

“Catching emotions”

Sport is full of occasions when the mood of a team changes rapidly and changes in mood correspond with performance. Examples include Liverpool’s famous comeback in the 2005 Champion’s League final or France’s poor performance in the recent World Cup, where players were visibly arguing. In this article *Andy Lane* examines evidence showing how we appear to “catch” emotions from others. It also looks at strategies we can catch the others we want and resist catching those we don’t.

At A Glance

This article:

- Illustrates how emotions can transfer in sports teams;
- Shows ways in which people can identify if they are catching or transferring wanted and unwanted emotions
- Explores strategies to resist catching unwanted emotions and strategies to raising desired emotions among others and self.

Emotions and sport teams

To begin with it’s worth considering two points. The first point is that we should remind ourselves of the countless number of studies showing emotions influence performance. Emotions vary in intensity and direction ranging from sluggish and miserable (unpleasant emotions) to happiness and excitement (pleasant emotions) [1]. Studies suggest pleasant emotions tend to help whereas unpleasant emotions tend to hamper performance. Of the array of different explanations proposed to explain this effect, the notion that emotions have motivational implications is arguably the most convincing [1]. This theory proposes that feeling excited is motivating whereas feeling sluggish is de-motivating. Hence, there are times when athletes might wish to catch pleasant emotions and other times when people might wish to avoid unpleasant emotions.

The second key point is that emotions are inherently social. It’s rare to experience an emotion without involving another person. This could be from direct interaction such as a discussion with a team mate or anticipatory, such as feeling upset when thinking about your coach will respond if you perform poorly. Therefore, we should accept the position that a number of people could influence our emotions, whilst recognising that some people will have a greater effect than others. This list of influential people is likely to not only include team mates, coaching and sport science staff, but also family, friends, work colleagues [2]. Athletes are embedded within kinds of social networks and these networks can influence their emotional state.

These social networks form our personal neighbourhood. A key question is, do these networks affect how we feel? Does our emotional state prior and post competition depend partly on the emotions to who we are connected? In this article, I argue that the answer is yes. If emotional states impact on performance as evidence suggests, then the members of our social network, whether these are member of our team or friends, can be crucial for success.

Catching emotions in the social network

The basic network of a social network is a pair of individuals (see Figure 1). Pairs could be coach-athlete, athlete-athlete, athlete-family member, and so on. In Figure 1, the relationship between each person in the pair is equal; both partners’ emotions can be influenced each others. A team is a collection of a number of basic networks and an individual could in many different basic networks. For example, a sports coach should have a relationship with most people in the team. Figure 2a shows how each individual could contribute to the collective mood of the group. In Figure 2a, each person makes an individual contribution to group’s mood. Figure 2b shows that a person in a pleasant mood could be influenced by the mood of people in an unpleasant mood.

Figure 1a

A basic emotional network: The emotions of each person influence each other equally; one person’s happiness can affect the others and vice versa

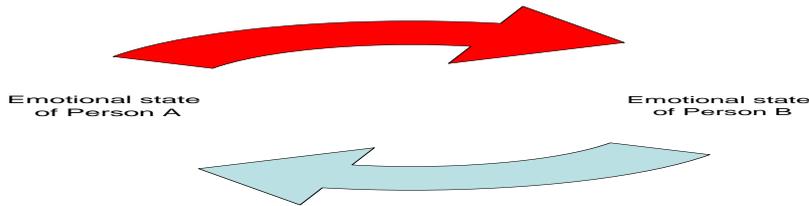


Figure 2a: A social network with three players. The mood of the group is influenced by all three members equally.

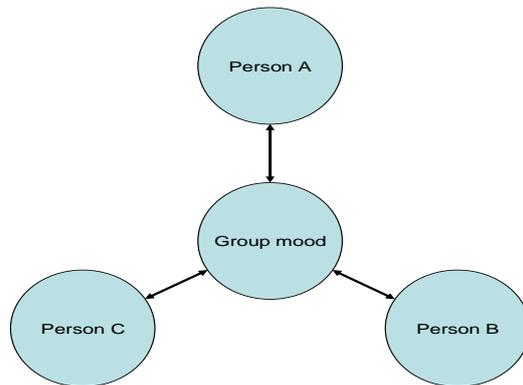
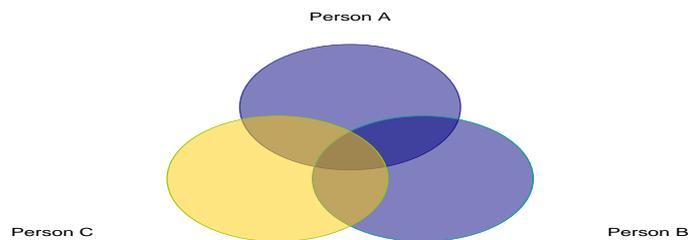
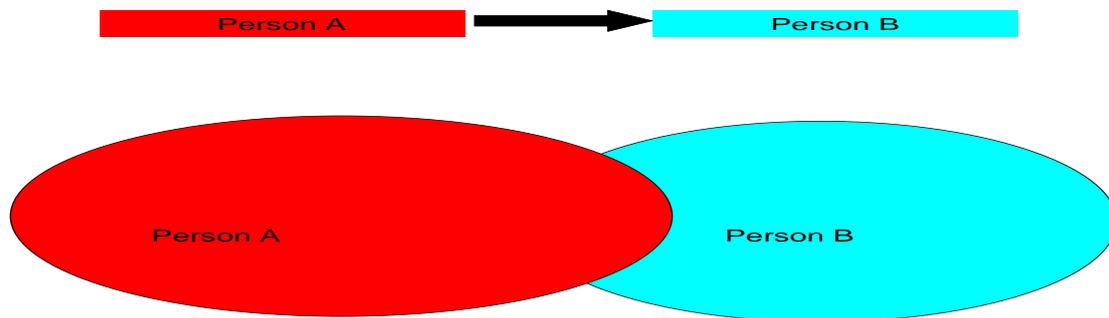


Figure 2b: A social network with three players. Two players are in a negative mood (in blue) and one player is in a positive mood (yellow). Note how the negative mood states influence the positive mood. Note the colour of the combined effect of the Person A and Person B on Person C.



The collective mood is the average mood state of the players involved (see Figure 2a). Research on sports teams shows that an individual's emotion can change in synchrony with the collective mood of their teammates [3] (see Figure 2b). For example, if a number of players report feeling happier and this shifts the average mood of the team upwards, then this feel good factor appears to transfer to other members of the team. The process can work in reverse raising unpleasant emotion. The implication is that the emotional climate of the team can begin to be improved by enhancing the mood state of one member of the group. Once the majority of the team feel that they are improving and getting close to performing at their best, this should lead to a general upwards shift in the mood of the team [4]. A coach could boost the mood of the team even though he or she provides positive encouragement to a single athlete.

Figure 3. Person A is the dominant member of the group and influencing the mood of Person B



There is evidence showing that key members of a group have a greater influence on the emotional climate of a team [5]. This seems particularly applicable when people look for guidance from the influential members of the group on what the prevailing emotional response should be [6]. In such cases, an individual will look at the emotional states of key members of the group. For example, a soccer player playing her or his or her first match in the World Cup finals might look to seasoned players on how they are feeling and try to copy their mood. If they look calm, relaxed and confident, then they use this information as a guide to how they try to self-regulate their emotions. Clearly if players are aware that emotions can transfer, then they could use strategies to maximise positive transfer or minimise negative transfer (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that player A (in red) influences the emotions of player B (blue) and that the relationship is one-directional. In this example, player A is influential and therefore needs to be sensitive of his or her influence on others, especially when experiencing unpleasant emotions. Player B needs to develop skills to capture the positive emotions from Player A. Player B needs to be able to ignore unpleasant emotions. Making each person aware of his /her potential to receive or transfer emotions represents a good starting point in managing the transfer of emotions from others.

Catching wanted emotions and avoiding unwanted emotion

The transfer of emotions is a complex process and numerous factors come into play. At any one time, an individual's emotional state will only be partly influenced by the emotions of others. Research shows that people appear to naturally develop self-regulating strategies and these are useful when developing intervention work [7]. Strategies that people naturally use are almost effortlessly and clearly this has implications for usage. However, people use strategies to deliberately improve or worsen their emotions and other people's emotions. There also are times when someone will seek to enhance their own emotions by seeking to improve someone else's emotions. Research shows that strategies aimed at worsening own or others emotions are detrimental to emotions [2].

The good news is that people can improve their emotion regulation skills. There is growing evidence showing that using psychological skills such as positive self-talk and imagining performing successfully in training and competition associates with improved emotional control [8]. Further, motivational strategies such as if-then plans are proposed to provide a way of telling yourself when you should use these strategies [9]. Below are some suggested if-then plans which could help emotion regulation.

Table 1: If-Then plans for catching emotion

If (barrier to performance)	Then (solution to the barrier)
My emotions are unpleasant and affecting others, how can I stop this emotion transferring?	
<i>"If I am feeling angry following an argument with the coach and I don't want to convey this emotion to other players"</i>	<i>"Then I will take a deep breathe and focusing on the word relax as I breathe out!"</i> or <i>"Then I will take a perspective on the argument and tell myself it wont matter in the long run!"</i>
My emotions are pleasant, how can I try to transfer these emotions to others	
<i>"If I am feeling excited"</i>	<i>"Then I will give someone helpful advice to try to improve how they felt!"</i> or <i>"Then I will remind others how well they have performed previously!"</i>
Other people's emotions are unpleasant and affecting me, how can I stop this transfer?	
<i>"If other people are getting me down"</i>	<i>"Then I will immediately ignore them!"</i>
Other people's emotions are pleasant and affecting me, how can I try to maintain his or her pleasant emotions?	
<i>"If other people are in a good mood and I want to improve my emotions"</i>	<i>"Then I speak to others to try to make myself feel better"</i>

Summary

In sport we see the collective collapse of team or individual performance. One reason that this might occur is that negative emotions spreads through the team like a virus, infecting players and demotivating them. In this article, I suggest that attempting to become aware of the effects of your emotions and others emotions is the starting point for intervention work. From this, it's possible to use a number of psychological skills to your advantage, and although I emphasise if-then planning, I also encourage introspection of strategies that you currently use and trying to use these when you need to control your emotions.

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