

# Bottle vs. Reframe

## What Emotion Regulation Research Means for Coaches

Episode 3 | Season 1 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

### EPIISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects
Author	James Gross, Stanford University
Published	Psychological Inquiry, 2015
Episode Length	Under 11 minutes
Tags	emotion regulation, reappraisal, suppression, mental performance, coaching psychology, athlete wellbeing

### THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

#### Bottle vs. Reframe

Suppression hides the emotion at a cognitive and social cost. Reappraisal changes the emotional experience before it peaks. The reframe wins, and the research is unambiguous about why.

#### The Three-Step Check

Emotion regulation requires three things in sequence: noticing the emotion (Step 1), choosing a strategy (Step 2), and executing it under pressure (Step 3). Athletes can fail at any step, and the right coaching response depends on where the breakdown is happening.

#### The Emotional Toolbox

The best-regulated athletes are not the ones with one perfect strategy. They are the ones with multiple tools and the ability to match the right tool to the right moment, especially as emotional intensity climbs.

## SHOW NOTES

### TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

#### Action 1 (Just-in-Time Coach Learning)

Think of one athlete who struggles emotionally under pressure. In your head, run them through the Three-Step Check: Do they notice when emotions are affecting their performance, or are they caught off guard? Do they have any go-to strategies, or do they just white-knuckle through? If they have strategies, have they practiced them under realistic pressure conditions? You do not need to act on this today. Knowing which step your athlete is failing on will tell you exactly where to direct your energy.

#### Action 2 (Just-in-Case Coach Learning)

Map the emotional toolkit of your most pressure-tested athlete. How many genuine regulation strategies do they have? Do they have tools that work at low intensity and tools that hold up when intensity is very high? If the answer is mostly "I just push through it," that is important information. In a future session, try building one additional tool together, specifically designed for high-intensity moments when reappraisal is difficult to execute.

## RESEARCH REFERENCE

**Primary Source:** Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1-26.

**Counterpoint Sources:** Sheppes, G., Catran, E., & Meiran, N. (2009). Reappraisal (but not distraction) is going to make you sweat: Physiological evidence for self-control effort. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 71, 91-96. | Sheppes, G., Scheibe, S., Suri, G., Radu, P., Blechert, J., & Gross, J. J. (2014). Emotion regulation choice: A conceptual framework and supporting evidence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143, 163-181.

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**Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.**

## SHOW NOTES

### FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

#### Cold Open

Here is something coaches say all the time: "Don't let it get to you." "Keep it in check." "Stay in control." We say it to athletes who are visibly rattled, frustrated, or anxious before a big moment. And it sounds like solid coaching. Practical and no-nonsense. The problem? Every time we say it, we are accidentally asking our athletes to suppress their emotions rather than regulate them. And the research is very clear on what that costs athletes and the people who coach them. You are going to want to hear this one!

#### Intro and Show ID

Welcome to Coaching Research To Results. I'm Beth Barz, the Coach Developer. One paper, three ideas, and two actions for tomorrow, in under 15 minutes. This is the podcast where coaching research gets off the shelf, out of your notes, and into your practice. Let's go.

#### The Paper

The paper is called "Emotion Regulation: Current Status and Future Prospects," published in the journal *Psychological Inquiry* in 2015. The author, James Gross, is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and probably one of the most widely cited researchers in the world on the science of how people manage their emotions. The field has become one of the fastest-growing areas in all of psychology. Gross steps back, takes stock, and then introduces a new model for how emotional regulation actually works. It has very direct implications for anyone who works with people under pressure. Here's what he found.

#### Big Idea #1

The big idea is something I'm going to call "Bottle vs. Reframe." And this might be the most practically important finding in twenty years of emotional regulation research.

There are two fundamentally different ways people manage difficult emotions. The first is suppression: you feel the emotion but you hide it, push it down, and soldier on. The second is reappraisal: you change the meaning of the situation before the emotion fully takes hold. Instead of "this pressure will crush us," it becomes "this is what we trained for." Instead of "we might lose," it becomes "this is where we find out what we are made of."

Here's what the research shows. Suppression does not actually reduce the emotion. The body is still running the stress response in the background. Cognitive performance takes a hit. Memory gets worse. And the social cost is real: athletes who habitually suppress emotion are harder for their teammates to connect with, and that disconnection shows up everywhere athletes gather. Reappraisal, on the other hand, actually changes the emotional experience. It reduces the negative emotion, costs far less cognitively, and has no downside for memory. The reframe wins. And the coaches who teach it are giving their athletes a real tool for life.

#### Ideas #2 and #3

Alright, idea two. And this one might change how you think about an athlete who consistently falls apart under pressure.

Gross introduces what he calls the extended process model of emotional regulation, and for coaches, let's think of it as a Three-Step Check. For an athlete to successfully manage an emotion in the moment, three things have to happen in sequence. Step one: they notice the

emotion and recognize that it needs to be regulated. Step two: they choose a strategy to deal with it. Step three: they actually execute that strategy in a particular situation.

And here is the coaching-critical insight: athletes can fail at any of these three steps, and the intervention looks completely different depending on where the breakdown is happening.

An athlete who doesn't notice how deeply anxious they are before a game is failing at step one. They do not need strategy coaching. They might need emotional awareness coaching first. An athlete who notices anxiety but has no idea what to do is failing at step two. They have awareness but no toolkit. And, an athlete who knows exactly what they should do but cannot execute it under competition-day conditions is failing at step three. They need practice implementing the skill under realistic pressure, not more information about it.

The sticky label for this idea is the Three-Step Check. When an athlete struggles under pressure, the question isn't "why can't they get it together?" The question is: which step are they failing on? And that answer changes everything.

Idea three. Let's talk about the Emotional Toolbox, because this might change how you design or support mental skills work with athletes.

Gross identifies five families of emotion regulation strategies: choosing which situations to enter or avoid, modifying a situation to reduce its emotional impact, redirecting attention away from a trigger, reframing the meaning of the situation through reappraisal, and directly managing the physical response once the emotion has occurred. Most athletes and most coaches naturally rely on one or two of these. But the research is increasingly clear that the best regulated athletes are not the ones who have found one perfect strategy. They are the ones who have a full toolbox and know which tool fits which moment.

Here is a specific nuance that matters for coaching: reappraisal works beautifully at low to moderate levels of emotional intensity. But as intensity climbs toward the high end, reappraisal becomes harder to execute and less effective. At high intensity, distraction is a better first move. So, telling an anxious athlete to "think about it differently" when they are already at a ten on the anxiety dial, is asking them to do something the research says is quite difficult in that state. Getting them to redirect their focus entirely may work much better in the moment. It all depends on where they are on the intensity scale.

### The Counterpoint

Let's complicate things a little, shall we? I just told you that reappraisal is generally better than suppression, and the evidence for that is strong. But, there is an important caveat here!

Gross cites research by Sheppes and colleagues showing that at high levels of emotional intensity, reappraisal is not just harder, it is physiologically more effortful and less effective. People actually shift their preference from reappraisal to distraction as emotional intensity climbs. So the advantage of reappraisal is real but context-dependent. It is most powerful before the full emotional response has fired.

What does this mean for coaching: timing matters. A pre-game reframe, a team talk that changes the narrative before the stakes spike, a quiet conversation with an anxious athlete in the hour before competition -- those are high-leverage moments for reappraisal. Trying to reframe mid-match when the emotion is already at full intensity is a much harder ask. In those moments, a physical routine, a focal point, or a deliberate attention redirect may serve your athlete far better. Keep that in mind.

### The Anecdote

I think I discovered this quite accidentally when coaching a high school team. This was a team that was relatively new, played for the fun of it, and became competitive quite quickly due to their love of learning and willingness to help each other. They were a real mix of athletes from Grade 9 to 12 who probably never would have met each other if rugby hadn't divinely intervened. As a result, there was a real spread between the athletes on who had experienced different points in The Three-Step Check and those who hadn't.

We had managed to win the semi-final and were into the final against the five-time defending champions. They had all the experience, all the hunger, the best player in the league (who would go on to a decorated international career) and looked destined to win again against this upstart team. As a coach, my internal struggle was how to figure out what each of the athletes needed before we got to the field. In fact, we started preparing a few days out. We exposed nervousness and put it out in the open. Then we reframed – or reappraised it - as caring, like, “nervous means you care.” And then we imagined what it would feel like when we stepped onto the field - how to keep the butterflies flying in formation, rather than all over the place. It was only after that, that we discussed the strategies and tactics for the game.

As a coach, I figured that the biggest stumbling block would be the emotional one, since playing a final was something we'd never done. Even though our program was new and the athletes didn't know rugby all that well, I felt confident – and more importantly, so did they – that they had enough rugby abilities to pull off the win. Focusing on the emotions and the gravity of the situation first paid off. The story has a happy ending for the good guys, winning 6-5 that day.

### Two Actions

Let's apply this research. Action one is to think of one athlete who struggles emotionally under pressure. Run them through the Three-Step Check in your head. First: do they seem to notice when their emotions are affecting their performance, or do they seem caught off guard by it? Second: do they have any go-to strategies, or do they just white-knuckle through? Third: if they have strategies, have they actually practiced using them under realistic pressure conditions, or only in calm training moments? You do not need to do anything with this information today. Just knowing which step your athlete is failing at will tell you exactly where to direct your energy in the future.

Action two. Map the emotional toolkit of your most pressure-tested athlete. How many genuine regulation strategies do they have? One? Two? Five? Do they have strategies that work at low intensity and strategies that hold up when the intensity is very high? If the answer is mostly "I just push through it," that is important information. In a future individual session, try building out one additional tool together, specifically something designed for high-intensity moments when reappraisal becomes difficult to execute. Connect with a mental performance coach to expand the athletes' toolboxes, too. The goal is not one perfect strategy. The goal is flexibility.

### Close and Invite

The big takeaway today: the next time you hear yourself telling an athlete to "shake it off" or "just keep it together," that is your cue. What you are really asking them to do is suppress. And suppression has a cost that you can see in their performance and in their relationships with teammates. The smarter move is to help them reframe before the pressure peaks, to understand where in the Three-Step Check they are getting stuck, and to build out an emotional toolkit that gives them more than one way to manage what they are feeling in competition.

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## SHOW NOTES

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