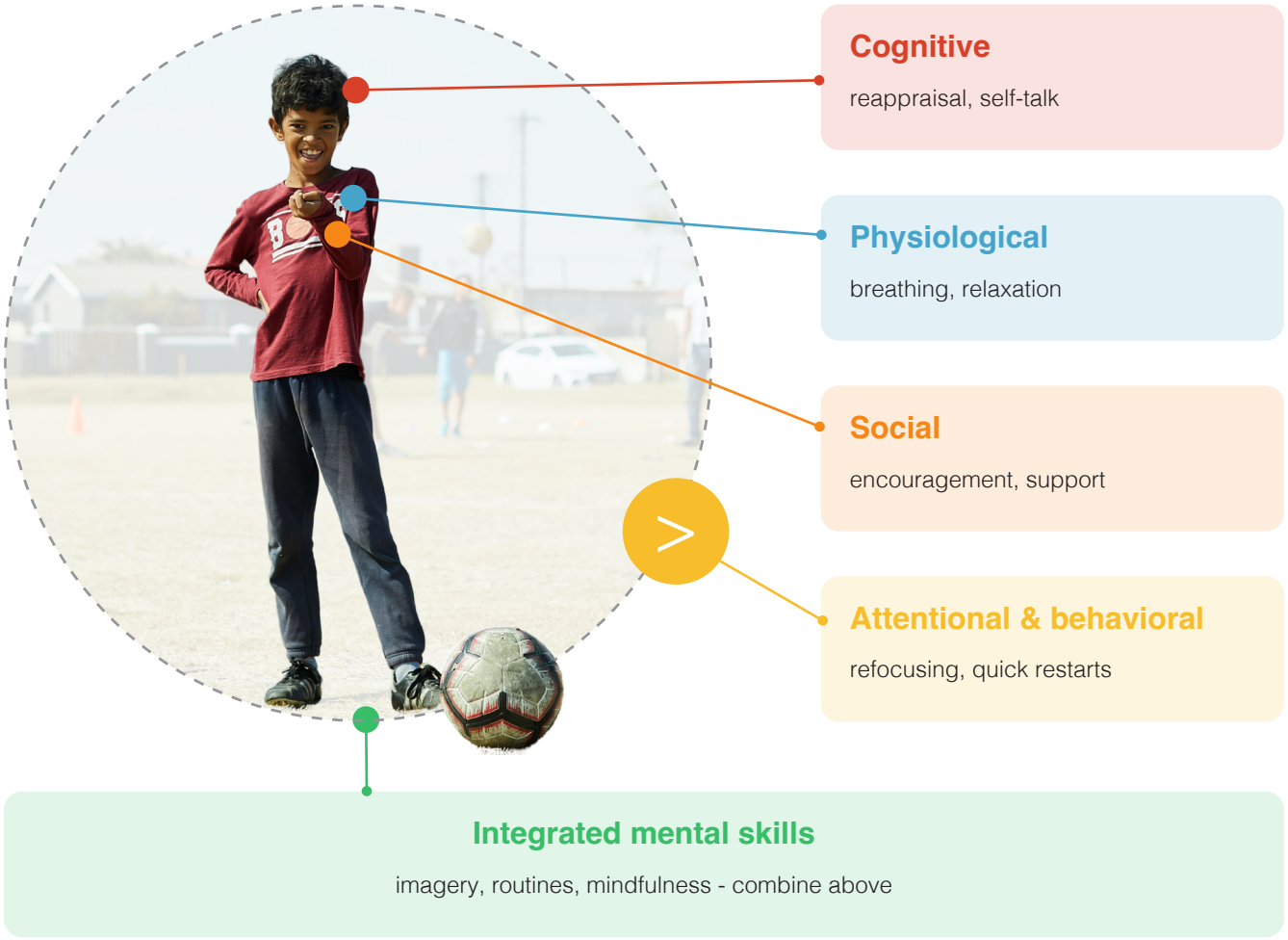


Figure 2: Hofkamp, 2024

1.2. Window of opportunities

The development of coping with emotions is closely linked to players' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Across childhood and adolescence, there are phases in which players are particularly receptive to learning how to recognise, understand, and regulate emotions. These phases represent important windows of opportunity in which emotional competencies can be developed effectively through sport.

In early childhood, players begin to experience and express emotions more clearly, but their ability to regulate these emotions is still limited. Emotional responses are often immediate and externally influenced, and players rely heavily on their environment to guide their reactions. During this phase, sport provides an important setting for recognising emotions and beginning to respond to them in simple and constructive ways.



As players grow older, their cognitive abilities develop, allowing them to better understand the causes and consequences of emotions. This creates opportunities to introduce more intentional forms of emotional regulation, such as directing attention, managing frustration, and responding more consciously to mistakes and challenges. Social interactions also become more important, as players increasingly learn to interpret and respond to the emotions of others.

During adolescence, emotional experiences become more complex and are often linked to identity, social relationships, and performance expectations. At the same time, players develop greater capacity for self-reflection, perspective-taking, and intentional regulation of emotions. This phase offers important opportunities to develop more advanced coping strategies, including managing pressure, dealing with setbacks, and maintaining emotional control in competitive environments (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014).

Research suggests that the development of emotional regulation follows a progression from externally supported regulation toward more independent and flexible self-regulation (Compas et al., 2001). This highlights the importance of providing age-appropriate experiences and guidance that match players' developmental stage. When emotional demands and learning opportunities are aligned with players' developmental readiness, the acquisition of coping skills is more effective and sustainable.

Sport is a particularly suitable environment for developing coping with emotions because it provides repeated exposure to emotionally meaningful situations. Players experience success, failure, pressure, cooperation, and conflict in a structured and supportive setting. These experiences create opportunities to practice emotional regulation in real contexts, which supports both learning and transfer to everyday life.

Overall, the window of opportunities for developing coping with emotions extends across all stages of youth development, with each phase offering specific potential for learning. By understanding these phases, coaches can create environments and experiences that support the gradual development of emotional regulation skills in a way that is appropriate, effective, and meaningful for players.

1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies



Correlation with Emotional Competencies
Coping with emotions works closely with other emotional competencies. Self-control is the response side of regulation: coping shapes the emotion before a reaction, and self-control decides the action that follows. Self-confidence depends on recovering from mistakes. Focus & mindfulness helps players notice emotions early, while continuing after a setback depends on the emotion not deciding the next action.

Correlation with Physical Skills
Physical arousal is the body side of emotion, so coping with them affects performance directly. Players who lower tension before a sprint or tackle keep movements controlled, while others may lose speed and precision. Endurance helps, as well-conditioned players feel less overwhelmed by fatigue.

Correlation with Technical Abilities
Frustration shows first in technical execution. A missed chance affects the next shot, and frustration after a mistake often shows in the pass that follows. Dribbling and feinting also suffer when players tense up, so coping with emotions keeps technique available under pressure.

Correlation with Social Competencies
Coping is shared in team sport, as players steady each other through encouragement and reassurance. Empathy & compassion lets a player read a teammate's state, which makes support possible. Most conflicts on the pitch are unregulated emotion meeting unregulated emotion, so conflict management depends on coping. Trust grows when a player stays composed under pressure and teammates can rely on them.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills
Emotional arousal narrows attention and speeds up poor decisions, so quick decision making depends on regulating emotion first. Critical thinking supports coping as well: reappraising a mistake as information rather than failure is a cognitive act that changes what the player does next.

Correlation with Tactical Principles
Concentration is the tactical quality most often broken by emotion. Emotional spikes pull attention away from the game, and defenders lose track of runners. Balance suffers too, because a team loses its shape when players chase the ball out of frustration.

1.4. Key learnings

- Emotions are a natural and constant part of football and directly influence performance, decision-making, and interaction with others.
- Coping with emotions is not about avoiding or suppressing emotions, but about responding to them in a constructive and effective way.
- Emotional regulation develops over time and can be trained through repeated exposure to meaningful situations in sport.
- Players use different types of coping strategies, including cognitive, attentional, physiological, and social approaches, which can be combined depending on the situation.
- The way players interpret situations (e.g. challenge vs. threat) has a strong impact on their emotional response and behaviour.
- Effective coping with emotions supports focus, decision-making, and consistent performance, especially under pressure.
- Emotional regulation is not only an individual competence but also influences the emotional climate, communication, and cohesion within a team.
- Coaches play a key role in shaping how players experience and regulate emotions through their behaviour, communication, and the environment they create.
- Coping with emotions is transferable beyond sport and supports well-being, relationships, and performance in school, work, and everyday life.
- Developing a broad repertoire of coping strategies enables players to respond flexibly to different situations and challenges.



1.5. From science to practice

The scientific understanding of coping with emotions highlights that emotional regulation can be developed through the gradual introduction and application of different coping strategies. In football, this process is most effective when players are repeatedly exposed to emotionally meaningful situations and are supported in responding to them in constructive ways. The goal is to help players build a repertoire of strategies that they can apply flexibly depending on the situation.

Across the different stages of development, coping with emotions progresses from simple and externally supported responses toward more independent and flexible regulation. This progression reflects both the increasing complexity of emotional experiences and the growing ability of players to interpret and manage these situations.

Stage 1
7-8 years



At this stage, players begin to recognise emotions and respond to them through simple and observable behaviours. Coping is mainly supported by the environment, with a focus on continuing play after mistakes and experiencing positive emotional responses. Basic strategies such as simple calming actions and encouragement are introduced in a natural and guided way.

Stage 2
9-10 years



Players become more aware of emotional situations and begin to apply simple strategies more consistently. They learn to continue trying after setbacks and to use basic forms of self-talk and social support. Emotional regulation is still largely supported externally, but players start to take more responsibility for their responses.

Stage 3
11-12 years



At this stage, players begin to use coping strategies more intentionally. They learn to manage their reactions through strategies such as self-talk, attentional refocusing, and simple routines. Emotional awareness increases, allowing players to recognise how emotions influence their behaviour and performance.

Stage 4
13-14 years



Players develop a deeper understanding of emotional situations and begin to apply more advanced strategies. They learn to interpret challenges more constructively, maintain focus under pressure, and regulate their responses in more demanding situations. Social aspects of coping, such as communication and interaction with teammates, become increasingly important.

Stage 5
15-16 years



Coping with emotions becomes more structured and individualized. Players apply a wider range of strategies, including breathing techniques, structured self-talk, and routines, to regulate emotional intensity and maintain performance. They are increasingly able to manage emotional responses independently, even in high-pressure situations.

Stage 6
17–18 years



At this stage, players are able to apply coping strategies flexibly and adapt them to different situations. Emotional regulation becomes more consistent and integrated into performance. Players also influence the emotional climate of the team by supporting others and contributing to a positive and stable environment.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

Coaching behaviour plays a central role in the development of coping with emotions, as coaches shape the environment in which players experience, interpret, and respond to emotional situations. Research in sport psychology consistently shows that emotional regulation is not only an individual process but is strongly influenced by social context, including the behaviour, communication, and emotional responses of coaches (Gross, 2015; Tamminen & Neely, 2020).

One important mechanism is social learning, which suggests that individuals learn behaviours and emotional responses by observing others. In sport, players observe how coaches react to mistakes, pressure, and success, and use these behaviours as reference points for their own responses (Bandura, 1977). Coaches who demonstrate calmness, constructive communication, and emotional control provide models for effective coping, while negative emotional reactions can reinforce maladaptive responses.

The way coaches structure the environment also influences emotional regulation. Research on motivational climates shows that task-oriented environments, which emphasise learning, effort, and improvement, are associated with more adaptive coping strategies and positive emotional outcomes. In contrast, ego-oriented climates, which focus on comparison and outcomes, are linked to increased anxiety, stress, and maladaptive coping (Nicholls, 1989; Ames, 1992). This highlights the importance of creating environments that support constructive emotional responses.

Coaches also influence emotional regulation through communication and feedback. Constructive feedback helps players interpret situations in a more adaptive way, supporting cognitive appraisal processes that are central to coping with emotions (Lazarus, 1999). Research shows that athletes who receive supportive and autonomy-enhancing feedback are more likely to develop effective coping strategies and maintain motivation under pressure (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Another important aspect is the role of emotional contagion and interpersonal regulation. Emotions expressed by coaches can spread to players and influence the emotional climate of the team (Hatfield et al., 1994). Coaches who regulate their own emotions effectively contribute to a stable and positive environment, while uncontrolled emotional reactions can increase tension and negatively affect both performance and cohesion.

In addition, research on interpersonal emotion regulation highlights that athletes often rely on others, including coaches, to help manage emotional experiences. Coaches can support this process by providing reassurance, guidance, and appropriate emotional responses in challenging situations (Tamminen & Crocker, 2013; Tamminen et al., 2016). This reinforces the idea that coping with emotions is a shared process within the team context.

The development of emotional regulation is also supported through psychological skills training, where coaches introduce and reinforce strategies such as self-talk, breathing regulation, imagery, and routines. These approaches are widely used in sport psychology to help athletes manage pressure and improve performance (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). Research shows that structured practice of these strategies enhances both emotional control and performance consistency.

More recently, mindfulness-based approaches have been integrated into sport settings, emphasizing awareness and acceptance of emotional experiences without immediate reaction. These approaches have been shown to support attention, emotional regulation, and well-being in athletes (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Josefsson et al., 2017). Coaches can facilitate this by creating environments that encourage reflection and present-moment focus.

Finally, the broader social environment, including coaching behaviour, is a key determinant of how athletes cope with stress. Studies on coping in sport indicate that supportive environments are associated with adaptive coping strategies, while controlling or highly pressurized environments increase the likelihood of maladaptive coping responses (Nicholls & Polman, 2007; Doron et al., 2023; Kim & Tamminen, 2022). This highlights the responsibility of coaches to create conditions that support the development of emotional regulation.

Overall, scientific evidence shows that coaching behaviour directly influences how players develop and apply coping strategies. Through role modelling, communication, environmental design, and the introduction of coping strategies, coaches play a central role in shaping emotional regulation in sport.

2.1.2. Practical implications

Practically, this means that the coach creates a learning environment in which players can experience emotions, recognise them, and learn constructive ways to respond. Coping with emotions develops when players repeatedly face meaningful football situations such as mistakes, pressure, frustration, success, failure, and conflict, while receiving consistent support from the coach and teammates.

A coaching style that supports Coping with Emotions includes:

Modelling emotional regulation

- reacting calmly after mistakes, pressure, or unexpected situations
- showing composure during competition and training
- avoiding visible frustration, sarcasm, or uncontrolled emotional reactions
- demonstrating that emotions can be acknowledged without losing control
- using the coach's own behaviour as a reference point for players

Creating emotional safety

- treating mistakes as part of learning
- allowing players to express emotions without being judged or embarrassed
- supporting players after frustration, disappointment, or conflict
- avoiding punishment-based reactions to emotional mistakes
- helping players feel safe enough to stay engaged after difficult moments

Supporting emotional awareness

- helping players recognise what they feel in specific football situations
- connecting emotions to moments such as mistakes, pressure, fatigue, or unfair decisions
- encouraging players to notice how emotions influence behaviour and decisions
- using short reflection moments to build understanding
- helping players distinguish between feeling an emotion and acting on it

Teaching coping strategies

- introducing simple strategies such as breathing, self-talk, refocusing, and routines
- practicing coping strategies repeatedly in realistic football situations
- matching strategies to players' age and developmental level
- helping players understand when a strategy can be useful
- encouraging players to build a personal repertoire of coping tools

Framing situations constructively

- presenting mistakes as learning opportunities
- helping players interpret pressure as a challenge rather than only as a threat
- focusing feedback on next actions and possible solutions
- reinforcing effort, recovery, and constructive reactions
- reducing fear of failure through learning-oriented communication

Strengthening social coping

- encouraging players to support teammates after mistakes or emotional moments
- promoting constructive communication during pressure and conflict
- reinforcing encouragement, reassurance, and positive team reactions
- helping players understand their influence on the team's emotional climate
- developing shared responsibility for emotional stability within the team

Providing emotionally meaningful practice

- designing activities that include pressure, mistakes, competition, and recovery moments
- allowing players to practice coping strategies during realistic situations
- avoiding overprotection from emotional challenge
- balancing challenge with support
- creating repeated opportunities to respond constructively to emotional demands

2.2. Choice of words

The way coaches communicate has a direct influence on how players regulate their emotions in football. In emotionally demanding situations such as mistakes, pressure, or conflict, specific phrases can help players refocus, calm down, reinterpret situations, and respond constructively. Effective coaching language therefore supports the application of coping strategies in real time.

Stage 1
7-8 years



At this age, children need very short, warm phrases that reduce emotional intensity and get them back into play immediately. Coaches should speak calmly and repeat familiar phrases consistently, since young players respond best to predictable, reassuring language rather than explanations.

Example tone:

- *"It's okay, keep playing." (reduces emotional intensity)*
- *"Try again right away." (behavioural refocus)*
- *"Take a breath and go." (physiological regulation)*
- *"Don't worry, just play." (reduces fear/frustration)*

Stage 2
9-10 years



Players at this age can begin to apply simple self-talk and refocusing cues on their own, so language should point clearly to the next action rather than dwell on the mistake itself. Short, repeatable phrases help players build the habit of resetting quickly and encouraging teammates.

Example tone:

- *"Focus on the next action." (attentional refocusing)*
- *"Tell yourself: keep going." (self-talk activation)*
- *"Leave the mistake behind." (cognitive disengagement)*
- *"Try again, same focus." (task orientation)*

Stage 3
11-12 years



As players start choosing coping strategies more deliberately, coaching language can introduce short cues that combine breathing, refocusing, and self-talk. Phrases should encourage players to actively select a response rather than simply calm down.

Example tone:

- *"Reset—what's your next action?" (attentional + behavioural reset)*
- *"Use your words—what helps you now?" (self-talk awareness)*
- *"Take a breath and refocus." (physiological + attentional)*
- *"Stay with the game, not the mistake." (attention shift)*

Stage 4
13-14 years



During adolescence, players are increasingly able to interpret situations and reframe setbacks, so language can move beyond simple calming cues toward questions and statements that build awareness and constructive reinterpretation. Coaches should invite players to reflect on what a situation demands and how they choose to respond.

Example tone:

- *"What does this situation require from you?" (cognitive appraisal)*
- *"Use it—learn from the mistake." (reappraisal)*
- *"Stay in control of your reaction." (self-regulation)*
- *"Channel your frustration into the next action." (emotion redirection)*

Stage 5
15-16 years



At this stage, players are expected to apply their own regulation strategies with less coaching support, so language should reference personal routines and strategies rather than prescribe a single response. Coaches can use brief, strategic cues that reinforce autonomy and composure under pressure.

Example tone:

- *"What works for you here?" (strategy selection)*
- *"Reset with your routine." (behavioural + cognitive integration)*
- *"Control your breathing, stay composed." (physiological regulation)*
- *"Stay with your task under pressure." (attentional control)*

Stage 6
17–18 years



Older players are expected to regulate their own emotions flexibly and to influence the emotional climate of the team, so coaching language can shift toward supporting independent decision-making and leadership. Phrases should reinforce ownership of one's response and responsibility for stabilizing others.

Example tone:

- *"Choose your response deliberately." (self-regulation autonomy)*
- *"What is the best way to handle this situation?" (adaptive coping)*
- *"Stay composed and lead the reaction." (social + emotional leadership)*

2.3. Body language

A coach's body language helps players regulate their emotions, because players read it in the seconds after a mistake or a conflict. Calm, controlled and supportive signals help players settle, while visible frustration raises their tension and spreads through the group.

Eye Contact

- Keep steady, supportive eye contact when a player is upset
- Avoid aggressive or dismissive looks after a mistake
- Use brief, positive eye contact to confirm that a player can continue

Facial Expression

- Keep a calm, composed expression in difficult moments
- Avoid visible frustration, disappointment or anger after mistakes
- Show acceptance, not judgement when a player is emotional



Gestures

- Use clear, controlled gestures to point the player to the next action
- Avoid throwing arms up or pointing aggressively
- Reinforce recovery with a thumbs-up or a clap

Posture

- Stand upright, relaxed and balanced, especially when the game is tense
- Avoid tense, rigid or closed positions
- Show stability through a calm physical presence

Positioning & Distance

- Move closer when a player needs stability after an emotional moment
- Avoid distancing or isolating a player after a mistake
- Adjust distance to what players need: close for support, open for space

When the coach's body language stays calm and supportive, players see coping in action. This helps the group recover faster after setbacks and keeps the team together under pressure.

3. TRAINING

THE DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

of coping with emotions from foundation to maturity:



7-8 years

1. Name an emotion you felt during the session, and what happened just before it.
2. Use one simple response after a difficult moment, and get back into play.
3. Respond supportively when a teammate is upset.



9-10 years

1. Say what your reaction was after a mistake or a success.
2. Use controlled breathing or a cue word, and take the next action.
3. Encourage a teammate when the game becomes difficult.



11-12 years

1. Tell the difference between frustration, nerves and pressure in what you felt.
2. Use a prepared phrase after a mistake, move your attention to the next action.
3. Say how an emotion affected your concentration or your decisions.



13-14 years

1. Describe a mistake in terms of what it tells you, and act on it.
2. Say what you are focusing on instead, in an emotionally difficult moment.
3. Stay involved after a mistake teammates have seen.



15-16 years

1. Use your own routine before a penalty, free kick or kick-off.
2. Raise or settle your own intensity, and say which you needed.
3. React to a setback in a way that steadies your teammates.



17-18 years

1. Use your breathing, self-talk and routines without being reminded.
2. Be aware of changing the situation, your attention, the meaning, or your response.
3. Hold your composure in the decisive moments of a game.

Training

7-8 years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, emotional reactions during football are usually immediate and strongly connected to situations in the game. Positive moments such as scoring or winning often lead to visible excitement and joy, while mistakes, losing the ball, or unsuccessful actions can quickly result in frustration, disappointment, or anger. Emotional reactions are often expressed openly through body language, facial expressions, or verbal reactions.

Players are still developing the ability to regulate emotions independently and may struggle to recover quickly after mistakes or setbacks. At the same time, they begin to recognise basic emotions in themselves and others and can learn simple coping responses through repeated football experiences. Emotional regulation at this stage depends heavily on external guidance, repetition, and supportive interactions during play.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players begin to recognise emotions during football activities and experience simple coping responses that help them remain positively engaged after emotionally challenging situations.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

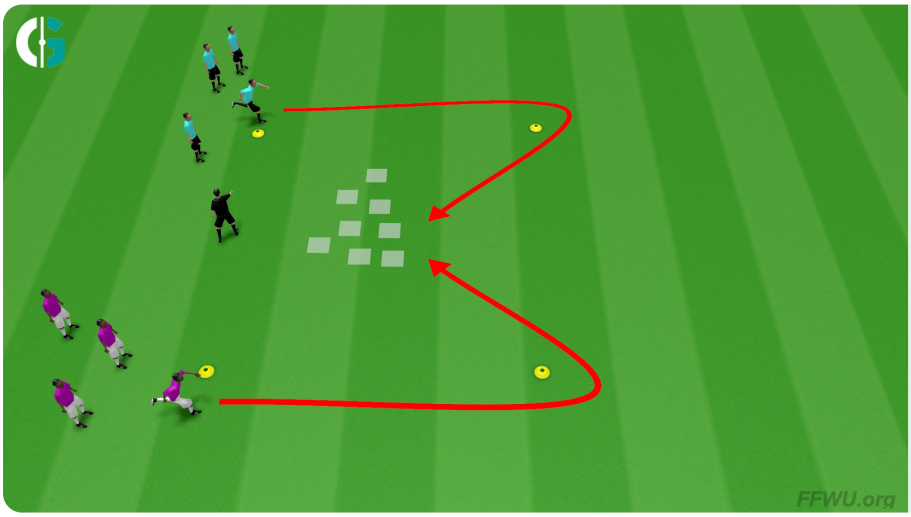
1. Name an emotion you felt during the session, and what happened just before it.
2. Use one simple response after a difficult moment, and get back into play.
3. Respond supportively when a teammate is upset.

3.1.3. Coach insight

At this age emotions arrive fast and show on the outside before the player has any say in it. What a seven-year-old can learn is not to feel less, but to have something to do next: one breath, a “try again”, and back into the game. The response has to be simple enough to use while still upset.

EXERCISE

RUNNING CHARADE



Players	4+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	10 x 7 m
Equipment	4 cones, 8 charade cards
Duration	total: 18 min play: 15 min breaks: -
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into two teams. Two players (one from each team) run around the cones and collect one emotion card from the centre.
- The two players act out the football situation shown on the card without speaking, while their teammates try to guess the emotion and situation. The team that guesses more emotions correctly wins the activity.
- The cards include positive and challenging football situations connected to the eight basic emotions: happy, excited, proud, confident, frustrated, nervous, disappointed, and angry.
- Example situations include scoring or missing a penalty, starting on the bench, conceding a goal, receiving praise from the coach, making a mistake, or winning the ball.
- After the charade play a game and reinforce the learnings to be implemented in a game situation.

Coaching Tips

1. Prepare players to recognise that football situations can create **different emotions**.
2. Introduce simple coping strategies such as **taking one deep breath**, saying “try again”, or quickly continuing after mistakes or disappointment.
3. Discuss with players how teammates can **react supportively during emotional moments** in football.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players name the emotion on the card and the football situation that causes it.	○ *Which emotions did you recognise during the game?* ○ *What football situation created that emotion?* ○ *Which card was hardest to act out without words?*
2	Players use one simple response after their team guesses wrong, and rejoin the run.	○ *What could the player do after that moment?* ○ *What did you do to get back into the game?* ○ *How did it feel when your team could not guess your card?*
3	Players respond supportively when a teammate struggles to act out their card.	○ *How did teammates react during difficult moments?* ○ *What can you say to help a teammate after a mistake?* ○ *Who helped you when your turn was difficult?*

Training

9-10 years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, players become more aware of emotional reactions during football activities and begin to understand that emotions influence behaviour and participation in the game. Mistakes, losing possession, competition, or interactions with teammates may create frustration, disappointment, nervousness, or excitement that can affect concentration and decision-making during play. Emotional reactions may still be strong, but players increasingly become capable of reflecting briefly on their emotions and reactions.

Players begin to understand that emotional responses can be influenced intentionally through simple coping strategies. Repeated football situations provide opportunities to practise calming down, refocusing, and continuing participation after mistakes or difficult moments. Encouragement from teammates and coaches continues to play an important role in helping players regulate emotions and remain positively engaged during training and games.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, simple coping strategies are introduced directly within realistic football situations to help players better understand emotional reactions and remain positively engaged during play.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

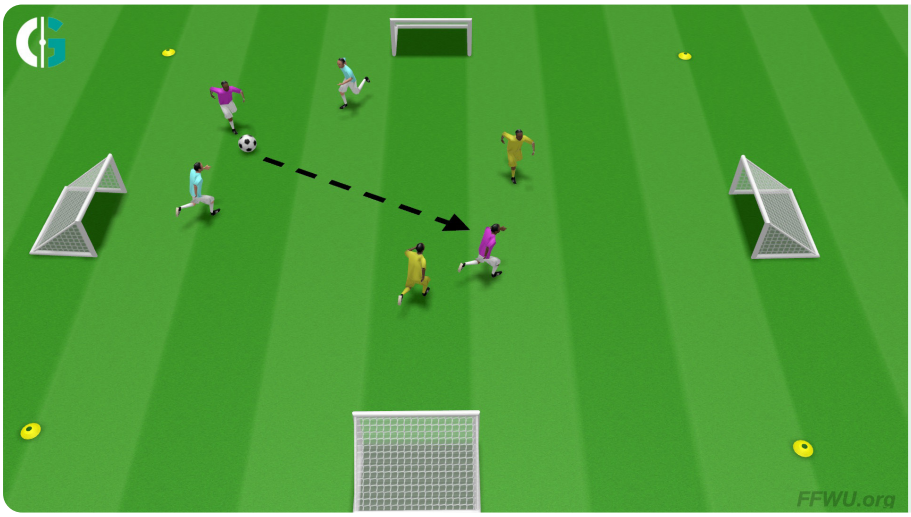
1. Say what your reaction was after a mistake or a success.
2. Use controlled breathing or a cue word, and take the next action.
3. Encourage a teammate when the game becomes difficult.

3.2.3. Coach insight

Players can now be given a technique rather than only comfort. One slow breath, a short cue word and a quick restart work because they give the player something to do in the seconds when frustration would otherwise decide the next action. The restart matters most: attention leaves the mistake only when the next action demands it.

EXERCISE

3-TEAM CHAOS GAME



Players	6+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	25 x 20 m
Equipment	1 ball, 4 mini-goals, 4 cones
Duration	total: 25 min play: 4 x 4 min breaks: 2 min
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into three teams of two players. All teams play on the same field at the same time.
- The team in possession attacks, while the other two teams defend together (2v4). When a team wins the ball, they immediately become the attacking team.
- Teams can score in any of the four small goals. If the ball goes out of play, the coach immediately plays a new ball into the field to keep the game continuous.
- The game runs without stoppages, creating constant transitions, mistakes, unsuccessful attempts, and new situations that require players to continue participating and react positively after setbacks.
- Variations:
  - Increase the challenge by requiring seven consecutive passes

Coaching Tips

1. Prepare players for frequent mistakes, transitions, and loss of possession **before the activity starts**.
2. Introduce short and **positive self-talk phrases** such as “keep going” or “try again” before the activity starts.
3. Discuss with players how teammates can **support each other during difficult moments** and mistakes.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players say what their reaction was after losing the ball to the two defending teams.	○ *When did you lose the ball during the game?* ○ *What did you do immediately after losing it?* ○ *What did it feel like being outnumbered two to four?*
2	Players use controlled breathing or a cue word, and take the next defensive action.	○ *What did you say to yourself after a mistake?* ○ *Did it help you continue playing?* ○ *How quickly did you start defending again?*
3	Players encourage their partner when their team is defending against two teams at once.	○ *When did your partner make a mistake, what did you say?* ○ *How did your teammate react?* ○ *What kept the two of you working together?*

Training

11-12 years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, players experience emotions more consciously during football activities and begin to understand how emotions influence concentration, behaviour, communication, and decision-making in the game. Competitive situations, mistakes, pressure from teammates or opponents, and expectations about performance can create emotional reactions that affect participation and performance during training and matches. Players increasingly become capable of reflecting on emotional situations and recognising how emotions influence their actions.

Players also begin to apply coping strategies more intentionally to manage emotional reactions during football activities. Repeated exposure to emotionally challenging situations helps players practise calming down, refocusing attention, and continuing participation after mistakes or setbacks. Social interactions with teammates become increasingly important, as supportive communication and positive emotional responses can strongly influence confidence and emotional regulation during play.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players learn to apply coping strategies more intentionally to manage emotional reactions and maintain concentration during football activities.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

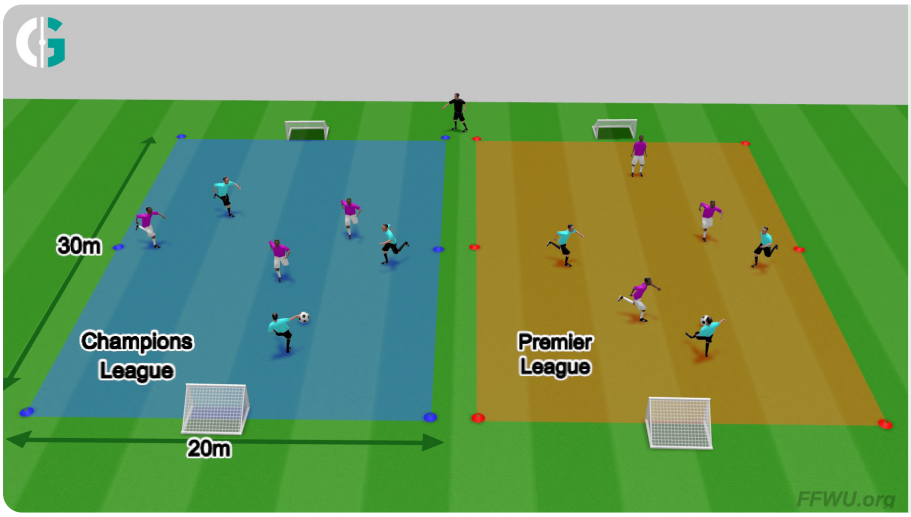
1. Tell the difference between frustration, nerves and pressure in what you felt.
2. Use a prepared phrase after a mistake, move your attention to the next action.
3. Say how an emotion affected your concentration or your decisions.

3.3.3. Coach insight

Naming an emotion changes what a player can do with it. At this stage players can tell frustration from nerves and nerves from pressure, and a feeling that has a name can be talked about rather than only acted out. Cue phrases work for the same reason — they supply words at the moment words are hardest to find.

EXERCISE

CHAMPION MINDSET GAME



Players	12+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	40 x 20 m
Equipment	2 balls, 4 mini-goals, 12 cones
Duration	total: 25 min play: 4 x 4 min breaks: 2 min
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into four teams of three. Two teams play on each field in a 3v3 format.
- Games are played for 4 minutes. After each round, teams rotate to play different opponents.
- The activity includes three coping strategies:
  1. Simple self-talk
  2. Attention shift
  3. Reset actions
- Players apply the coping strategies during emotionally challenging football situations such as losing the ball in a 1v1, making a bad pass, or missing a chance on goal.
- After challenging situations, players are encouraged to quickly refocus on the next action and continue playing positively.

Coaching Tips

1. Introduce **simple self-talk phrases** such as “next action” or “try again” before the activity starts.
2. Prepare players to quickly **redirect their attention back to the game** after emotionally challenging situations.
3. Encourage players to **identify and describe emotions** such as frustration, pressure, nervousness, or confidence during the activity.

Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1 Players tell the difference between frustration, nerves and pressure across the four-minute rounds.	○ *Which emotions did you experience during the game?* ○ *When did you feel frustration, pressure or nervousness, and how were they different?*
2 Players use the self-talk strategy from the session after a mistake, and take the next action.	○ *When did you use self-talk during the game?* ○ *After a mistake, did you focus on the next action?* ○ *Which of the three strategies suited you best?*
3 Players say how an emotion changed their concentration or decisions in that round.	○ *What did the emotion change about how you played?* ○ *What helped you bring your attention back to the game?* ○ *Did the rotation to new opponents change how you felt?*

Training

13-14 years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 Years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, players become increasingly capable of reflecting on emotions and understanding how emotional reactions influence behaviour, communication, decision-making, and performance during football activities. Competitive situations, mistakes, pressure to perform, social comparison, and interactions with teammates or opponents can create emotional responses that affect concentration and confidence during training and matches. Emotional reactions may still fluctuate strongly, particularly during challenging or stressful situations.

Players increasingly develop the ability to regulate emotions intentionally and apply coping strategies more independently during football activities. Repeated exposure to emotionally demanding situations helps players practise remaining task-focused, regaining concentration after setbacks, and responding constructively to pressure or frustration. Supportive communication, self-awareness, and constructive emotional responses become increasingly important for both individual performance and positive team dynamics.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players learn to apply coping strategies more independently to regulate emotional reactions and remain constructively focused during football activities.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

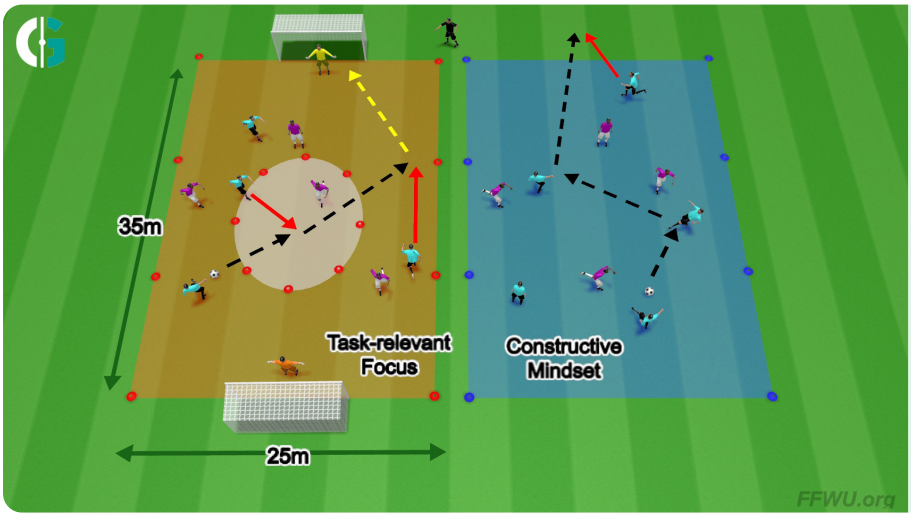
1. Describe a mistake in terms of what it tells you, and act on it.
2. Say what you are focusing on instead, in an emotionally difficult moment.
3. Stay involved after a mistake teammates have seen.

3.4.3. Coach insight

This is where players can begin to change the meaning of a situation rather than only their response to it. A mistake read as information instead of failure produces a different next action, and that reinterpretation is what this stage rests on. It takes far longer to learn than breathing does, and it is worth the time.

EXERCISE

FOCUS FORWARD GAME



Players	16+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	35 x50 m
Equipment	2 balls, 2 goals, 24 cones
Duration	total: 37 min play: 6 x 4 min breaks: 2 min
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into four teams of four (including goalkeepers). Two teams play on each field in a 4v4 format, game time 4 min.
- A simple tournament structure can be used (e.g. winners stay, losers switch).
- Field 1 (Constructive Mindset):
  Only forward and diagonal passes are allowed. Backward passes are not permitted. If a backward pass is played = opposing team gains possession. Players dribble over or receive the pass behind the finish line to score.
- Field 2 rule (Task-Relevant Focus):
  The field has a centre circle. Only one player per team is allowed inside the circle at a time. If the player leaves, another teammate can enter. To score a goal, the team must play at least one touch inside the centre circle.

Coaching Tips

1. Reflect with players on how mistakes, setbacks, and pressure situations **can be interpreted as opportunities** to learn, improve, and continue playing constructively.
2. Prepare players to **focus on task-relevant cues** such as the ball, space, teammates, opponents, and centre circle occupation during demanding situations.
3. Discuss with players how **communication can positively influence teammates** during emotionally challenging moments.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players describe a mistake on the Constructive Mindset field in terms of what it tells them.	○ *How did you react after a mistake in the game?* ○ *What did that mistake tell you about the next action?* ○ *Which field made mistakes easier to accept?*
2	Players say what they refocused on after the mistake, and keep playing.	○ *What were you focusing on during the game?* ○ *What helped you stay focused on your next action?* ○ *How long did it take to get back into the game?*
3	Players stay involved after a mistake the other team has seen.	○ *What did you do after a mistake everyone saw?* ○ *How did you react when a teammate made a mistake?* ○ *Did the tournament format change how mistakes felt?*

Training

15-16 years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, players experience emotional situations in football with increased intensity and complexity due to higher performance expectations, competitive pressure, social evaluation, and personal ambitions. Emotions such as frustration, nervousness, disappointment, excitement, or pressure can strongly influence concentration, confidence, communication, and decision-making during training and matches. Players increasingly recognise emotional patterns in themselves and begin to understand how emotions influence both individual and team performance.

Players also become more capable of intentionally regulating emotional reactions and selecting coping strategies based on the demands of the situation. Repeated exposure to competitive football environments helps players practise maintaining composure, recovering after mistakes, and remaining focused under pressure. Emotional regulation increasingly becomes connected to consistent performance, resilience, and constructive behaviour within the team environment.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players learn to intentionally select and apply coping strategies to regulate emotions and maintain performance during demanding football situations.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

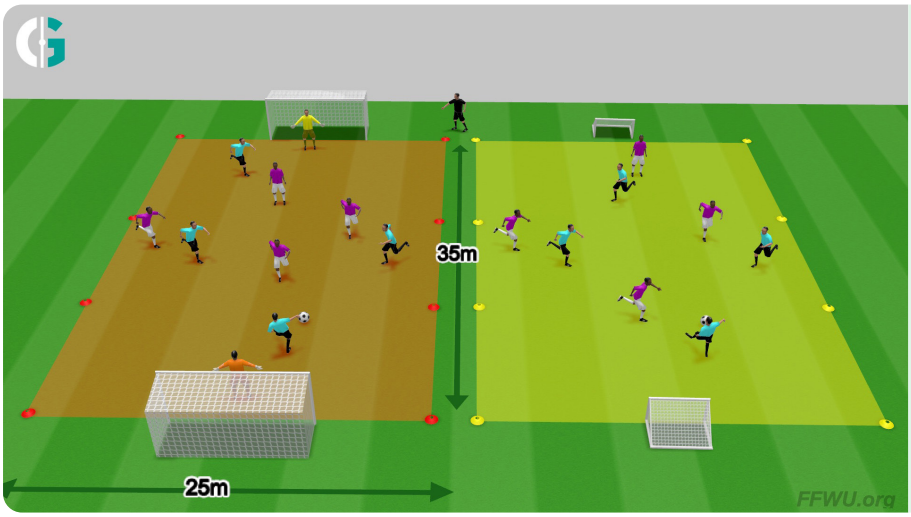
1. Use your own routine before a penalty, free kick or kick-off.
2. Raise or settle your own intensity, and say which you needed.
3. React to a setback in a way that steadies your teammates.

3.5.3. Coach insight

Under real competitive pressure players fall back on whatever is already routine. Breathing, a personal cue phrase and a consistent pre-performance sequence work precisely because they were rehearsed long before the penalty. Nothing new can be introduced in the moment itself, so at this stage the coaching happens in the weeks before it is needed.

EXERCISE

ELITE COPING TO PERFORM



Players	20+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
Pitch	35 x 25 m
Equipment	2 balls, 2 goals, 2 mini-goals, 16 cones
Duration	total: 57 min play: 3 x 16 min breaks: 3 min
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into four teams of five (including goalkeepers). Two teams play on each field in a 5v5 format.
- The session is divided into three coping phases.
  1. Breathing (~16 min)
  2. Self-talk (~16 min)
  3. Individual routines (~16 min)
- Each phase follows the same sequence and duration:
- Introduction (2 min) > Individual practice (2 min) > Game 1 (5 min) > Individual practice (2 min) > Game 2 (5 min)
- During the games, players apply the respective coping strategy in realistic match situations such as mistakes, pressure, setbacks, or key actions.

Coaching Tips

1. Introduce controlled breathing before the activity starts and **demonstrate how breathing can help** players regulate emotional intensity during demanding situations.
2. Support players in developing **short and personal self-talk cue words** (e.g. “focus”, “next action”) that can be used during performance situations.
3. Encourage players to develop **simple and repeatable individual routines** that combine breathing, self-talk, and preparation for the next action.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players use their own routine in the routines phase before a decisive action.	○ *When did you use your routine during the game?* ○ *Did it help you return to the next action?* ○ *What suited you best: breathing, self-talk or routines?*
2	Players raise or settle their intensity during the breathing phase, and say which they needed.	○ *When did you feel under pressure during the game?* ○ *Did you use your breathing technique, and what changed?* ○ *Did you need to calm down or wake up?*
3	Players react to a setback in a way that steadies their teammates.	○ *What was your cue word, and did it help you stay focused?* ○ *How did your reaction affect the players around you?* ○ *Who steadied you when you needed it?*

Training

17-18 years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, players experience emotionally demanding football situations with increased frequency and intensity due to competitive expectations, performance pressure, social evaluation, and leadership responsibilities within the team environment. Emotions such as frustration, anxiety, disappointment, pressure, or excitement can influence concentration, communication, decision-making, and overall performance during training and matches. Players increasingly recognise emotional patterns in themselves and others and become more aware of how emotional reactions affect team dynamics and collective performance.

Players develop greater independence in regulating emotional responses and selecting coping strategies based on the specific demands of the situation. Emotionally challenging football experiences provide opportunities to practise maintaining composure, adapting to adversity, and responding constructively under pressure. Emotional regulation increasingly becomes connected to leadership, performance consistency, resilience, and the ability to positively influence teammates during difficult moments in football activities.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players learn to independently apply and adapt coping strategies to maintain composure, performance, and constructive behaviour during highly demanding football situations.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

1. Use your breathing, self-talk and routines without being reminded.
2. Be aware of changing the situation, your attention, the meaning, or your response.
3. Hold your composure in the decisive moments of a game.

3.6.3. Coach insight

The test now is whether the strategies still work when nobody prompts them. Players at this stage should be choosing their own cue phrases and routines, because a routine that belongs to the coach is abandoned the moment the coach is not there. Composure has also become visible: teammates read it and take it from them.

EXERCISE

COMPOSED THROUGH ADVERSITY



Players	18+
Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 **17–18**
Pitch	50 x 35 m
Equipment	1 ball, 2 goals, 12 bibs
Duration	total: 49 min play: 6 x 6 min breaks: 2 min
Author	Martin Hofkamp

Description

- Divide the players into three teams of six (including goalkeepers). Two teams play 6v6 on the field, third team is the Observation Team.
- 6 min games. After each round, teams rotate so another team becomes the Observation Team.
- Before each new round, the coach rolls a dice to determine the rule for the next game:
  1 = 1-touch only, 2 = max. 2 touches, 3 = minimum 3 touches, 4 = 4 passes before scoring, 5 = all players must touch the ball before scoring, 6 = free game
- After the dice is rolled, one player must leave the field (simulated red card). The team plays with one player less for that round.
- The observation team watches emotional reactions, coping strategies, communication, and team behaviour during difficult situations and changing conditions. Before entering the next round, players briefly discuss which coping behaviours were most effective.

Coaching Tips

1. Reflect with players about the **different coping strategies** and when they should be used.
2. Prepare players for difficult situations **before the activity starts** and explain that emotional control is part of high-level performance.
3. Discuss with players how communication and behaviour can **positively influence teammates** during pressure situations.

	Learning Objectives	Reflection Questions
1	Players use their breathing, self-talk and routines in the 6v6 without being reminded.	○ *Which situations were most challenging during the game?* ○ *What strategy did you choose, without being told to?* ○ *What did the observation team see you do?*
2	Players say whether they changed the situation, their attention, the meaning, or their response.	○ *How did you react when the situation felt unfair or difficult?* ○ *What did you use: changing the situation, your attention, the meaning, or your response?*
3	Players hold their composure in the adversity the coach introduces.	○ *Did you stay composed when it mattered the most?* ○ *When did you support a teammate under pressure?* ○ *What did you notice while observing another team?*

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