

Managing Emotions and Expectations with Athletes

Erica Koven, USA Gymnastics Chief Membership Officer

Shelba Waldron, USA Gymnastics Director of Member Education & Outreach



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It's Not "Bad Behavior." It's a Message.



What We See When Athletes “Act Out”

Disruptive Actions

- Talking over coaches, goofing off, distracting teammates, ignoring directions

Power Struggles

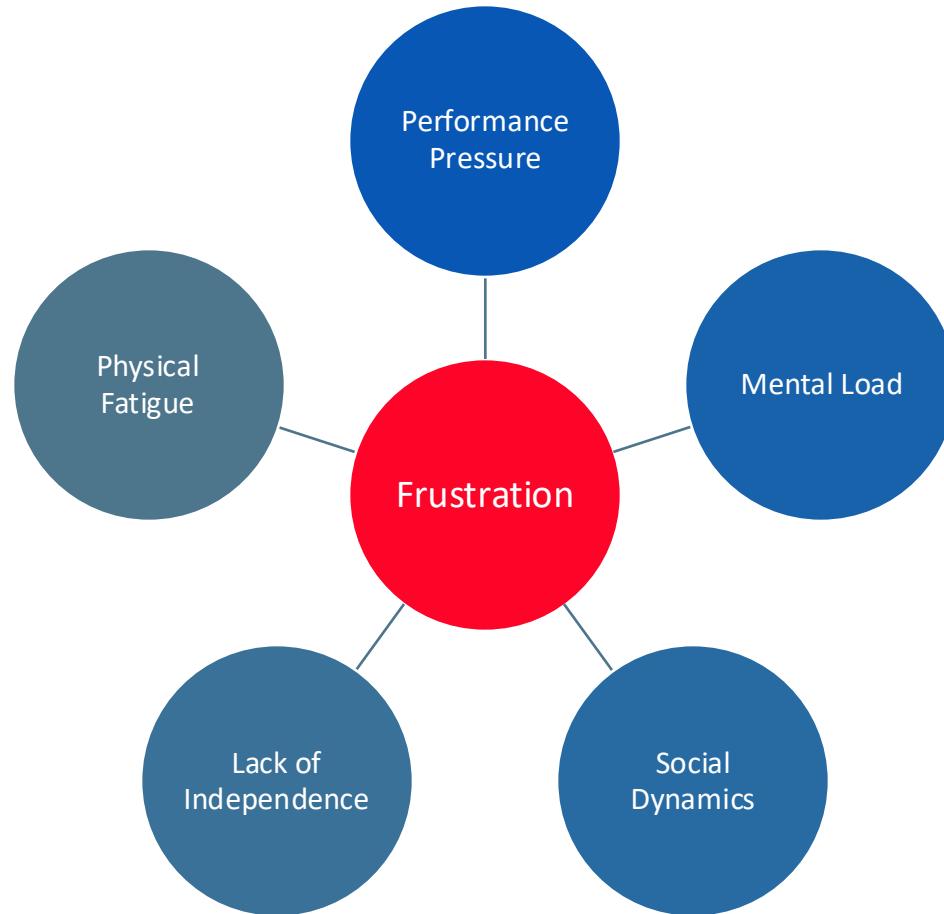
- Arguing, eye rolls, refusing the attempt a skill, doing it poorly on purpose

Withdrawal

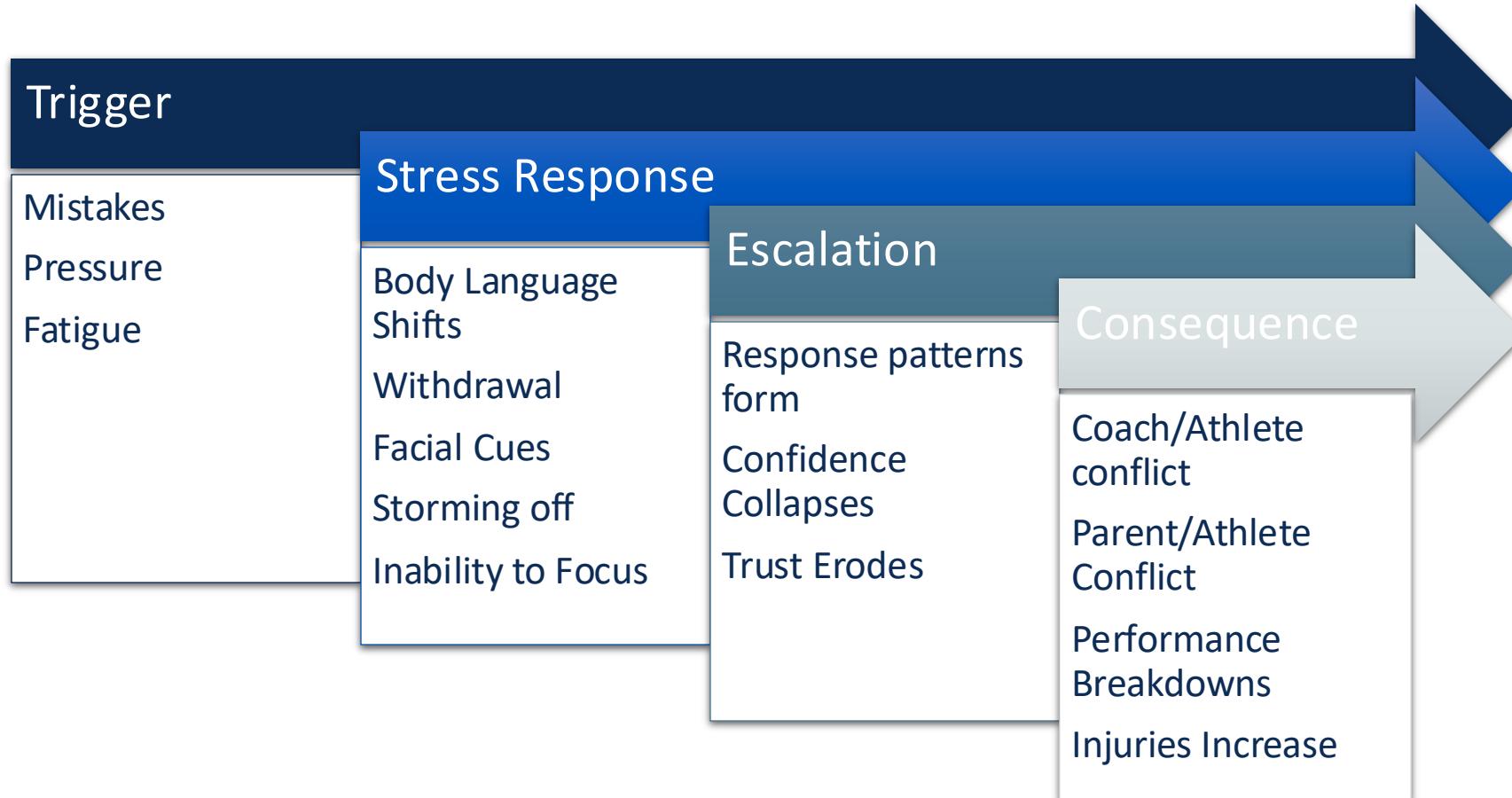
- Silent, won't respond, tears, walking away, refusing to engage in post practice discussions



What's Behind Athlete Behavior?



How Frustration Builds Over Time



When Training Breaks Down

- Skill avoidance
- Confidence crashes
- Safety shortcuts
- Emotional spikes
- Leaving the apparatus

These aren't *skills* problems —
they're *stress* problems.



Reacting vs. Responding

Reacting

- Immediate, emotional, often defensive
- Driven by frustration, stress, or feeling controlled
- Can escalate conflict and disrupt training

Responding

- Thoughtful, measured, and purposeful
- Builds trust and keeps focus on solutions
- Models' composure for athletes under stress

A reaction escalates the moment. A response manages it.



Responding *Before* the Boiling Point

Early Recognition of your own frustration:

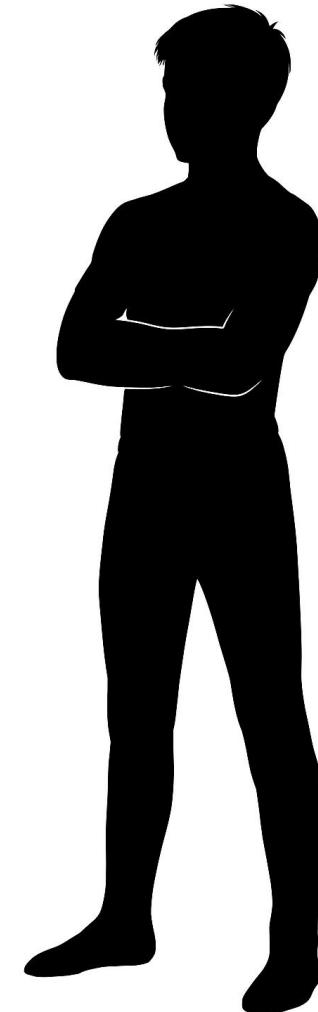
- Voice gets shorter and sharper, sarcasm sneaks in, Anytime today.”, internal scripts is saying, “I don’t have time for this or back in my day.”

Prevention Strategies

- **Pause before correcting** – take one beat on purpose to lower the temperature.
- **Offer clear choices** – e.g., “*Do you want to try that skill again, or reset and take a breath?*”
- **Neutral language** – words that guide without blame:
 - Instead of: “*You’re not listening.*”
 - Try: “*Let’s reset and focus on the first step.*”
 - Instead of: “*That was wrong.*”
 - Try: “*Let’s adjust and try this variation.*”

Goal

- Give the athlete a safe outlet for frustration.
- Model composure: if you stay calm, they learn to stay calm.



Coaching Messages: Helpful vs. Harmful

Avoid Saying This...	Negative Body Language	Say This Instead...
"Why can't you get this right?"	Walking away mid-skill with no feedback	"Let's break that down together."
"You're never going to get this."	Eye rolling or turning to coach another athlete instead	"I believe in you. Let's try again."
"You're behind the rest of the group."	Consistently ignoring their presence in group praise	"You're getting stronger every week."
"You're being ridiculous. Calm down."	Sighing dramatically when the athlete makes a mistake	"Take a breath. You've got this."
"That was pathetic."	Giving up spotting or coaching effort mid-routine	"That's a tough skill—let's work through it."



Why This Matters

A coach's response determines whether the moment becomes:

A Setback

- Power struggle
- Embarrassment
- Disconnection

Or

A Lesson

- Resilience
- Emotional Control
- Confidence

The response is what turns conflict into progress.



Turning Conflict Into Progress

- Resilience → “Try again with one change”
- Emotional control → Pause & model composure
- Stress management → Challenge, not failure
- Problem-solving → Ask before telling
- Transferable skill → Practice for life



Athletes Can't Use Skills if They Don't Feel Safe

- Athletes can't use emotional skills if they're afraid to be honest.
- Skill-building only works in a climate of safety and trust.
- Conflict skills + Safe culture = Growth, not shutdown.



From Conflict to Culture

Culture is what tells an athlete; it's okay to cry here, it's okay to struggle here, and it's safe to be honest here.



Setting Expectations

- **If you give me a standard...**
→ *I know exactly what's expected of me, and I don't have to guess.*
- **If you hold me to it...**
→ *I know you believe I can reach that standard, even when it's hard.*
- **If you model it...**
→ *I learn that accountability isn't just for athletes—it's for everyone.*
- **If you explain the “why”...**
→ *I understand the purpose behind the expectation, not just the rule.*
- **If you adjust when needed...**
→ *I see that expectations are fair, not rigid punishment.*



The Two Pillars of a Healthy Training Environment



Normalizing Emotions

Normalize

- Set the tone that emotions are expected
- Respond without judgment
- Model calm when things get tough

Name

- Ask simple check-ins (“*What’s your mood right now?*”)
- Encourage athletes to put words to feelings
- Show it’s safe to be honest

Navigate

- Guide athletes toward choices, not excuses
- Offer strategies to reset and refocus
- Reinforce growth from the moment



Build Routines for Communication

Every athlete should know **three things** every day:

- ★ How to ask for help
- ★ How to signal they're overwhelmed
- ★ How to close the day with confidence



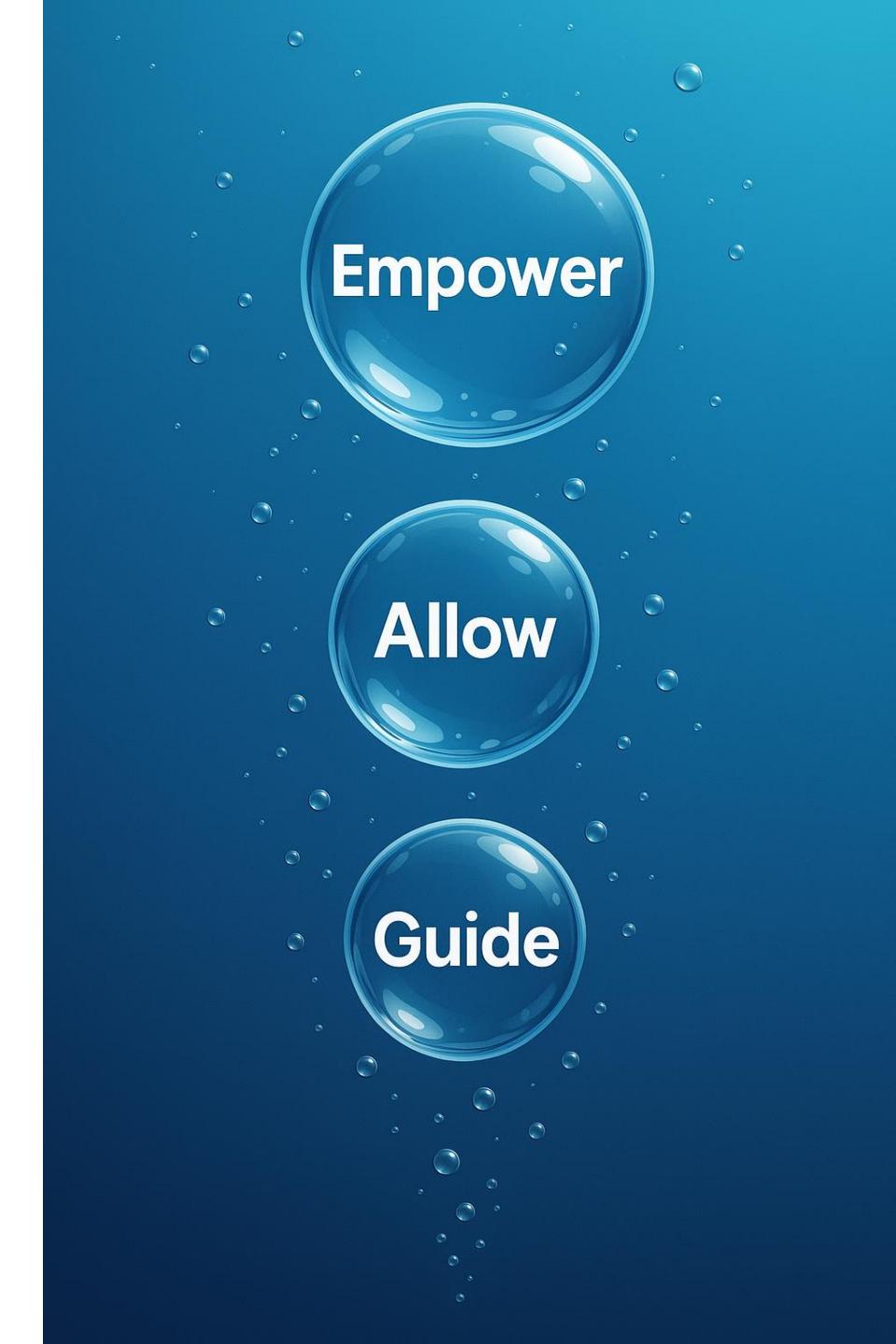
Invite Athlete Voice

When athletes have agency, they don't need to act out.



Creating Space for Athlete Independence

- **Guide to build independence** — give clear feedback, but leave space for athletes to solve problems.
- **Avoid constant correction** — too much input takes away ownership and weakens confidence.
- **Offer choices** — small options show trust and increase athlete engagement.
- **Use silence strategically** — pause between corrections so athletes can process and self-adjust.
- **Loosen control** — while control feels safe for coaches, it often creates frustration for athletes.



When Nothing Else Is Working

Effective Practices	Ineffective Practices
Short, structured breaks to reset or calm down	Physical punishment
Private conversations to address behavior	Public shaming meant to embarrass
Temporary removal from an activity for safety or regulation	Ignoring or isolating an athlete as “consequence”
Reassigning tasks or modifying participation with clear explanation	Threatening punishment or using fear to control behavior
Loss of privilege tied directly to behavior (e.g., leadership role)	Taking away basic rights (e.g., breaks, water, spotting, communication)
Parent or support meeting to reset expectations	Yelling, name-calling, or emotional outbursts from the coach



If you remember nothing else...

1. See the why.
2. Protect the relationship.
3. Teach the life skill.



Thank you!

For more information:

Shelba Waldron: swaldron@usagym.org
usagym.org

