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Sports Coaching & Development



A Practitioner's Guide

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About The Authors

Rhys Deighan, Founder, Writer and Researcher.

Over the previous 2 years I have gained a HND in Sports Coaching & Development, and now study at Stirling University. In addition to this, I have 5 years of experience coaching multiple age groups and teams within North Lanarkshire, including experience at elite academies. In future, I plan to continue progressing through UEFA Licences while obtaining the highest degree of education possible.

Dylan Waller, Writer and Researcher.

For the past 1/2 decade I have amassed coaching experience at youth-grassroots level, led a U-18's women's team, alongside serving as an assistant to various senior women's teams competing at regional and championship levels. I also achieved a HND in Sports Coaching & Development and currently hold the UEFA C Licence. Future progression includes completing the Football Coaching Degree at Edinburgh Napier and eventually breaking into the senior men's game as a coach.

About A Practitioner's Guide

As the SFA report “Coaches and volunteers are the lifeblood of the community game in Scotland”. Often unpaid, they give up significant amounts of time and resource to helping their clubs and the wider community” (1). Further to this, a 2015 study indicated that 77% of coaches in Scotland engage in voluntary work (2).

As coaches, we often dedicate ourselves and our time for no monetary benefit. However, limited training times amongst other commitments such as family and work life makes it difficult for us to become the best coach we can be (3). Finally, it is important to note that coaches in particular are responsible for the early stages of a child's sporting development; ensuring they build a positive relationship with sport is central to the Active Scotland Delivery Plan (4).

The aim for this project is to bridge the gap between academic research and practical coaching by presenting evidence-based knowledge in a digestible and applicable format. This project will also include interviews with influential members of the sports industry, professional practitioners, and volunteers.

Issue 2: Writer's Note

Psychology has recently become recognised as a critical factor in sports coaching.

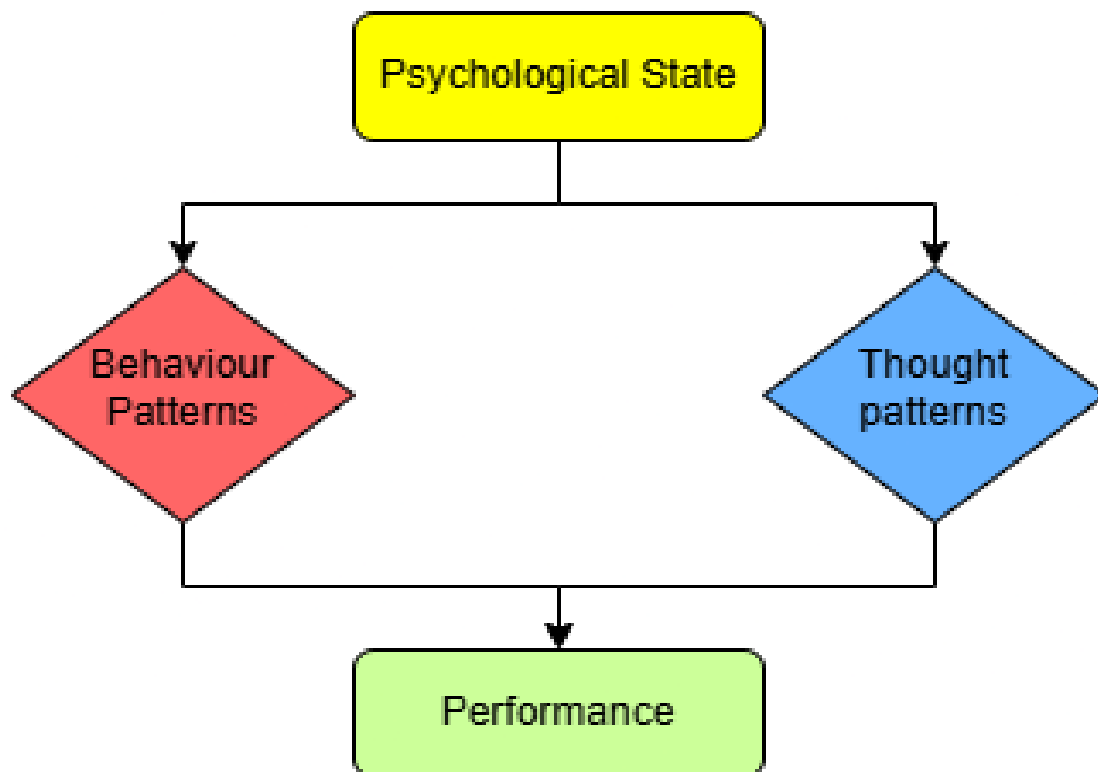
This issue is designed to help you understand psychological constructs and implement psychological skills training within your sessions.

As usual, there are practical examples included throughout the issue to provide a balance of theoretical and practical information, alongside principles to apply this month and a psychological coaching framework!

What is psychology?

Psychology is the study of the human mind, where we can begin to understand the emotions, thoughts, behaviours, and actions of a person.

In sport, psychology allows us to better understand our players, tailor our coaching to their individual needs, and implement psychological skills training within our practices.



Why is psychology important?

Psychologically literate coaching is the foundation of participant enjoyment, long-term participation, development, and performance in sport (5,6).

The environment within a team is just as important as the individuals within it. If we are able to create a psychologically safe, challenging, and positive climate, the benefits are almost endless (5, 6).

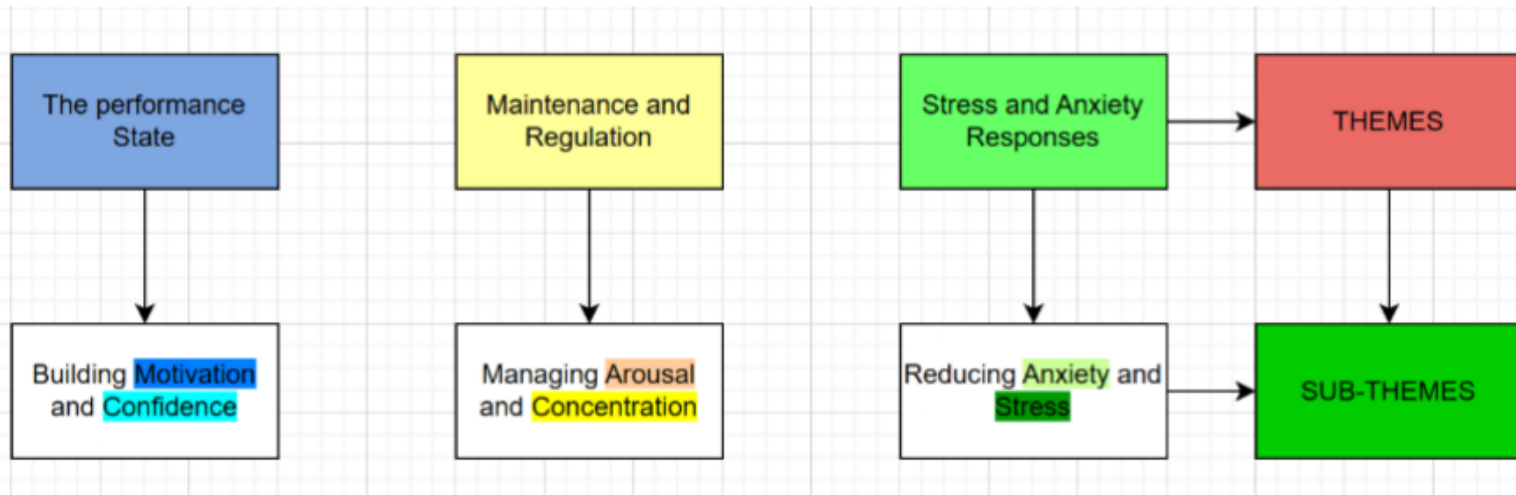
So, what does this mean?

Create a positive learning environment, and team culture to make your sessions somewhere players want to be!



Components of Psychology

Six key components were identified in a 2026 thematic analysis of sports psychology literature (7).



This categorises the sub-themes into 3 groups;

‘The Performance State’: motivation and confidence – two critical predictors of performance. Pre-performance we should look to develop these skills for players, and develop assured, hard-working and positive attitudes.

‘Maintenance and Regulation’: arousal and concentration - the effects of situational task-demands on the athlete, and actions a coach can take to manage mentality during performance.

‘Stress and Anxiety Responses’: the physiological and psychological influence of competition on the mind and body, analysing how an athlete can best control their emotions to achieve peak performance.

Components

1.Motivation (8).

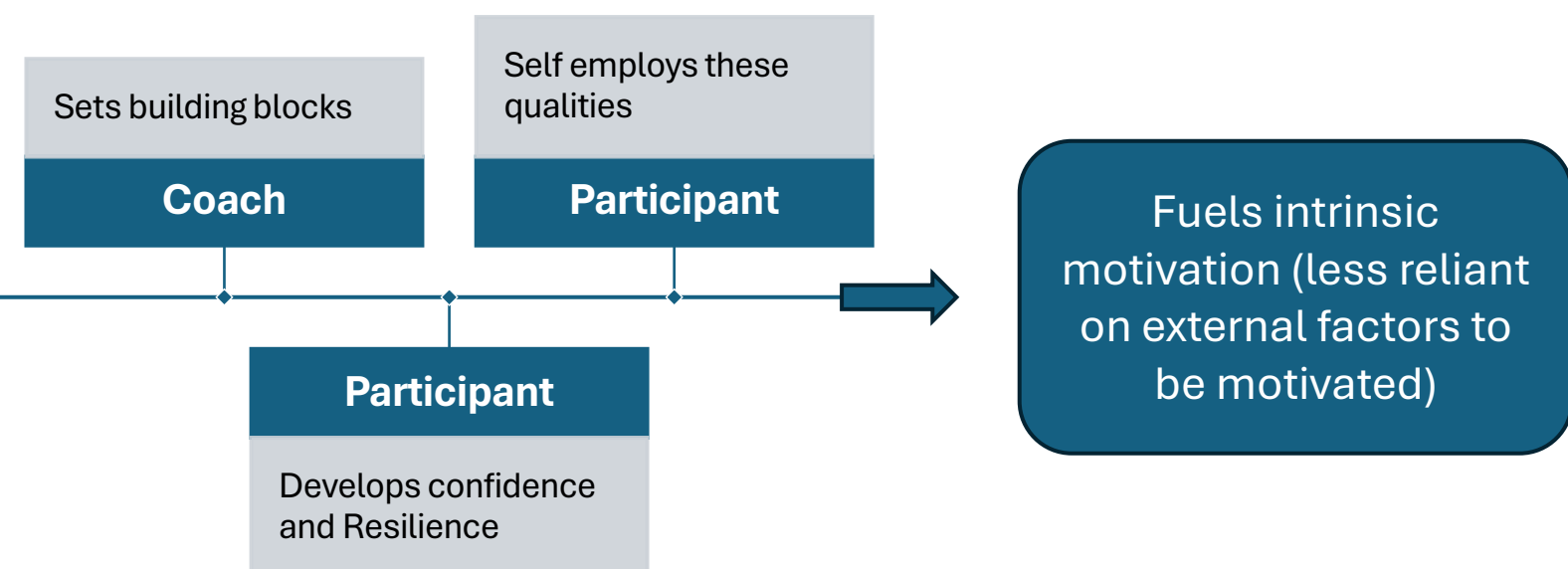
Motivation types are strongly linked to participation and ability. Performers with an internal desire to succeed were found to be more resilient and confident, even following setbacks – this is linked to improve performance and long-term participation!

***"Extrinsic motivation** is the drive to engage in an activity not for any inherent enjoyment it offers, but because of the external consequences it produces."* (9)

***"Intrinsic motivation** is the psychological force that arises from within a person rather than from separable external consequences."* (9)

So, what does this mean?

As coaches, we can create ‘psychological building blocks’ to develop confidence and resilience – as this will lead to the participant self-producing these qualities



Components

2. Confidence (10, 11).

Confidence is the belief that one is capable of performing a desired action. Like motivation, confidence can be defined within 2 constructs:

Trait confidence: Stable personality component where the performer's belief does not tend to fluctuate.

State confidence: Unstable, and can fluctuate depending on the situation, environment, or action.

Confidence is not universal. A defender may be confident tackling, however, be anxious to take a long shot. Sources of confidence will be discussed in the 'Applied Psychology' section.

Inverted U theory: performance and confidence link – as confidence increases towards an optimal level, performance does too. However, this works both ways... self confidence that is either too low or too high also has a detrimental impact.

Performers in optimally confident states have a high expectancy of success which regulates positive emotions (assertiveness, calmness and effort). Conversely, expecting to fail leads to failure, that is why we must ensure such cycle does not exist – encouraging and promoting self-belief in our players is vital for their development!

CASE STUDY: The Power of Confidence.

Weightlifters were given a placebo (saccharine) but believed it was steroids. They proceeded to lift heavier weights than they were previously able to. After being told it was only a placebo, their performance levels returned to normal, showing that their performance was associated with belief -proof that expectations impact performance, and athletes with high belief in their own ability can outperform expectations.

Components

3. Arousal (12).

Arousal is the physiological, emotional and cognitive response to in-game situations which affect behaviour and performance.

Excessive neural excitation interferes with natural coordinative action, impairing complex skill execution. The optimal arousal level should align with the active task demands, and any deviation can be detrimental to performance, primarily affecting response/reaction time and decision making.

The effect arousal has on performance is most pronounced in difficult conditions and high levels of arousal can be present in simpler tasks without having performance decrements.

Simple gross motor tasks demand a higher optimal level of arousal, while complex or fine motor tasks demand a low-moderate level. From this we can interpret that different situations require different levels of Arousal.

So, what does this mean?

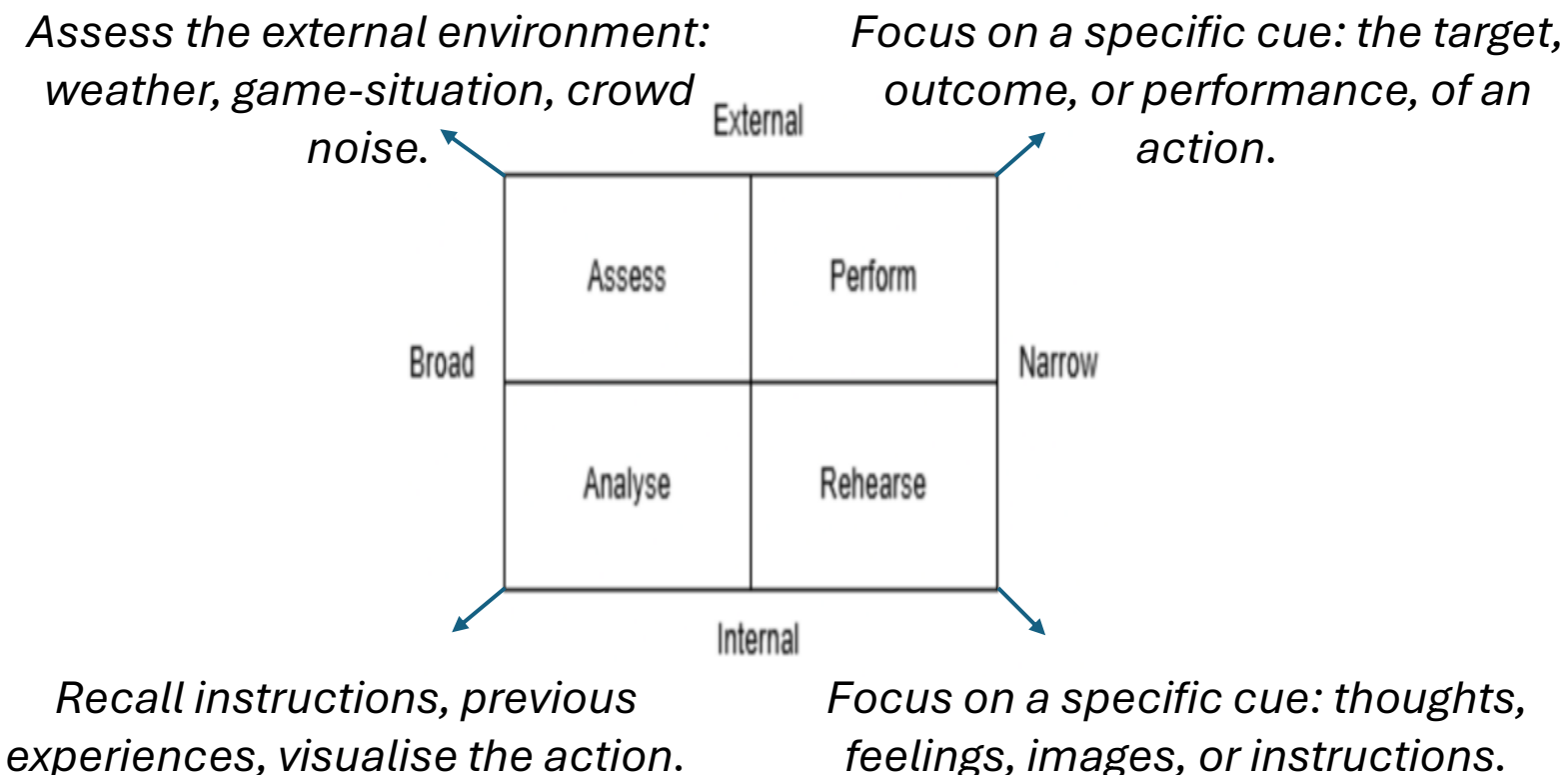
Football is an incredibly complex, physically demanding sport, and participants need to be hyper-aware mentally, which demands a moderate level of arousal. As a coach, you must be perceptive, recognise when participants may need to increase, maintain or decrease their arousal levels!

Components

4. Concentration (7, 13).

Concentration is the ability to focus on the task at hand and make positive decisions amidst a multitude of stimuli which all want your attention!

Dimensions of Concentration:



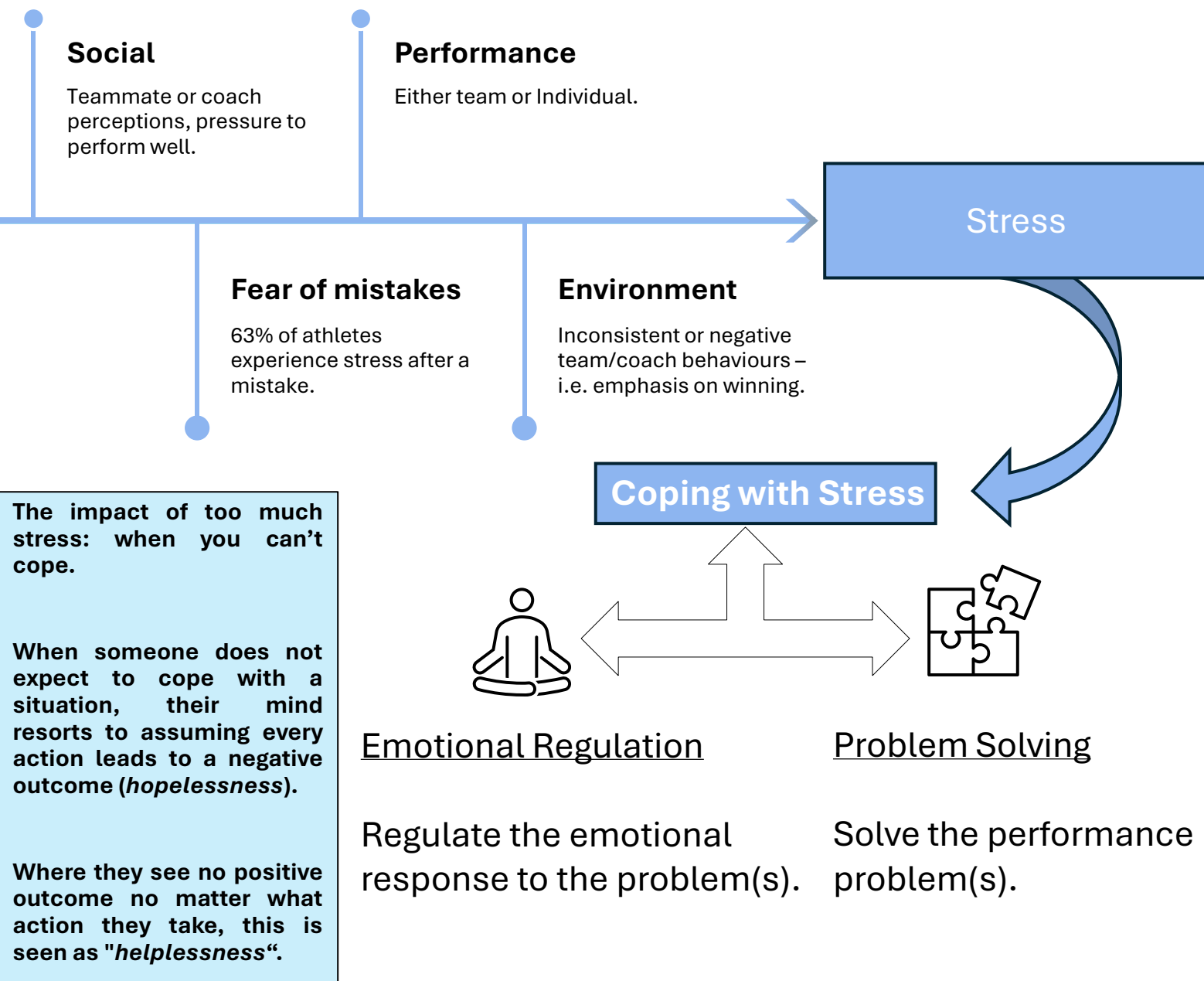
Broad and Narrow: the quantity of information a performer must process. E.g. a penalty requires much narrower focus than a central midfielder receiving the ball – both are beneficial, but we should generally focus on developing a broad attention span in football to support the large quantity of information required to be processed.

Internal and External: the direction of attention – **the focus should always be on what the player can control.** Giving attention to external factors (e.g. referee decisions, fearing the opponent, etc.) slows decision making and technical actions!

Components

5. Stress (7, 10, 11, 14).

An athlete can be stressed by numerous factors during competition including:



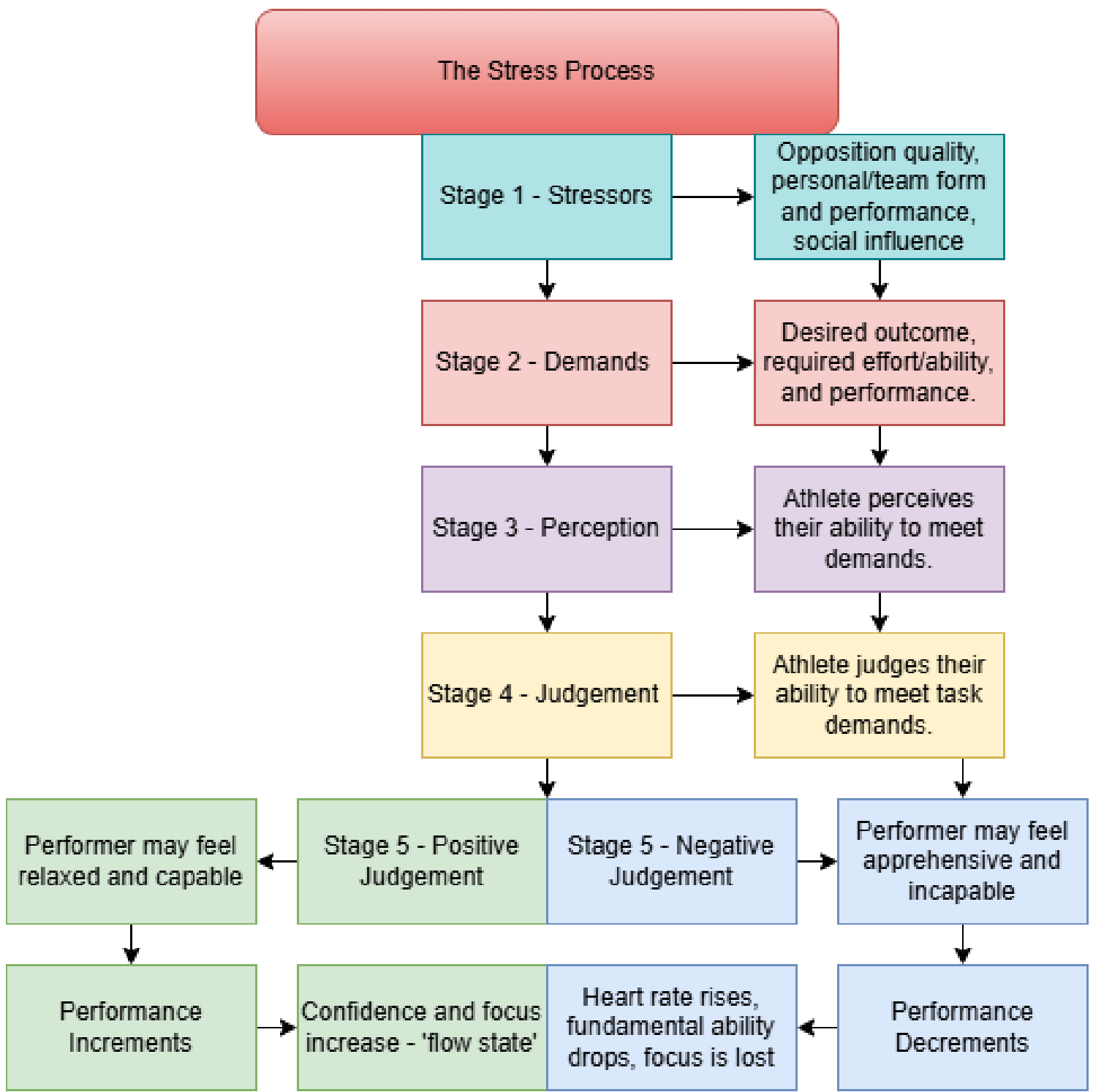
Key Points:

If things are not going well, and you observe your team becoming stressed, focus on getting one small win!

Be consistent with your coaching: create a positive mastery climate and don't react badly to mistakes – it's how they learn!

In training, we should expose players to some stress – let them develop their ability to perform under pressure, problem solve and build resilience.

Additional Information: The Stress Process



Components

6. Anxiety (10, 11).

Anxiety is a state of apprehension and impacts cognitive thought as well as physical activation, these are referred to as cognitive and somatic anxiety. Like confidence, anxiety is often referred to as being either “trait” or “State”.

Anxiety impacts performance by presenting “threats”. For instance, when taking a last-minute penalty, a performer with high trait anxiety will feel under pressure, viewing missing the kick as extremely threatening.

However, a performer with low trait anxiety will not feel as much external threat and be more focused on executing the action. Coping strategies include reducing cognitive arousal, through quiet time before performance, cognitive restricting (framing the positives even when facing challenges), and instilling confidence in preparation for performance.

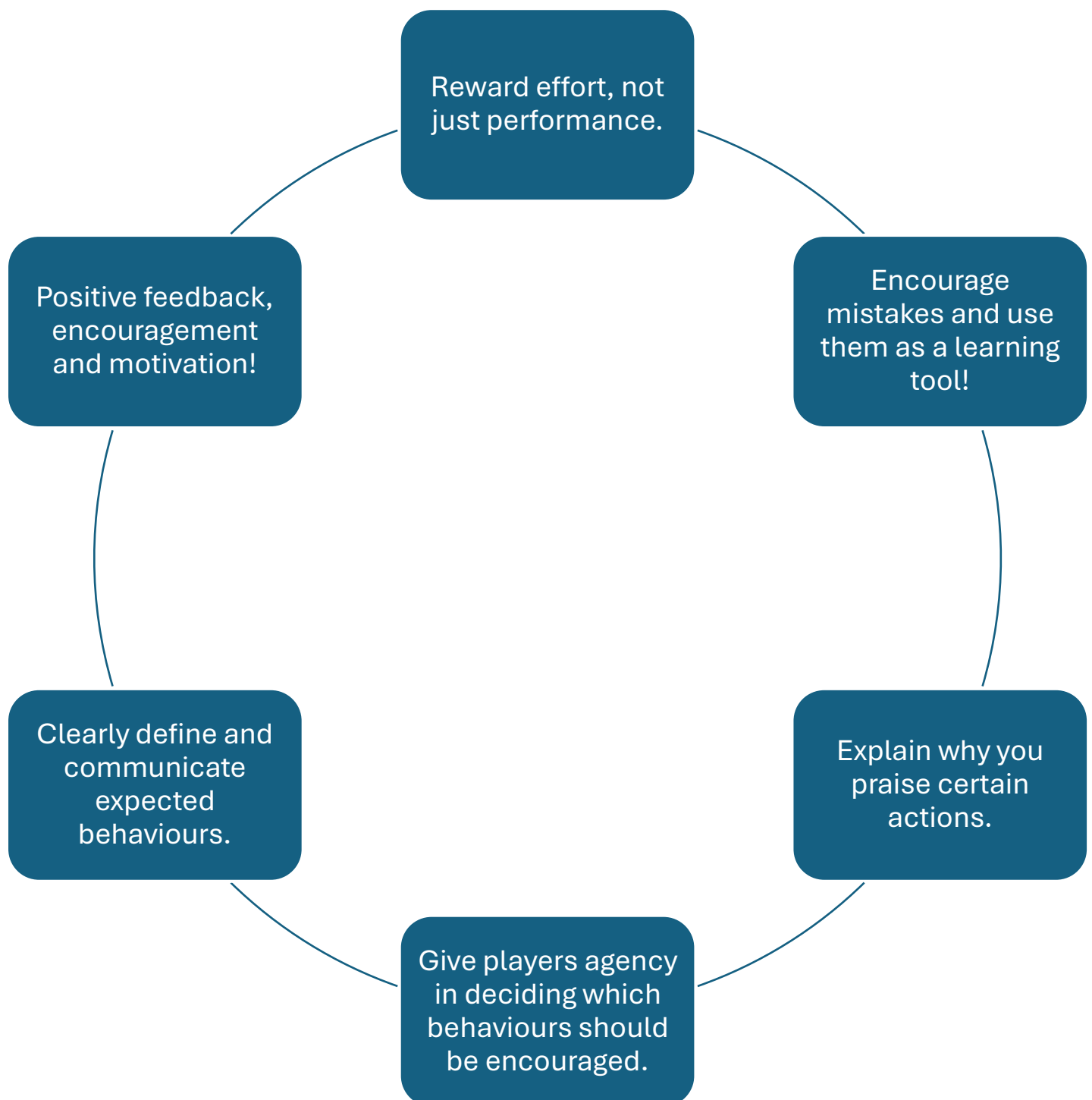
Understanding Anxiety

- ➔ Stage 1: Environmental demands – scoreline, expectations, pressure.
- ➔ Stage 2: Perceptive demands – Athlete’s view of consequences. E.g. a penalty when already winning will cause less anxiety than a game-decider.
- ➔ Stage 3: Bodily response – Cognitive or somatic anxiety? Attentional shifts? Fatigue/tension?
- ➔ Stage 4: Performance Outcome – Success or failure.

Applied Psychology

Guidelines for Building Motivation (1, 7, 10, 11).

To motivate athletes not only to succeed and enjoy participation, but to display positive behaviours and turn them into 'norms'. Some examples of coaching practices associated with high motivation.



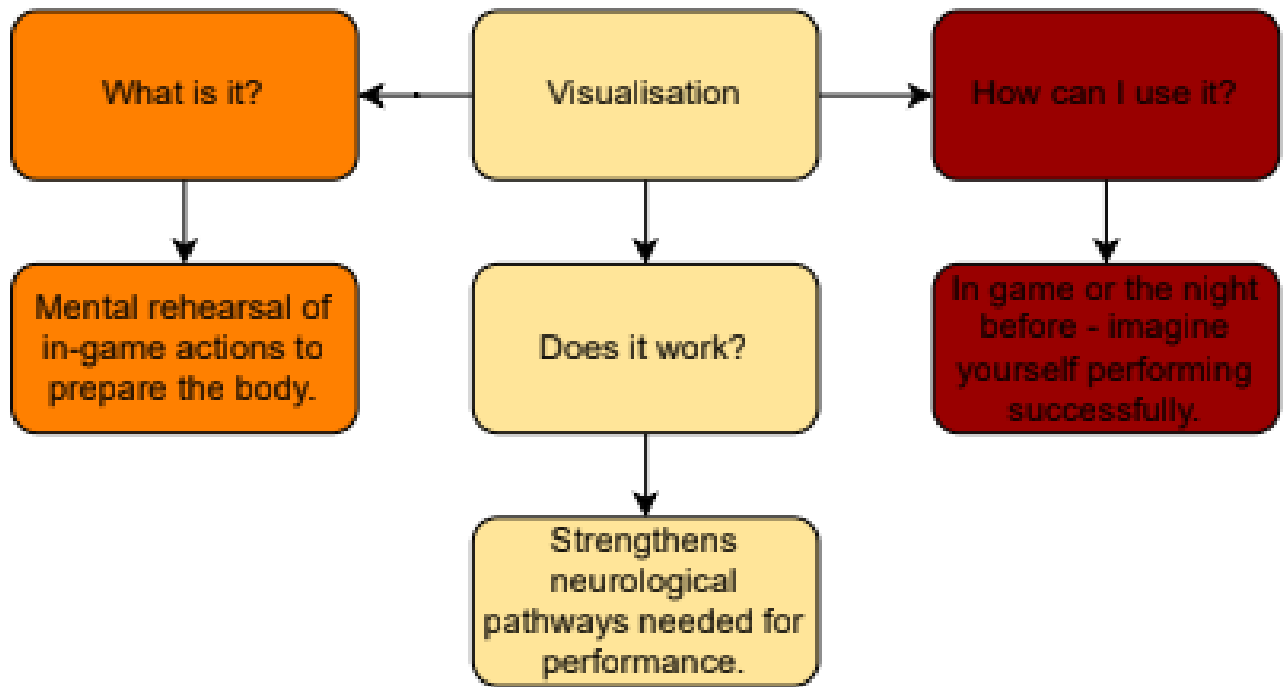
Applied Psychology

Guidelines for Building Confidence (7, 10,11).

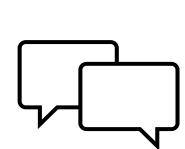
- **Performance Accomplishments:** If a performer is generally successful in completing a skill, they will develop self-efficacy while repeated failures detract. An example of this in action may be that a striker is struggling to score in training, to give them a confidence boost and increase the chance of scoring the coach may decide to create an attacking overload or utilise bigger goals.
- **Vicarious Experiences:** 4 step model (1. Attention, 2. Retention, 3. Motor Reproduction, 4. Motivation) where a performer observes a demonstration of a skill. This can be demonstrated by a coach, teammate or model performer, crucially the effectiveness of this technique depends on how much respect the performer has for the person demonstrating. Once the action has been observed and key points are understood, motor reproduction is the key aspect, where the steps of the skill are put into physical action by the performer. For this to be effective the coach's key role is to motivate the performer to attempt skill acquisition while giving concise and memorable explanations.
- **Imaginal Experiences:** Visualisation is the mental rehearsal of in game actions, in essence, the mind has already completed the skill, so the body is able to execute it faster as it strengthens the neurological pathways needed for performance. The other sources of self-confidence include verbal persuasion (positivity, reinforcement), physiological state (heart rate which can be influenced by breathing techniques) and emotional state (happiness leads to increased efficacy).

Applied Psychology

Guidelines for Building Arousal (7, 10, 11, 12).



Music triggers physiological and psychological responses from the body, in an S+C session loud music can enhance performance, while calming music can ease stress!



Feedback: be perceptive. Judge your players' mental state – if the team are winning comfortably set new goals to keep them engaged. Conversely, if a game is tough, give them motivation and encouragement to keep going.

Applied Psychology

Guidelines for Building Concentration (7, 10, 14).

Broad External: Testing players situational awareness, for example having a cue for players to freeze and cover their eyes during performance and asking them questions about the situation. This develops a broad external understanding of the game and factors which may influence their next actions.

Narrow External: Testing ability to spot key factors, for example a scanning drill where a coach stands behind a midfielder who is receiving the ball and holds up different coloured cones. The midfielder must check their shoulder and shout out the answer before receiving, which develops scanning and processing ability.

Narrow Internal: Emphasise the primary source of focus. Often football players pass and focus on the ball, standing still to see if the pass is successful. Instead encourage reacting to more important game stimuli, such as opposition reactions and space created. Introducing self-talk triggers such as asking “where is the space?” or “move” may assist the player’s fluency in moving from one action to the next.

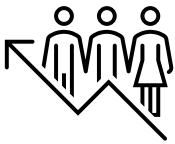
Broad Internal: Visualisation is crucial, if performers can learn to effectively use techniques such as imagery, they can prepare the body for the upcoming action and gain confidence from recalling past experiences.

Applied Psychology

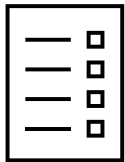
Guidelines for Building Stress Resistance (7, 10, 11).



Coach the individual – we all deal with stressful situation differently! Understand their triggers, how they cope, and how to calm them when something goes wrong.



When coaching young people at any level in any sport, prioritise development over winning. This reduces pressure to perform. Treat mistakes as a learning opportunity and don't react negatively!



Plan and prepare! Encourage problem solving as a coping mechanism – For example, if a performer gets apprehensive when losing, this distracts them from performance. Incorporate situations in training (e.g. use cues like “you are 2-1 down with 2 minutes left to play” during your games. When performers are comfortable with uncomfortable situations they can focus on the task at hand and solving the problem!



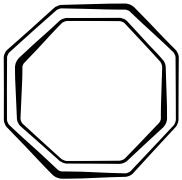
The winner effect: even the smallest wins boost psychological performance, and success breeds success. If things are not going well, set one or two targets you know they can achieve! But be careful with your targets as this is reversible; if they fail to meet them it can have a negative impact.

Applied Psychology

Guidelines for Building Anxiety Resistance (7, 10, 11).



Self-talk: give your players 1–2-word cues to repeat to themselves in anxiety inducing situations – it can be as simple as “stay focused”!



Hold up a mirror to your players and encourage self-reflection! If a mistake has caused anxiety, be constructive and encourage them to think on how they could have prevented it. Discourage blame or external excuses.

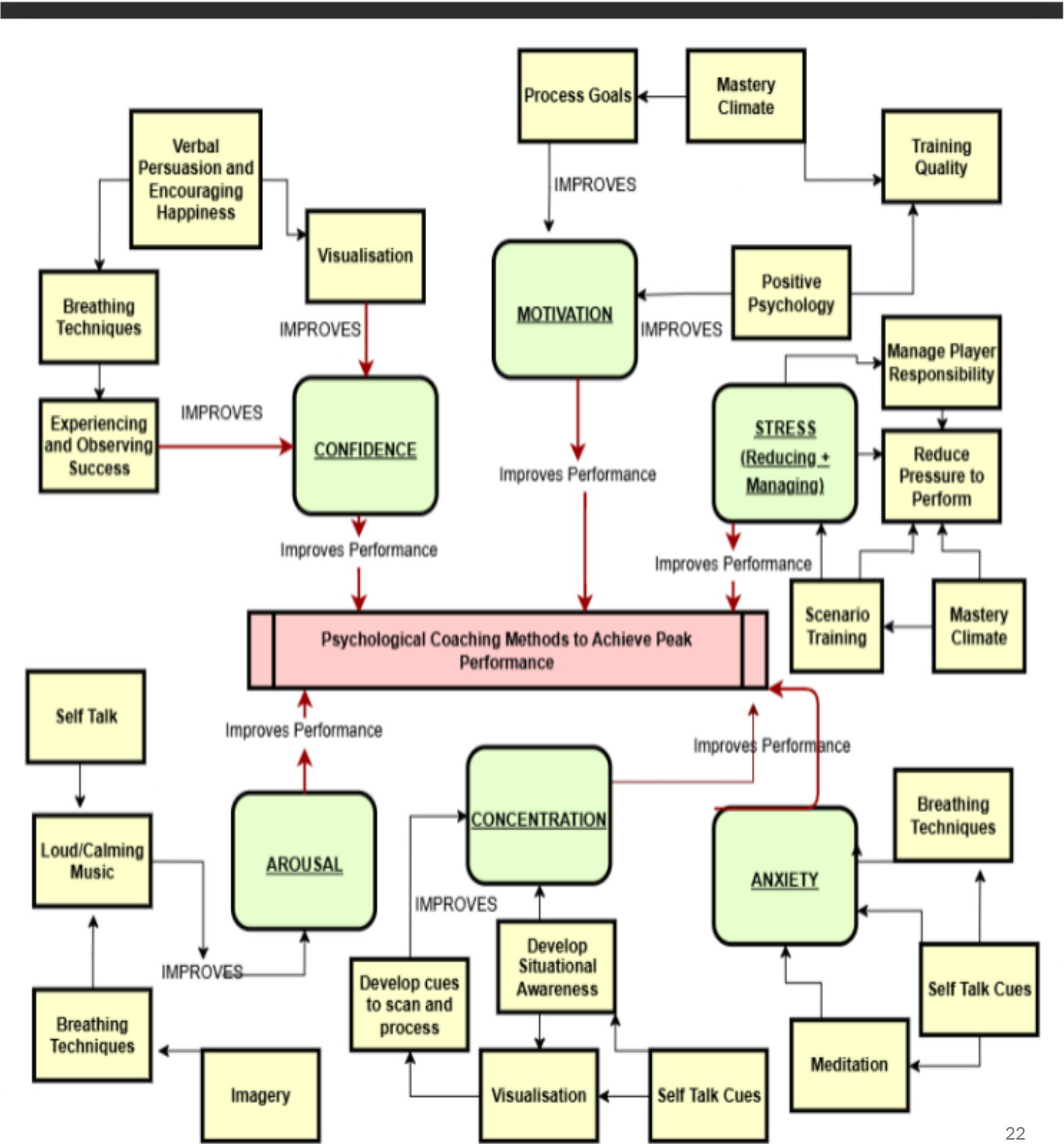


Inevitably in sport, something will go wrong at some point. Train for the situations where something goes wrong and teach your players how to respond to it!

Remember: things don't have to be catastrophic to cause anxiety, everyone has different triggers which cause different levels of anxiety, and different responses. Allow your players to practice missing a penalty, going a goal down, or having a player sent-off in training as this will improve how they react to these events in a game!

Applied Psychology (7).

Figure 2: Final Psychological Coaching Framework



Principles To Apply This Month



Use at least ONE of the applied psychology strategies.



Focus on small wins and long-term development.



Be positive: Praise and motivational feedback are associated with strong psychology and coach-player relationships.



Begin trying to recognise the psychological state of your players and adapt your coaching to them!

THANK YOU!

We have come to the end of this issue of Sports Coaching & Development: A Practitioner's Guide.

To recap, psychology in sport is just as critical as technical, tactical, or physical attributes.

We hope you enjoyed reading and have gained an understanding of the basics of psychological theory, as well as some useful ideas to implement within your sessions!

Remember you can sign up to our newsletter to be notified when next month's issue is released.

Thank you once again, Rhys and Dylan.

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