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E IS FOR EMOTIONAL CONTROL



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Whether it's yelling at a parent, kicking a bleacher, or letting an expletive fly, most people have lost their "cool" at some point. Emotions are a part of every sporting event, and if we don't recognize how they are influencing us, emotions can impact our performances. This article will focus on how to control your emotions by recognizing them, addressing them, and using them to your benefit.

Are Emotions Bad?

Most athletes perform their best when they keep their emotions to themselves. It is often the case that becoming too emotional creates an improper focus on the initial cause of the emotions (e.g., a bad start, an important event, a competitor from the other team). Emotions become most detrimental when they cause athletes to lose focus on what they need to do to swim well and instead create a focus on a past event, a negative occurrence, or a future unwanted action.

Even positive emotions can elicit poor performance. When a football player becomes elated because he just ran back a kick-off only to start celebrating two yards short of the end zone, you can say his emotions got the best of him. You've seen swimmers, a few strokes away from winning the race, let the opponent make a comeback. Often this happens because the swimmer in the lead was so caught up in the positive emotions of winning that their thoughts were no longer on the event. Thus, overconfidence is an emotion that can negatively impact individuals because it can make their focus less than ideal. Therefore, it's not just negative emotions that we need to be aware of.

That said, emotions are not necessarily bad. Some people perform their best when they are emotional and claim their emotions help them to "get into" the event. I have worked with many athletes who tell me they play better angry, but I find the reason for this is because they consequently become more intensely focused on what they need to do in the competition. Essentially, certain emotions help them to create the focus that allows them to compete at their best.

While emotions can help people to focus better, the problem with swimming "emotionally" is that emotions can be physically manifested. Emotions often tighten athletes' muscles, which changes their mechanics and decreases reactions, ultimately hindering their performance.

Having emotions isn't bad. The key is in controlling the emotions you do have and not letting them cross the line from beneficial to detrimental.

Controlling Your Emotions

To make sure your emotions don't hurt your performance, you need to know how to control them.

- First, take deep breaths as often as possible. A deep breath will slow down your heart rate and slow down your thoughts, both of which give you better control over your emotions.
- Have a pre-planned way to stop your emotions and refocus your energy more positively. If you are really excited, turn this excitement into a desire to swim well and focus on what you need to do. If you're often angry after a race, have a post-race routine that you do after all races (good or bad). This may include listening to three songs before talking to anyone and then logically assessing your swim by thinking about what you did well and what you will work on for next time.
- Be creative and come up with other ways to physically and/or mentally release the emotion. Pull on your cap and say "Pull it together" or as you get out of the water after a poor race think about leaving it behind.

Watch Your Body Language

Your mind will react to what your body does. If you put your head down, throw a water bottle or slump your shoulders, you are essentially telling your mind that you're mentally checking out. If you keep your head up, your eyes focused ahead, and your comments positive, your mind will know you have already let go of the bad race and are ready to keep going. This helps to control

your emotions by treating bad races (or other negative occurrences) as nonevents—just part of the sport—and showing your mind that you are in control of your body and your emotions.

Practice Emotional Control

Outside of sport, there are many situations that test our emotional fortitude. By practicing staying calm when you are sitting in traffic, in the slowest line in the grocery store, or fighting with a sibling, you are training yourself to be in control of your emotions. Just like practicing your physical skills is essential for peak performance, so is practicing your emotional skills. So start taking control of your mind, your body, and emotions in every situation.

Make it Great!**About Aimee C. Kimball, PhD:**

Dr. Aimee C. Kimball is the Director of Mental Training at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Center for Sports Medicine. She received a PhD from the University of Tennessee where she specialized in sport psychology. She is an Association of Applied Sport Psychology Certified Consultant, and is a member of the American Psychological Association, the United States Olympic Committee's Sport Psychology Registry, the USA Swimming Sports Medicine Network, and the NCAA Speakers Bureau. As a Mental Training Consultant, Dr. Kimball has worked with professional, collegiate, high school, recreational, and youth athletes in a variety of sports, including assisting the Pittsburgh Steelers in analyzing potential draft picks and the Pittsburgh Penguins in developing their players. She has been a featured speaker at conferences across the nation and has appeared in numerous media outlets across the country. Currently, Dr. Kimball works with athletes, coaches, corporate leaders, and other performers to assist them in achieving success in sport and life. (412-432-3777; kimballac@upmc.edu)

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