



Helping junior tennis players cope with their emotions

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ABSTRACT

Competition is an integral component of junior tennis. Through competition children can test their physical prowess, develop their psychological skills and, ultimately, progress through the rankings. While some enjoy tournaments and excel when competing, others find it more challenging and experience emotions such as anxiety and pressure when they perform. For children to succeed in matches and reach their potential as tennis players, they must be able to cope with the range of emotions that arise before, during, and after matches. It is therefore important to understand the emotions that children experience when they compete and help them develop appropriate coping strategies to manage these emotions. This article provides recommendations for coaches regarding how they can help children to cope with the emotions they experience when competing.

Key words: Emotions, coping, junior tennis, tournaments

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INTRODUCTION

Participation in competition is an integral part of the youth sport experience. Through competition, children not only test and develop their physical skills and fitness but also have an opportunity to develop their psychological and social qualities (Cumming, Smoll, Smith, & Grossbard, 2007). Despite the benefits that can be gained through competition, concerns have been raised regarding potential negative consequences (cf. Sagar & Lavalley, 2010). Children can experience high levels of stress and pre-competitive anxiety when they compete and these feelings can negatively affect sport performance, participation, and health (Crocker, Hoar, McDonough, Kowalski, & Niefer, 2004). For example, high-levels of pre-competitive anxiety have been associated with avoidance of sport, reduced sport enjoyment, burnout, and sleep disruption (Gould, Udry, Tuffey & Loehr, 1996).

To minimize the negative psychological and social consequences of competition, it is important that children understand their emotions and develop strategies to control or cope with the emotions they experience (Crocker et al., 2004). If children are unable to cope with the emotions they experience, the chances of them reaching their potential are greatly reduced. Coaches can play a critical role in helping children to manage their emotions in a variety of ways, including (but not limited to): (1) Understanding the emotions children experience and normalizing such experiences; (2) Working with children to reappraise situations and emotions; and (3) Helping children to develop individual coping strategies.

UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS AND NORMALISING EXPERIENCES

A recent study of elite junior tennis players identified that children experienced 25 different emotional experiences before, during, and following matches (Lewis, Knight, & Mellalieu, 2014). For example, players described feeling nervous, calm, and excited before matches, confident, bored, and happy during matches, and embarrassed, despondent, and relieved following matches. These findings replicate previous studies conducted in other sports, which have indicated that athletes experience emotions ranging from anger, guilt, and anxiety to happiness, pride, and relief when they are competing

(Neil, Hanton, Mellalieu, & Fletcher, 2011; Uphill & Jones, 2007). Such findings provide a clear indication of the range and volume of emotions experienced by athletes and simply sharing such insights with players may help to reassure them that the emotions they experience when they are competing are normal (Lewis, 2014). An additional strategy is to provide players with opportunities to discuss and review the emotions they see professional players experience when competing. This can further help players to understand that emotions are a common part of sport, and the distinguishing factor between athletes is how well they cope with or manage their emotions.



A variety of theories have been developed to help explain how and why athletes experience and regulate emotions in sport (Crocker et al., 2004). One theory that has been widely used is Lazarus' (1991) cognitive-motivational-relational theory. This theory states that the emotions individuals experience are a by-product of their personality and the surrounding environment combined with cognitive, motivational, and relational features (Lazarus, 1991). Therefore, neither the individual nor environment is independently responsible for the emotions experienced; rather it is the ongoing transaction or relationship between the individual and the environment that produces an emotion. Thus, for players to understand the emotions they experience, and consequently develop strategies to manage

these emotions, it is important to consider both the environmental and the individual personal factors that influence their experiences. Two factors are particularly important to consider: (1) Cognitive appraisal of the situation and one's emotions, and (2) The coping strategies employed to manage these appraisals and emotions. Attending to these factors are two key strategies coaches can employ to help children manage their overall emotional experiences in and around training and competition.

Working with children to reappraise situations and emotions

Cognitive appraisals comprise two processes. The first, termed primary appraisals, are motivationally orientated and involve the individual evaluating the importance of a situation to themselves (Lazarus, 1991). Primary appraisals consist of three components; goal relevance, goal congruence, and goal content (Uphill & Jones, 2007). Goal relevance refers to whether there is anything at stake for the individual. If there is something at stake then it will result in the experience of an emotion associated with the importance of the goal, such as anger or happiness (Lazarus, 1991).

Goal congruence refers to whether the encounter is viewed as harmful or beneficial, and will determine whether the emotion generated is positive (e.g., pride) or negative (e.g., anxiety; Lazarus, 1991). Finally, goal content describes what type of goal is at stake, for example the protection of one's perceived competence (Lazarus, 1991).

Given the importance of personal goals in relation to players' emotional experiences, it would appear pertinent to encourage players to adjust their goals to focus on performance rather than outcomes (as is recommended in achievement goal theory literature, see Harwood, Spray, & Keegan, 2008). If participants create goals that are under (or at least more under) their control (e.g., performance rather than outcome goals) participants will have more chance of protecting their goals. If participants cannot shift their personal goals from, for example winning, it might be beneficial if athletes could at least be encouraged to identify or acknowledge their personal goals prior to competition. This might allow participants to identify when they might experience different emotions and allow them to prepare strategies to cope with them if/ as they arise.

In addition to reappraising their goals, players should also be encouraged to reappraise the demands they are encountering, viewing them as challenging rather than threatening or harmful (Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009). If players are in a 'challenge' state, emotions are perceived to be beneficial towards performance. However, in a 'threat' state emotions are perceived to be harmful towards performance (Jones et al., 2009). Therefore, by helping players to view different situations as challenges to be overcome, rather than threats to their goals, players will be able to better regulate their emotions and maintain or improve their performance. Recent research has demonstrated that facilitative interpretations of negative emotions can add positive value to performance, whereas debilitating interpretations of negative emotions can be detrimental to performance (e.g., Neil et al., 2011). That is, if players can be encouraged to positively interpret their negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) during matches this can result in either maintenance or an increase in performance levels. In comparison if players negatively interpret their emotions during matches it is likely to have a debilitating effect on performance. One simple strategy here is to help players see the potential benefits that arise from anxiety (e.g., better focus, more activated) rather than viewing anxiety as a bad thing.

Help children to develop individual coping strategies

In contrast to primary appraisals, secondary appraisal is concerned with an individual's assessment of what action can be taken in situations where there is the potential of harm or benefit to the individual (Lazarus, 2000). Thus, tied into secondary appraisals are an individual's coping options. Coping relates to the action (thoughts and behaviors) that is carried out to manage the demands an individual faces. How one copes is influenced by evaluating (appraising) what action is possible or necessary, what action is acceptable in the situation, and what action is likely to be most effective in dealing with the situation (Lazarus 2000). Coping can be broadly classified into three categories; problem-, emotion-, and avoidance-focused. Problem-focused coping seeks to reduce or eliminate threat or harm in the person-environment by obtaining practical information about how to tackle the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, if a player is struggling with their serve and becoming frustrated, they might look to make a technical change to address the problem. In contrast, emotion-focused coping involves attempts to regulate emotional responses to given situations and is directed at changing one's emotions rather than attempting to change the situation or the demands directly (Lazarus & Folkman). For example, if a player is feeling very anxious at a change of ends they might use relaxation strategies to calm their nerves but not actually address the problem underpinning the anxiety.

Avoidance coping describes behavioral (removing self from situation) and psychological (cognitive distancing) efforts to disengage from a stressful situation (cf. Nicholls & Polman, 2007).



Effective coping strategies have the ability to inhibit, control, and even change one's emotions experienced, hence helping players to develop their coping strategies is critical in the management of emotions.

Players are likely to learn about coping through trial and error by trying different coping strategies during their sporting experiences, in addition to having opportunities to reflect on their strategies, being taught specific strategies, and being increasingly introduced to different situations in which they might have to employ different coping strategies (Tamminen & Holt, 2012). Therefore, as a coach, working with players to teach them different coping strategies and providing players with opportunities to test out different strategies to cope with their emotions is beneficial.

CONCLUSION

While all players will experience positive and negative emotions during their tennis careers, coaches can play a critical role in helping develop appropriate strategies to manage and maximize the positive consequences of these emotions. If coaches can commit time to understanding a players' emotions

and work with them to develop, practice, and learn different approaches to regulating emotions, it can play a critical role in helping players achieve success.

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