



EMBRACING POSITIVE STRESS:

A Guide to Building Resilience
and High-Performance Mindsets
in High School Athletes

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Resilience is one of the most critical life skills that coaches can help athletes develop through supportive sports experiences. It is crucial for anyone facing high-stakes performance on the field and for overcoming challenges off it. Resilience is the psychological “muscle” that enables us to bounce back from setbacks, adapt to stress, and continuously move forward despite adversity.

Sports present a unique opportunity to build resilience because they inherently involve challenges, from the disappointment of a loss to the relentless demands of training. Resilience is developed within safe, supportive environments through repeated exposure to stressors that push mental and physical boundaries. Over time, resilience becomes a competitive advantage, helping athletes sustain performance through the highs and lows of their careers.

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EMBRACING POSITIVE STRESS

Stress is what occurs when a demand or challenge takes us out of balance. It is a natural part of life and an essential tool our bodies use to navigate the world. When faced with challenges, our brains draw on past experiences, spot patterns, and ready our bodies for action. Stress response is more than just psychological - it engages the whole body to prepare for what is ahead. The key to managing stress effectively lies in understanding its types, effects, and how we can harness it as a positive force in our lives and in sports.

Positive Stress vs. Distress: The Two Faces of Stress

Not all stress is created equal. In fact, stress can be a powerful motivator that fuels performance and growth. Positive stress, that which is predictable, moderate, and controllable is essential for pushing us forward, keeping us engaged, and helping us perform under pressure. It's a positive force, driving us to problem-solve, stay alert, and persevere.



However, when stress is unpredictable, extreme, or lasts for too long¹, it can shift from positive stress to distress. Distress is often triggered when our minds and bodies interpret everyday challenges as life-threatening, engaging our "fight or flight" response. When this response is triggered too frequently or for too long, it can lead to a host of issues, including difficulty managing emotions, reduced resilience, and even physical problems like digestive issues, heart disease, and impaired decision-making. This prolonged strain in the absence of protective relationships, causes toxic stress, and can wear down our bodies over time diminishing overall well-being. To learn more about the link between trauma and toxic stress, check out this [PCA resource](#).

1. Perry, Bruce, M.D., Ph.D, and Oprah Winfrey. What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing. New York, New York, Flatiron Books, 2021.

Adaptive Stress: A High-Performance Ally

Our brains are remarkably adaptive. When we encounter manageable levels of stress, our bodies respond by mobilizing our brain, nervous system, and body in a way that supports peak performance. In sports, for example, when athletes encounter manageable stress they may sharpen their focus, increase physical explosivity, heighten body awareness, and amplify strength and speed in preparation for competition.

Understanding that not all stress is negative can be empowering for athletes. When coaches [create a team environment](#) that engages the athlete's stress response with predictable, moderate, and controllable stress, they can develop resilience and improve their ability to perform under pressure. As a coach or mentor, encouraging this positive relationship with stress can be transformative.



THE ROLE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN BECOMING RESILIENT

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult. The safe, trusting connections that athletes build through a positive sports experience can contribute to support systems that help athletes navigate any form of adversity that arises.

Coaches who build trust and communicate effectively can:

- ✓ Foster confidence amongst athletes
- ✓ Encourage a [growth mindset](#)
- ✓ Teach coping strategies
- ✓ Help athletes bounce back from poor performances and learn from mistakes

Coaches can develop supportive relationships by:

- ✓ **Leading Interactions with Empathy** - Empathy plays a significant role in enhancing resilience by fostering emotional support, connection, and understanding in the face of adversity. It creates connection, normalizes emotions, and gives athletes a feeling of belonging. When coaches lead interactions with empathy, athletes will feel better understood and supported, which reduces stress and enhances emotional well being. Listening, acknowledging feelings, and validating emotions - not immediately trying to fix them - builds resilience and self-compassion, helping athletes handle difficult situations.
- ✓ **Getting to Know Each Athlete as an Individual** - Each athlete, and their needs, are unique. By taking time to check-in with athletes and learn about them outside of the sport, coaches can better understand and provide support they may need.
- ✓ **Developing Connections Amongst Teammates** - Providing opportunities for athletes to connect with teammates lets them know there are others that share similar goals and are navigating similar challenges. This further strengthens one's mental resilience, while reducing feelings of isolation during difficult times. Coaches can build informal time before and after practice for athletes to connect, use a buddy system that pairs athletes up, or run teambuilding activities that encourage collaboration and communication.

Ultimately, an athlete's support system can serve to remind them of their worth beyond their athletic performance, while providing a sense of security and community. This can empower athletes to face adversity with confidence and determination. The resilience developed through these bonds not only enhances athletic performance but also contributes to personal growth and overall well-being.

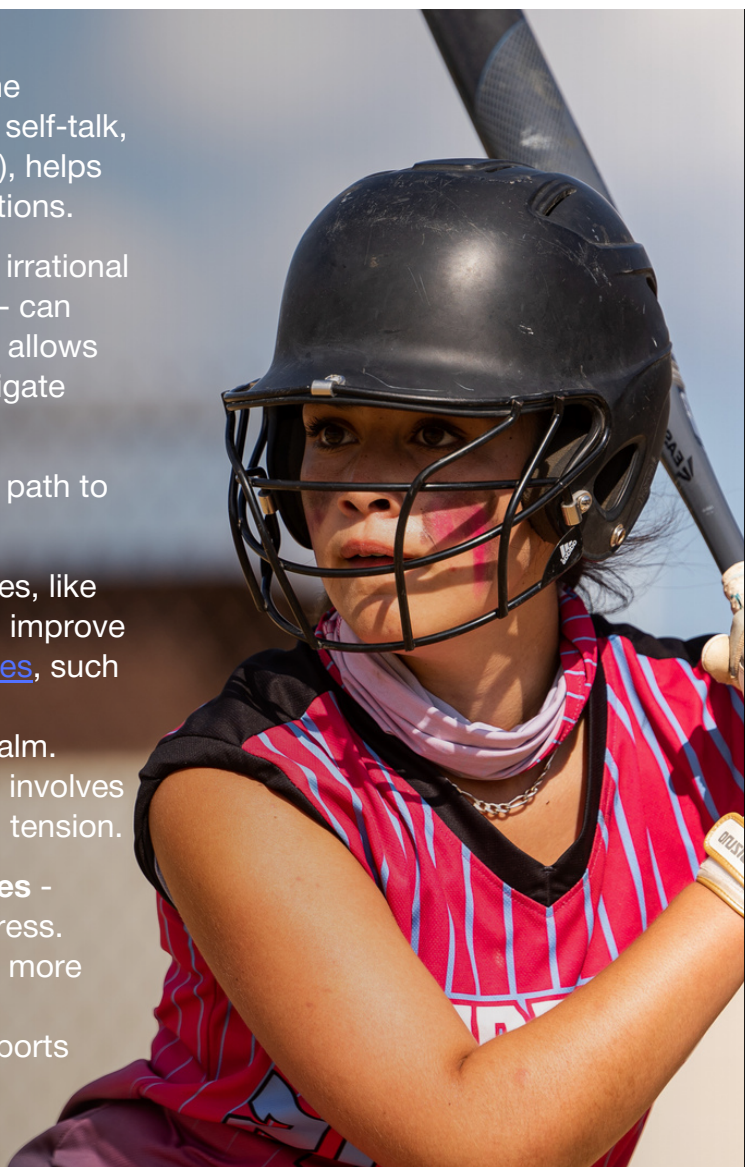
2. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience>

Coping with Adversity

Trusting relationships are vital for helping athletes cope with adversity. You can be someone your athletes turn to as a trustworthy resource that can significantly impact their ability to handle setbacks and the pressures of competition. This trust allows athletes to be open about their struggles without fear of judgment, making it easier to seek advice and support. A coach who listens, encourages, and provides constructive feedback can help young athletes develop a resilient mindset, turning challenges into learning opportunities.

Coaches can support their athletes by providing, modeling, and teaching specific coping skills that strengthen resilience, such as:

- **Positive Self-talk** - Athletes can use self-talk to reframe negative thoughts and boost their confidence. Positive self-talk, including affirmations (i.e. "I can handle this challenge"), helps athletes stay focused and confident during tough situations.
- **Cognitive Restructuring** - The practice of challenging irrational beliefs and replacing them with realistic, positive ones - can shift an athlete's mindset from defeat to growth. It also allows them to identify what is within their control as they navigate challenging situations.
- **Visualization** - Help athletes envision success on their path to overcoming adversity.
- **Stress management techniques** - Behavioral strategies, like breathing techniques, help athletes manage stress and improve focus during adversity in sport. Deep [breathing exercises](#), such as diaphragmatic or box breathing, activate the body's relaxation response, reducing anxiety and promoting calm. Progressive muscle relaxation, another useful strategy, involves tensing and relaxing muscle groups to release physical tension.
- **Emphasizing effort and process goals over outcomes** - Setting goals helps to guide and reinforce athlete progress. Focusing on effort-based goals allows athletes to have more control over their achievement and still identify accomplishments regardless of the results within the sports space.



Offering unconditional support, listening without judgment, and celebrating small successes can boost confidence and help youth navigate the challenges inherent in sport and life.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

Stress Management in a Sports Setting

Stress management is about returning to a state of balance and regulation. By learning to identify and react to feelings of stress, athletes can better optimize their minds and bodies to thrive under challenging conditions. Here are some essential strategies to help athletes build resilience and develop a high-performance mindset:

✔ **Educate Athletes on the Value of Positive Stress** - Coaches can teach athletes that stress isn't always the enemy; it's a natural response that prepares them for challenges that sports can produce. Explain that manageable, positive stress can be their ally, helping them stay sharp and motivated.

- Ask an athlete what sensations they feel in their bodies that they associate with “stress” (i.e. heart rate goes up, breathing increases, etc.)
- Emphasize to the athlete that their body is doing exactly what it is supposed to be doing when preparing for an exciting challenge.
- Give examples of what is happening and how the body is preparing, “When you feel your breathing getting faster, it is because your body is taking on oxygen for your muscles, when you feel your heart speed up, it is so you can get blood and oxygen to your muscles faster for competition.

✔ **Reframe Stress Signals as Excitement** - When we perceive a challenge, our heart rate rises, blood flows to our muscles, breathing intensifies, and digestion slows. Educating athletes about these changes can help them see these signals, when taking place during competition, as signs of excitement rather than anxiety. Instead of interpreting a racing heart as panic, they can learn to think:

- “My body is getting ready to perform.”
- “I am feeling my body prepare for this competition.”
- “This is a sign that I care about my team.”

Stress Management in a Sports Setting (continued)

 **Introduce Stress Progression Training** - By gradually increasing the difficulty of practice scenarios, athletes can experience stress in a controlled setting. This “stress progression” prepares their brains and bodies to respond more effectively during high-stakes moments in competition. When athletes experience increasing pressure in practice, they’re less likely to be overwhelmed by it during games.

- Start practice off with a drill to practice dribbling with their weaker foot
- Progress to an activity where athletes must dribble within a tighter area with their weaker foot
- Run a competition where athletes race each other with their weaker foot
- Hold a scrimmage where athletes must dribble only with their weaker foot

 **Teach Techniques for Regulation** - Help athletes learn ways to “cool down” when stress levels are too high and “heat up” when they need a performance boost.

- Cooling Down:
 - Try slow, deep breathing (inhale for four counts, exhale for six).
 - Practice grounding techniques, like focusing on a specific detail around them (something they can see, touch, or hear).
 - Use simple relaxation tactics like unclenching the jaw, relaxing the shoulders, or even splashing cold water on their face.
- Heating Up:
 - Engage in quick, intense exercises like burpees or short sprints.
 - Play energizing music.
 - Breathe in short, quick bursts to increase alertness.
 - Engage with teammates to heighten focus and motivation.

Active Recovery: The Unsung Hero of Stress Resilience

Managing stress isn't just about handling pressure in the moment. Without intentional recovery, our minds and bodies become vulnerable to prolonged stress that can overwhelm the nervous system and begin to take a toll. Proper recovery is the key to maintaining mental and physical resilience over time. Coaches can encourage athletes to prioritize recovery through:



Regular Sleep: Getting at least 8 hours of quality sleep is essential for mental and physical restoration.



Hydration and Nutrition: Maintaining energy and focus requires a well-balanced diet and plenty of water.



Social Connection: Spending time with friends and family outside of sport provides balance and emotional support.



Engaging in Fun and Relaxation: Activities like meditation, walks, yoga, or even a fun game with friends can ease stress and rejuvenate the mind and body.



Mindset Training

Mindset training, paired with recovery, is a vital mechanism for building resilience. While physical recovery supports muscle repair and energy restoration, mindset recovery involves resetting mental focus, reducing stress, and restoring emotional balance. Developing a resilient mindset requires regular practice in managing thoughts, reframing setbacks, and cultivating self-compassion. Coaches play a key role in helping athletes develop and reinforce these mindsets. When these tools are incorporated consistently, they become part of an athlete's psychological toolkit, enabling them to bounce back faster from challenges. Two mindsets coaches can help their athletes develop are:

Positive Stress-is-Enhancing Mindset

The “positive stress-is-enhancing” mindset redefines stress as a benefit rather than an obstacle, turning it into a powerful tool for growth. Rather than simply enduring or avoiding stress, a positive stress-is-enhancing mindset allows athletes to leverage it to sharpen focus, boost motivation, and get their bodies ready for peak performance. This shift allows athletes to use stress as an energy source rather than a drain, unlocking a more composed, effective version of themselves in high-stakes moments.

Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is the belief that abilities can be developed through hard work, effort, persistence, and learning. It's a perspective rooted in the understanding that talent is only a starting point, not a fixed destination. When coaches help athletes adopt a growth mindset, challenges become opportunities for growth rather than threats to self-image. Mistakes and setbacks are reframed as parts of the learning process, allowing athletes to lean into discomfort and continually improve. This mindset encourages openness to feedback, curiosity, and sustained effort—all critical components of peak performance. With a growth mindset, athletes are not just aiming for achievement but for continuous self-improvement, pushing the boundaries of what they're capable of over time.



Mindfulness Skills for Resilience

Mastering the Present: How Mindfulness Enhances Focus and Resilience

In a world full of distractions, learning to focus on the present moment is a skill that can transform performance in sports and life. Mindfulness is the practice of being aware of where one's attention is, managing it without judgment, and redirecting it to what truly matters. Coaches can help athletes improve focus, manage adversity, and enhance their ability to 'stay where their feet are' by cultivating mindfulness with their team.

The Four Core Components of Mindfulness

A mindfulness practice trains one's mind to handle distractions and stay focused. The key components are:

1 NOTING

Recognize and name where your attention is. Are you worrying about the last play? Rehearsing future scenarios? Simply note it without judgment. This practice helps build awareness of mental patterns and increases your ability to detect when your focus has drifted.

2 NON-JUDGMENT

When you notice you've been distracted, avoid being hard on yourself. Getting upset only prolongs the distraction and drains emotional energy. Instead, practice non-reactivity by accepting that wandering thoughts are natural.

3 ACCEPTANCE

Acknowledge that distractions or emotions have occurred. Fighting them won't change the fact that they've already happened. Acceptance allows you to shift your energy away from regret or frustration and toward productive action.

4 REDIRECTION

Gently bring your focus back to the present moment. Whether it's refocusing on a physical sensation, your breath, or the task at hand, this step is critical for building sustained attention.

The Link Between Mindfulness and Performance

By consistently practicing mindfulness, athletes develop dynamic attention control—the ability to shift focus seamlessly between broad and narrow attention or between internal and external focus. This flexibility is critical for managing high-pressure situations. For example:

- A basketball player needs broad focus to scan the court and anticipate plays but narrow focus to make a free throw.
- A gymnast needs external focus on the apparatus during routines but internal focus on body alignment during practice.

Mindfulness also promotes emotional regulation, helping athletes stay calm and composed. This prevents distractions like frustration over a missed play or nervousness before a big moment from derailing performance.



Action Steps to Help Athletes Integrate Mindfulness into Their Routine

1. Start with Noting

- Practice simple mindfulness exercises with athletes - like having them note where their attention is during warm-ups or breaks. Use labels like “thinking,” “feeling,” or “distracted” to build awareness.

2. Develop a Reset Routine

- Help athletes create a quick mental reset routine for when distractions arise. For example:
 - Take a deep breath.
 - Acknowledge the distraction without judgment (e.g., "I got distracted; that's okay").
 - Refocus on the next action (e.g., pre-shot routine, strategy, or breathing).

3. Anchor to the Present

- Have athletes use cues like "be where your feet are" to ground themselves in the present moment. Combine this with physical sensations— tell them to feel their feet on the ground, their breath, or the ball in their hands.

4. Practice Dynamic Attention Control

- Design drills that require shifting focus between broad and narrow tasks. For example, tell athletes to alternate between scanning a playing field (broad) and focusing on executing a specific skill (narrow).

5. Reflect Mindfully

- After practice or competition, encourage athletes to spend 5–10 minutes reflecting on what went well and what didn't, without judgment. Use this time to learn from mistakes and celebrate progress.

6. Build Automatic Responses

- Build activities so athletes overlearn key physical and mental skills through repetitive, game-like practice until they become automatic. During these repetitions, help them stay mindful of their form and execution to make every rep count.



The Bigger Picture: Resilience Through Mindfulness

Mindfulness isn't just about improving athletic performance—it's a tool for navigating adversity in life. Mindfulness helps athletes tackle challenges by focusing on what's manageable right now. By training their mind to let go of distractions, accept setbacks, and refocus on the present, they can cultivate resilience that extends far beyond the playing field.

Start small with these mindfulness practices, and over time, coaches will notice the difference—not just in how athletes perform but in how they approach life's challenges with focus, grace, and flexibility.



About Momentum Labs, A PCA Trusted Resource

Momentum Labs is a mental performance coaching group that helps athletes and coaches build the mindset to pursue their passions with grit, resilience, and wellbeing. Through one-to-one virtual sessions, Momentum Labs teaches the mental skills athletes need to think, feel, and perform their best. Through the development of these skills, athletes learn to be more resilient, healthier, and to excel in sport and life.

About Positive Coaching Alliance

PCA's vision is to build a world where every child benefits from a positive youth sports experience with a coach who inspires them to become the best version of themselves in the game and in life. We train coaches and partner with youth sports organizations, parents, sports leaders, and communities to make youth sports more positive, equitable, and accessible to all kids regardless of social or economic circumstances. For more information go to positivecoach.org.