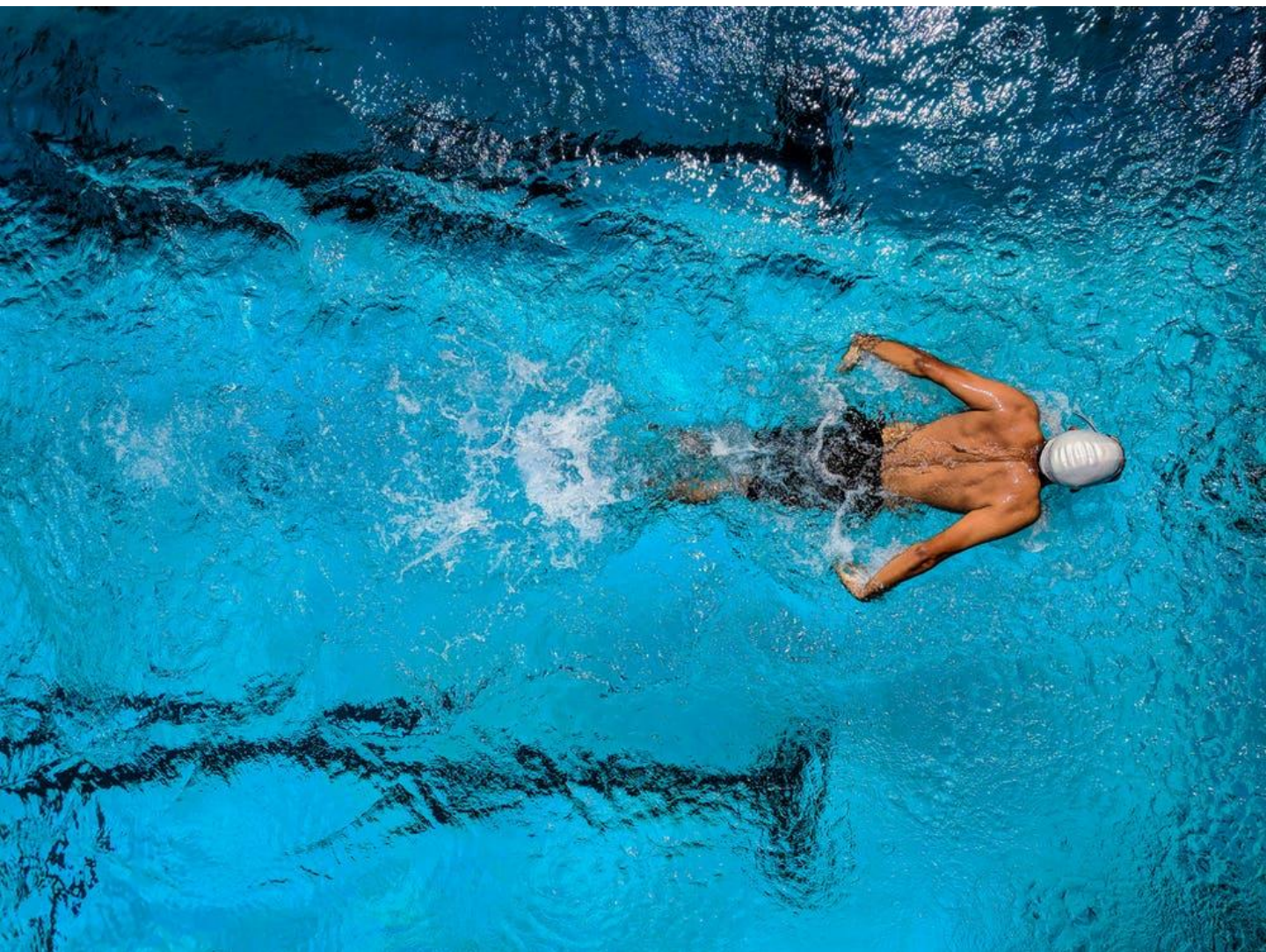


Emotional health in sport teams: A guide for coaches



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In the midst of dramatic and unprecedented changes resulting from Covid-19, supporting the emotional health of athletes has become more difficult than ever. And although the pandemic has illuminated the gravity of this challenge, optimizing emotional health should always be at the forefront of people-focused sport leadership and organizational culture.





Emotional health and mental toughness in sport

Too often we're swayed into thinking sport culture is defined solely by "hard skills" like toughness, grit, and willpower, and while these skills certainly play a role, the broader reality is [that teamwork in sport is just as much a "soft skill", emotion-rich experience as it is anything else](#). The days of simply powering through or toughing it out when faced with true hardship are long gone, as the modern coach is required to become more emotionally intelligent and educated than ever. And although a heightened focus on the softer skills of human performance emerge as a key competitive advantage, it's also proving a difficult balance to strike for those preparing athletes to compete (and win) in often extreme physical and mental circumstances.

So, what role do emotions play in athlete-centered team environments? What's the difference between emotional health and stress? How do coaches best understand and support the emotional ebbs and flows of the athletes and staff they lead through meaningful challenges and goals? Our mission with this guide is to [help coaches and sport leaders build a foundational knowledge of emotional health and intelligence](#) so they can best support the athletes and teams they lead.

In this guide you will explore:

- ✓ Emotions as the foundation of behavior and well-being
- ✓ A mental model of emotional responsiveness
- ✓ Emotional health defined
- ✓ The difference between emotional health and stress
- ✓ The emotional spectrum
- ✓ The difference between emotions, moods, and feelings
- ✓ Emotional health in teams
- ✓ The cost of emotional labor

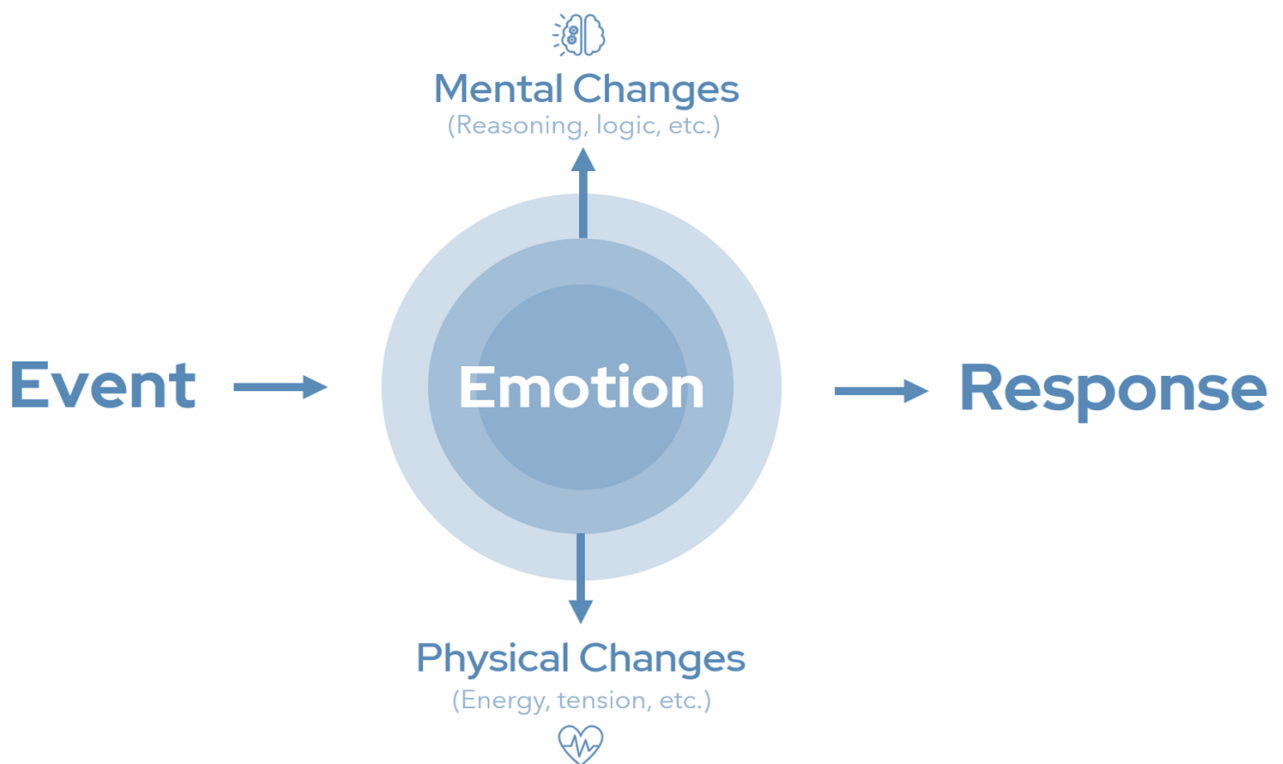


When you're not aware of your emotions, they can dictate your behavior & your well-being for better or for worse. It's best to manage them so they don't manage you. ⁽¹²⁾

Emotions: the foundation of **behavior & well-being**

Truly understanding the state of a person or team inevitably begins with understanding the flow of emotions they're experiencing at any given point. Emotions, or "instinctual states of feeling", are not only what make us innately human, they profoundly **affect both our performance and our health** (1). As world-renowned emotional intelligence expert Daniel Goleman puts it, "a view of human nature that ignores the power of emotions is sadly shortsighted" (1).

The science behind the emotion-behavior relationship is simple, clear, and longstanding. Each emotion we experience is intentionally built into our nervous system as a distinct signal to act (1). In fact, emotions are our most primal mechanisms of functioning which we have relied on to navigate everything from tribes to boardrooms. In short, they unfailingly affect both our thinking and behavior (especially in groups!), and that isn't changing anytime soon. Here's a simple model of how emotions affect our mind and our body:



Derived from <http://atlasofemotions.org/#triggers/> (2)



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The human heart pumps out two more litres of blood per minute in those feeling a sense of threat than in those feeling a sense of safety.⁽⁵⁾

What is emotional health?

Emotional health is a measure of how effectively people or teams can meet the emotional demands of everyday life and manage the inevitable ups and down that come with it. [High emotional health is synonymous with resilience](#) in that it doesn't mean you're free of unpleasant or uncomfortable experiences, but rather capable of either enduring through them or returning to optimal functioning in a reasonable timespan when taken off track. Low emotional health is synonymous with a lack of resilience, even burnout, in that it signals an inability to cope with or manage emotional demands (4). A staggering 70% of people polled have experienced worse emotional health this year than any other previous year (5).

The difference between emotional health & stress

While emotional health encompasses the impacts of the entire emotional spectrum, stress is simply one aspect of it. Broadly speaking, stress is defined as feelings of mental or emotional strain, tension, or exhaustion, and it usually presents itself when the demands of a situation (including emotional demands) outweigh our resources to deal with it (4).



That's right - we can feel the emotion of stress as a result of the difficulty we're having coping with other emotions. In short, stress is an emotion itself, however one that is often caused by continued exposure to a combination of several other smaller emotional challenges.

It's also important to note that stress is generally an unpleasant, high-energy state (4), whereas [emotional health is dictated by the full range, or "constellation" of emotions within a person or team](#). This constellation can include stress, but it does not independently dictate emotional health.



The emotional spectrum

When it comes to understanding our emotions, most of us are not much better equipped than the average fifth grader. In fact, [only 36% of the adult population can accurately recognize and identify their emotions](#) (7). And even when able to do so, most adults still use some combination of the same five adjectives we learned in elementary school: sad, happy, scared, angry, surprised (12). This equates to not only a serious lack of emotional intelligence among the majority of the population, but also the root cause of the emotional health epidemic currently at play in the world - because you simply can't change when you don't notice.

Take a look at some of the deeper, more specific emotions that exist within the emotional spectrum (captured from the innerlogic emotional health tracking tool).

Joy

- Joyful
- Proud
- Balanced
- Grateful
- Connected

Motivation

- Motivated
- Driven
- Focused
- Eager
- Optimistic

Surprise

- Curious
- Intrigued
- Interested
- Fascinated
- Shocked

Discontent

- Disappointed
- Discouraged
- Drained
- Down
- Disconnected

Stress

- Panicked
- Afraid
- Stressed
- Concerned
- Confused

Anger

- Furious
- Angry
- Frustrated
- Annoyed
- Irritated

Emotions, moods, and feelings

Despite their massive impact, *emotions* are actually quite short-lived in relation to *moods*. However, despite their shorter duration, emotional responses typically tend to be significantly more intense. Another key difference to note between emotion and mood is the cause. Emotions tend to have very specific origins, whereas moods often have no clear or obvious starting point (8). To use an analogy, emotions are akin to a



single crashing wave, while moods are akin to the overall current. Lastly, *feelings* are simply the personal spin we attach to our emotions or moods. They are conscious, subjective interpretations of what we're experiencing, and they can differ dramatically from one person to another based on everything from personality to memory (8).

The development of group emotion is what defines a group & distinguishes it from merely a collection of individuals.⁽⁹⁾

Emotional health in teams

Psychologists have known for decades that emotions are contagious - that they irresistibly spread within groups from one person to another. And although the word "contagious" has taken on more weight than ever over the past year, it does perfectly describe the spread of emotions in teams. In fact, this phenomenon



is actually called "emotional contagion" in team psychology. In short, [emotional contagion is the spread of emotions or mood states within groups](#), and it stems from automatic cognitive processes designed to mirror the behavior of others (9). Often referred to as the *ripple effect*, emotional contagion is critical when it comes to maintaining team emotional health because it facilitates the spread of negative (or positive) states of one person to another, eventually affecting the mood of the entire team. In a study of senior management teams, collective or shared emotions were shown to have a strong effect on team dynamics, power-relationships between CEO and the team, and employee satisfaction (9).

In addition to emotions and moods spreading across team members, teams also have to be aware of how the [team environment and team culture impacts emotional health](#) (10). For instance, teams with higher levels of trust tend to experience less stress, and teams with aligned values tend to be more resilient (10). In brief, healthy team behaviors tend to increase the likelihood of teams having strong emotional health.



Emotionally healthy teams don't wear blinders. They acknowledge, accept, and embrace emotions with a lens of empathy and support.

The cost of emotional labor

Maintaining strong team emotional health is about accepting and embracing group emotions to better understand how they affect team performance, well-being, and moral. Many teams take the approach of avoiding or suppressing group emotions because they don't know how to properly manage them. This approach is unhealthy and ineffective because it creates emotional labor.

Emotional labor is the management, and often suppression, of emotions, feelings, and expressions to fulfil the requirements or expectations of a team or environment (11). Think of how you are greeted at a chain coffee shop or when you board a plane. These individuals are both trained and required to interact this way, even if they are feeling differently than the warm,



Studies on team effectiveness prove that normalization of emotional states within teams improves trust, group identity, and cooperation (12).

welcoming vibe they inauthentically exude. While we typically see this type of surfacing acting customer service jobs, it plays a role in any team culture that builds up "emotional norms". Emotional labor can be just as exhausting as physical labor, and it's been linked to stress and burnout at alarming rates (11). Emotional labor can even impact life outside of your team, as suppressed emotions from the day are expelled at home or with friends. [Team builders, coffee chats, and athlete lounges are all opportunities for people to "be real" again, even if in short intervals.](#) A truly great culture allows people to be themselves, invests in understanding how they are feeling on a more regular basis and provides a safe space to talk about their emotional experiences.



Executive summary

As Susan Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations* eloquently puts it, “*fierce conversations do take time. The problem is, not having them takes longer*”. The same concept applies to the emotional management strategies applied within teams. You can continue to avoid the true science of emotions by labelling and judging people who aren’t coping well as weak and fragile, imploring them to just toughen up and gut it out. Or, you can [embrace the real education and culture development required to build an emotionally healthy culture](#), ultimately creating a sustainable emotional management strategy.

Emotions are complex mind-body experiences that lie at the core of every human behavior from motivation, to stress, to commitment. Currently, the average sport team is unaware of the vast emotional shifts occurring within their people on a day-to-day basis, ultimately leading to unmanaged issues, discontent, and burnout.

At innerlogic, we see this gap and are committed to providing the technology required to track athlete emotional health with both ease and accuracy.

About innerlogic

Innerlogic is a software service that provides analytics on organizational culture in sport. We pride ourselves on quantifying the human aspects of teamwork, performance, and achievement so that sport teams and organizations can better understand and prioritize their culture.

If you would like more information on innerlogic, visit innerlogic.com

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