

### BACKGROUND

Strong emotional reactions may appear as isolated outbursts but they are not. They are an integral part of our personalities and a natural response to stress and overload.

Our emotions are shaped by many things:

1. Our unique biology
2. Positive and negative experiences
3. Pleasurable and hurtful experiences
4. Self-esteem and the value we give ourselves
5. Recognition
6. Relationships
7. Role model behaviour
8. Stressors: fatigue, expectation, disappointment

The impact of each influence is also unique to each of us.

A process for learning to manage emotions begins with:

1. Understanding and accepting ourselves as we are. Guilt, denial, or non-comprehension traps us in a vicious cycle. Recognise and accept, or '*watch*' and '*learn*'.
2. Noting patterns in our behaviour. Patterns provide us with opportunities to avert reactions or they may serve to warn us a storm is on the way.

Emotional states tend to snowball or cascade. A small response, easily managed in isolation, can quickly spiral out of control. An argument might begin with a single complaint but they often snowball unintentionally into a mess of irrational thoughts and insults. Emotions feed on themselves. The best tool we have is a reasoned understanding of what's happened and why, and what response is in our best interest. We have to practice thinking and responding rationally and develop a better understanding of our own emotional trigger points.

There are three 'thinking' engines in the human brain: 1) a very strong emotional engine (the chimp), 2) a weaker logic or rationale conscious thinking engine (the human), and 3) a very fast subconscious computer.

The computer is responsible for rapid and automatic thinking and behaviour. Playing a piece of music with no one else in the room or speed reading a book are instances of the computer at work. The chimp is the strongest engine and the first to react to the presence of others and new environments, and threats in general. The chimp is part of our primitive brain and includes our fight or flight response. The chimp is home to our emotions. The human is our rationale brain and because it involves conscious thought it is considerably slower than the computer. The human is the device we use to manage the chimp and though it isn't as strong, the human can learn to exert control over the chimp.

### TIMING

The key to learning to manage emotions in sport is timing. Match day is too late. Training is an important place to reinforce constructive psychology but it is only a fraction of the week and also an occasion when the chimp is on high alert. We need to intervene regularly throughout the week at times when the chimp is off duty (figure below).

The brain is an adaptable tool. Teach the brain to think rationally on a more consistent basis – turn the low level negative or unconstructive thoughts off – and avoid overloading it with emotional stressors. If the balance of an average week in the life of a young athlete is not internally peaceful or stable but instead comprised of negative thoughts and unconstructive behaviours we shouldn't be surprised by an emotional outburst as it is a sign of overload. The 'damage' in this sense is not done at training or during matches; the seeds are sown in the time between outbursts. A constant, low-amplitude level of stress or disharmony has a large long-term effect.



In the figure above, the line represents a period of time in a young athlete's life. The peaks represent emotional outbursts and the shading denotes the intensity of the outburst. The outbursts are overload responses and depending on intensity little can be done at this time; ride them out. Change is made in the times between when the chimp is calm and the human is in charge. The first step is to pinpoint obvious, regular opportunities to talk.

As a parent, share your own experiences and wisdom and listen to your child's fears and concerns. Children are fantastic learners and excellent listeners at the right moments. The likelihood that one or both parents are close in personality or behaviour to a child is very high. You are very likely to be the greatest resource that your child could ever have but you need to first establish a connection and this involves talking to one another at the right moments. Emotional behaviours are also learned behaviours. The chances are high that they have learned a specific pattern of behaviour from you. Discuss this with them and show them you are continually evolving and learning to manage yourself as well.

### MANAGEMENT TOOLS

- ☞ Identify and avert/ control emotional triggers (medium to long-term strategy)
- ☞ Identify and regulate day-to-day stressors (short to medium term strategy)

Stressors are interactions that destabilise us in a general way. Arguments and conflict are stressors. Because they provoke the irrational 'chimp' part of the human brain, stressors increase the likelihood of an emotional reaction. Fatigue and conflict are common but by far the most important stressors during childhood are our relationships. Relationships are emotional axes in our lives: Stable and supportive relationships bring pleasure and contentment and they engender the self-esteem we need to evolve whereas conflict provokes the chimp and makes life a lot harder for the rational 'human' engine.

Triggers reflect our thoughts and ideas. They are very personal kinds of vulnerabilities. Triggers include environments or situations in which an emotional reaction is very likely or even certain. For young athletes competition is an obvious emotional trigger. The important point is that stressors are frequently controllable whereas emotional triggers are difficult to manage at any time but more so if we are stressed to begin with. The long-term strategy for managing emotions involves first learning to avert and limit stressors in the short term.

In young athletes I have noticed several common denominators that predispose to an emotional reaction or outburst:

- 1) Incorrect priorities: In children's sport the emphasis should be placed on development firstly and achievement lastly
- 2) Unprepared and emotional parents
- 3) Poor planning of positive outcomes

The environment of a match or contest is a highly emotional experience for almost every child. Huge significance is implied and often stated. If they are not shown otherwise, a child will place too much value on each and every match. Matches are treated like gateways or tests. If I lose I will not move forward. With this line of thinking a child quickly comes to view progress as monumentally difficult.

In reality children are always moving forward. Athletically they grow and enhance. Intellectually they learn and extend. Children do not see this unless it is identified for them. For most children, school is a stressful but positive and constructive experience. Exams and tests are accepted as necessary stepping stones but we don't allow children to become stuck on the first rung of the ladder. Why do we allow this in sport? The difference is the process. At school, children are not merely provided information they are shown a process that, among others things, teaches them self-awareness. They are given control over their abilities and responsibility for their learning. The ultimate goal of an education is self-empowerment. Sport should aim to achieve the same thing but how many programs do? Harder still, in sport we label every attempt a win or a loss, failure or success. The combination of a barely prepared young mind and a binary outcome scenario is a sure-fire recipe for emotional overload.

The chimp deals in absolutes (blacks and whites) while the human rationalises:

- Win or loss, do not dwell or focus on a result but on the means by which it was achieved
- Set performance goals not outcome goals; identify key steps
- Analyse and discuss choices and the thinking behind them
- Locate and discuss the positives before any negatives
- Give them a reason to come back and try again
- Help them to find the right things to do so that they can repeat them
- Ask pointed questions rather than making statements

It can be a huge challenge keeping cool when your child plays sport but it is vital that you do. The child's chimp is already aroused and ready to explode. Do not add more fuel to the flame. The child needs to learn control and moderation, and you set the most significant example. It isn't a coincidence that calm children tend to have calm parents. It isn't necessary to avoid criticism but

the goal of any kind of analysis is to find useful answers so going over old ground or simply pointing out mistakes isn't good enough.

Insecurity and uncertainty (threats) arouse the chimp. A performance plan is map of how we intend to move from where we are to the next level of performance. It includes medium term goals and events, and draws down to a weekly timetable and each day's events. By its nature, a plan minimises uncertainty and assists in keeping the chimp under control. The medium term sets out big events such as tournaments and assessments and start/finish dates etc. The weekly plan contains school and training times, eating and rest/bed times, additional responsibilities including fitness and injury-free exercise, physio or medical appointments. The daily plan fills in the detail: what, when, and by whom. A good plan allows the child to begin associating stable preparation with certain outcomes. It also permits the transfer of responsibility to the child.

Positive outcomes need to be assured. Schooling demonstrates that progress is implicit with good teaching and planning. Even the adaptation of a strong rational grasp and emotional stability is coachable if testing. We can control positive experiences and outcomes, and we need to. Too many bad experiences (i.e. losses) and the child won't know how to manage the emotions of winning; too many wins and an immature reaction to losing is likely. Keep stats for every match/contest and plan a ratio of approximately 7:3 wins to losses.

### SUMMARY

- 🌀 Our personalities define our needs.
  - Don't wait until match day, discuss and implement solutions when the emotional chimp is asleep and the rational human is in control
  - What do we need to support and what conflict can we avoid
- 🌀 Focus on decision making and choices as the basis for outcomes. Progress is always being made. Help your child to see this. Do not let them come to feel trapped and isolated
- 🌀 Practice what you preach
- 🌀 Plan for success and positive experiences

### EXERCISE FOR PARENTS

Make a list of some common negative or emotional expressions and outbursts.

Place them into a category:

1. Uncontrolled, complete meltdowns
2. Self-handicapping or resistant behaviour
3. Simple negative/ emotional reactions or responses

Trigger or stressor, each different kind of emotional reaction has its own solution but there is a pathway to follow: avert or regulate behaviours at one level to raise the threshold for provocation (reduce the risk) at the next. Begin by identifying the day to day or simple emotional reactions – look closely at relationships – and find solutions for them. Don't worry about more extreme reactions until you can solve the simple ones.