

We have all seen it, and most of us have done it. A bad pass, a missed shot, or a call we do not agree with, and suddenly our shoulders drop, our head sinks, and we let out a sigh. It happens at every level, from school teams to the pros. That small reaction says a lot about what is going on in our mind and it can affect what happens next.

In netball, split-second decisions can decide the game. Those decisions are not just about skill, they are shaped by how we feel in the moment. How we handle frustration, pressure, and mistakes determines whether we can reset and make the right call. That is why emotional regulation is not just about staying calm, it is a true game-changer.

Let's start by looking at what psychologists have said on this topic

The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions was developed by psychologist Barbara Fredrickson in the late **1990s**, emerging from her research into the adaptive functions of **positive emotions**.

At the time, much of psychological study on emotion focused on **negative emotions** such as **fear, anger, and anxiety, particularly their role in survival**. These states were known to narrow attention and prime the body for specific, immediate actions, for example the “fight or flight” response. Fredrickson observed that there was relatively little understanding of why positive emotions existed from an evolutionary standpoint, beyond simply being pleasurable.

Through a series of empirical studies in the 1990s, Fredrickson found that **positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, and love tend to broaden an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire**. This means they expand the range of possible thoughts and behaviours a person can consider in a given moment. Over time, this broader perspective helps individuals build enduring personal resources such as **problem-solving skills, social connections, and resilience**.

Her work showed that **participants in a positive mood performed better on tasks requiring creative thinking, flexible problem-solving, and pattern recognition**. These findings contrasted with results from participants in negative emotional states, whose attention and decision-making tended to become more rigid and narrowed. In short, **those in a positive state of mind could see the problem from multiple angles and make more effective choices**, while those

in a negative state often became stuck, focused only on frustration.

In sport contexts such as netball, this theory explains why players who regulate their emotions to stay positive or balanced are more likely to see strategic options, adapt to changes in play, and recover quickly from mistakes. Emotional regulation is therefore not only about mental well-being but is also a performance-critical skill.

Understanding Emotional Regulation in Sport

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage and respond to emotions in a controlled, adaptive way. It is an important factor in sports such as netball, where emotions can change rapidly. **It is about noticing how you feel and choosing to respond in a way that helps rather than hurts your performance.** Staying in control emotionally means that frustration, anxiety, or anger do not take over. Instead, you adapt and respond calmly, keeping your thinking clear and your decisions sharp. This skill is not about bottling up emotions; **it is about handling them in a way that supports your best play under pressure.**

Common Emotional Triggers in Sport

Umpires' Decisions

As athletes, we expect umpires and referees to be unbiased, to see everything on court, and to make split-second calls, usually without the help of a TMO. It is easy to forget that **they are human too**, with emotions and limitations. Sometimes it feels like we are playing against the officials as much as the other team.

This is why it is important to make a mental shift and play “out of the umpire’s sight.” In other words, do not give them a reason to penalise you. Play smarter, cleaner, and respond respectfully. This helps **control emotions for everyone involved** and keeps the focus on the game.

Mistakes

Match statistics have a love-hate relationship with sport. Sometimes your stats look great, showing sharp execution and control. Other times, the numbers tell a story of misplaced passes, turnovers, and errors. **Statistics do not always reflect how an athlete should feel about their performance.** You can have a great personal game and still lose, or make many mistakes and still enjoy playing.

These situations highlight why emotional regulation matters. Do not let one mistake derail your entire game. Use it as fuel to come back stronger or as a personal challenge to improve.

Opposition Aggression

Just like every household has its own way of doing things, every netball team has its own style. Some rely on speed and agility, others on creative, calculated movements to get the ball to the post. Sometimes you will face teams or individual players who play more physically. **This is not always a bad thing.** For example, the Australian netball league is known for its physicality and is also recognised as the best netball league in the world.

Training to handle physicality is becoming more common. Using cushioned bags and adding physical elements to drills helps players prepare mentally and physically. This **training supports emotional regulation by helping players stay focused on their game and routines** rather than reacting emotionally to increased physicality.

Score Pressure in Close Matches

The scoreboard is a topic all on its own. When your score is double the opposition's, the game often feels more enjoyable. Mistakes seem harmless, more risks are taken, and teams may use the opportunity to test combinations or give game time to developing players.

When the opposition is leading by double, it can be tempting to give up. But in reality, if the score is 12-6, only three turnovers are needed to close the gap. Three scored turnovers and three conceded centre passes level the score completely. This is worth remembering before you decide a game cannot be turned around.

The emotions linked to different score scenarios are obvious compared to when the score is even and every mistake could cost the game. In these moments, **emotional awareness is crucial.**

Examples of Emotions Linked to Decision-Making

Anxiety

High levels of anxiety are linked to poor decision-making. We see this often in new

players who rush their passes before the three-second limit is up, almost like a game of hot potato. **Breathing exercises can help settle this emotion -** especially for shooters.

Anger

Anger often leads to unnecessary fouls or defensive errors. Unnecessary fouls include playing more physically than needed, hard passes that slip through hands, or footwork and ball-handling errors. Defensive errors include contacting or obstructing in an attempt to force an intercept, which results in standing out of play. **Breathing through anger helps focus the mind on what can be controlled, such as your own skill and gameplay.**

Confidence

Confidence can greatly improve performance, but players should be wary of false or overconfidence. Overconfidence can lead to risky plays instead of working with teammates. In a previous blog, we spoke about how **confidence is built through repetition and muscle memory, and both individual and team confidence should be developed to encourage emotional control** within the team.

Positive Emotions

Emotions are a normal part of being human and should be trained just as much as physical skills. Teams should develop a culture of emotions that align with their style of play, such as **calmness, self-awareness, focus, and resilience**. These contribute to a positive emotional state during high-pressure games.

Teaching a team to take a breath, communicate positively, and focus on what they can control reduces the risk of emotional volatility. Positive communication involves **giving feedback without shaming a teammate.**

For example:

“I noticed that when I go for a centre pass, you often pass too close to the defender. It would help me if you passed in front of me. Let me show you.”

“When you, as GK, take a throw-in, can you do it a bit faster? We are often ready before you, and the defender uses the delay to take space.”

When frustration takes over, players may start shouting at one another, keeping track of each other's mistakes, and losing focus on their strengths. **A strong, respected captain can also help control emotions** by directing play, making calls, and keeping players focused. Captains at the highest levels often use simple cues such as "Slow it down" when attacking too quickly, "Play it closer" when shooters are flustered, or "Next one" to encourage a teammate who has been penalised.

Final Thoughts

Emotional regulation is not just about staying calm, it is about giving yourself the best chance to perform at your highest level no matter the circumstances. Whether it is handling a tough umpire call, bouncing back after a mistake, or staying composed against a physical opponent, the way you manage your emotions shapes every decision you make on court. By training both your mind and body to respond with focus instead of frustration, you give yourself the ability to adapt, think clearly, and play to your strengths from the first whistle to the last.