

## How Can You Turn Coaching Stress into Your Competitive Edge?

Coaches juggle stress on two levels: managing athletes' stress so they don't burn out or underperform and managing their own stress so they can lead well and avoid burnout themselves. To do both, coaches need to understand how stress works, as well as how to make it work for them and their teams.

Here, board-certified family physician and [TrueSport Expert Deborah Gilboa](#), MD, shares how coaches can turn stress—for themselves and their athletes—into a competitive edge.

### Reframe stress as a tool

Stress isn't necessarily negative or positive, but it is powerful. Gilboa suggests seeing stress as a physiologic tool. "We don't want to pretend that stress feels good," says Gilboa. "But we are saying that you can use stress to get better and get more of the life you want. Your athletes being stressed is not evidence that you're a bad coach. You being stressed does not mean that you're failing at something."

"Stress is real. Stress is often hard," says Gilboa. "But stress is not a toxin. It's a tool that's incredibly valuable. Without stress, we would have no motivation or drive." Moving through [stress grows resilience](#)—the ability to navigate through setbacks—and [resilience is key to performance](#) and overall health and well-being.

### Know your optimal stress range

People need some stress to grow and thrive, but only within an optimal range. Too little and you stagnate; too much and stress becomes paralyzing or harmful. Gilboa likens stress to water: Having too little or too much can be deadly, but there's a wide range that keeps us alive and a smaller range that keeps us healthy.

"The same is true of stress: You can survive a truly ridiculous amount of stress, and that's your physiologic range," she says. "But you have an optimal range in the middle, where your stresses are keeping you focused on the things that matter most to you, and helping you move towards the life you want. When you're in your optimal range, you're able to pay attention to what matters most to you, knock stuff off your to-do list, perform at practice, and have important conversations. That's enough stress that you're motivated and driven, but not so much that it hurts your efforts. That is the range that we want to stay in for ourselves and our athletes."

### Use stress as a signal

Stress should cause you to pause and assess, not panic. "When you're stressed, that should simply remind you to pause and evaluate your current situation," says Gilboa. "I recommend asking two questions about things that are causing stress. Ask yourself: Is the thing avoidable or unavoidable? Is the thing useful or useless?"

If it's unavoidable or useful, you know you need to deal with it. If it's avoidable, then you have more choice than you may realize. And if it's useless, you can work on letting it go. This same simple framework can be powerful for athletes, helping them reclaim ownership of stressful school, sport, or relationship situations. And if your athlete thinks that they're stressed, believe them, even if you don't understand the reason.

### **Watch for yellow flags**

Coaches are quick to spot “red flags” that signal an athlete is stressed, such as an athlete storming out of practice. But there are also yellow flags, including irritability, snapping at teammates, showing up late or unprepared, or shifts in social behavior. It's important to recognize those yellow flags and know that every athlete's signs will look a bit different. Be sure to notice your own yellow flags, too, so you can recognize when you're edging toward the top of your optimal range for stress.

And remember, paying attention doesn't mean quickly removing every stressor. “It is not your job to keep your athletes within their optimal range of stress,” Gilboa says. “But it is your job to help them recognize when things are pushing them out of that range and start to develop strategies to handle that themselves.” For example, you can't prevent bad referee calls, but you can coach athletes to handle them better, so they don't lose control or get ejected. “One of the reasons that it's not a coach's job or a parent's job to keep kids in their optimal range of stress is that stress is a feeling, and you can't actually control how people feel,” she adds.

### **Help athletes get back into range**

Once athletes can spot their early warning signs, they can also learn how to bring stress back down. Help them create “coping lists” of small, practical actions that reduce stress in different contexts. Some might choose a favorite song, others a healthy snack, a breathing exercise, or a quick reset routine—what matters is that the list is specific, realistic, and varied enough that there are options for different environments (school, games, buses, and home).

Gilboa suggests having athletes keep this list on their phone for easy access as they approach yellow-flag territory. She likes calling it a “captain strategies” list, meaning a list that shows they're ready for leadership because they can handle their feelings. The shared goal is the “Goldilocks” amount of stress. “Coaches should be aiming to provide just enough stress to get their athletes to work hard and think differently about what they're doing, and to have drive and motivation, but not so much stress that they can't perform because of it,” Gilboa adds.

### **Model how you move through stress**

Don't hide all your stress from your athletes. They can benefit from seeing you handle challenging situations in healthy ways. While you don't need to share everything, you can narrate your thinking as you work through a real stressor. “You can model for your athletes how you determine if a problem is avoidable or unavoidable, and if it's useless or useful, as well as

what your desired outcome is and how you'll achieve it," Gilboa says. "Have this conversation with yourself in front of your students."

For example, being told you must share practice space is stressful. You might show athletes how you decide whether that's avoidable (can I talk to the other coach?) or unavoidable (the athletic director decided), and then how it might actually be useful by prompting creative drills or giving athletes a [chance to practice leadership and teamwork](#).

You can also "hand off" appropriate stressors to athletes as leadership opportunities. Often, coaches absorb too much in an effort to shield athletes and, in the process, limit athletes' growth. Instead, consider giving two athletes responsibility for leading warmups and taking attendance if you're always sprinting from last period to practice. They gain ownership and confidence, and you gain a few minutes to arrive in a more effective state.

### **Takeaway**

As a coach, you're managing your own stress and your athletes' stress—but stress itself isn't the enemy. When you and your athletes are in the optimal stress range, stress becomes a competitive edge. Help athletes recognize yellow flags, develop coping tools, and see stress as something they can work with, not just suffer through, while also applying the same mindset and tools to your own coaching life.



### ***About TrueSport***

TrueSport®, a movement powered by the experience and values of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, champions the positive values and life lessons learned through youth sport. Backed by U.S. Congressional mandate, [TrueSport](#) inspires athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators to change the culture of youth sport through active engagement and thoughtful curriculum based on cornerstone lessons of sportsmanship, character-building, and clean and healthy performance, while also creating leaders across communities through sport.

For more expert-driven articles and materials, visit TrueSport's [comprehensive collection of resources](#).

This content was reproduced in partnership with TrueSport. Any content copied or reproduced without TrueSport and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency's express written permission would be in violation of our copyright, and subject to legal recourse. To learn more or request permission to reproduce content, click [here](#).

For the most current version of this article, please see the following link on TrueSport.org, which will be live as of April 1, 2026: <https://truesport.org/perseverance/coaching-stress-competitive-edge/>