



# Challenging the concept of "Mental Toughness" to Promote Athlete's Resilience and their Ability to Navigate Adversity: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to:

- 1) Challenging the concept of mental toughness,
- 2) Debunking myths related to mental toughness,
- 3) Providing effective and safe alternatives to help coaches develop athletes' resilience and ability to navigate adversity.

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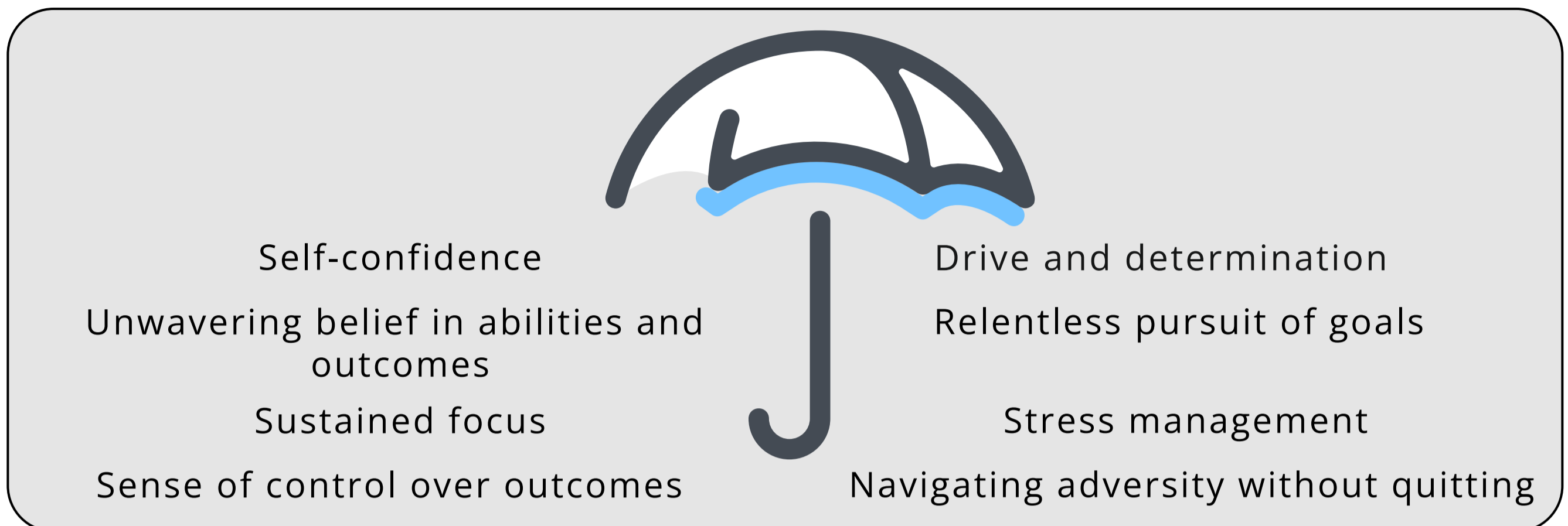
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# What is mental toughness?

An umbrella term that refers to a **psychological edge** that enables athletes to **cope with the demands** of competition and training, **consistently perform despite adversity**, while remaining **determined** and **focused** under pressure.



Certain aspects associated with mental toughness, such as resilience, stress management, and mindfulness, can **benefit athletes' mental health and their ability to handle adversity**.

However, various myths associated with the concept of mental toughness may lead coaches to **use harmful strategies** (e.g., violence) which, remains a **significant issue** in sports.

## Challenging this concept for a more effective field implementation

Some sport cultures can place significant **pressure** on athletes to **appear tough, avoid admitting vulnerability**, and **refuse help** when needed. This stigma around mental health in sports can **silence athletes** who fear being punished or being perceived as weak.

The term "toughness" often embodies aspects of sport culture that draw criticism, such as promoting a strong, masculine, dominant environment that can be harmful. Athletes can **suppress their physical and emotional pain** which, can lead to long-term physical and mental health issues.

Concepts like "never giving up" or "refusing to quit" can harm athletes' performance and well-being, as they **may ignore injuries or overexert** themselves.

Athletes inevitably encounter adverse events both within and outside of their sport. While these experiences can lead to learning and personal growth, **building mental toughness and improving performance does not require enduring adverse events**.

Despite strides forward, some coaches still maintain the belief that it is necessary to toughen athletes up and **break them down to build mental toughness**. This culture often conceals or even justifies coaches using their authority to employ **controlling and violent strategies towards athletes**.

# Common negative practices used to build mental toughness

The use of **coercive, threatening, and authoritarian** methods to impose ideas on athletes, while ignoring or dismissing the athletes' perspectives and emotions.

## Controlling behaviours

## Examples



**Placing an emphasis on winning at all costs instead of on athletes' progress and effort**

*"I don't care if we did better than last year in the championship, we did not win and that's all that matters."*

**Undermining athletes competencies**

*"You're never going to be good enough to play at this level. You're too weak and crack under pressure. Maybe you should consider a different sport."*

**Excessive personal control**

(e.g., firm and commanding presence, lack of flexibility, lack of choice)

*"My way or the highway"*

*Lack of choice (e.g., training methods, skill execution, position the athletes play)*

**Valuing athletic ability over the individual**

(e.g., comparing athletes, favoritism, making athletes earn attention)

*"If you want more training time with me, you have to show your athletic ability and that you're worth the extra effort."*

*"Unlike you, Liam never gives up. Even when it's tough, he pushes harder."*

## Violent behaviours

## Examples



Psychological violence

Yelling, humiliating or overly criticizing an athlete

Negligence

Voluntary excluding or ignoring an athlete

Physical violence

Pushing, biting, shoving, choking, hitting or punching an athlete

Instrumental violence

Forcing an athlete to use performance-enhancing supplements, do additional training or train despite injury

# Debunking myths on mental toughness

## What are some common beliefs?

**Myth:** Mental toughness is a predetermined personality trait that athletes either have or not.

**Myth:** Being exposed to controlling and violent coaching behaviours during training is necessary to build athletes' mental toughness and ensure they perform at their best during high-pressure competition.



These myths and practices **do more harm than good!** The concept of needing to "toughen up athletes" is harmful for **their well-being and performance.**

## Negative impact of using controlling and violent behaviours on athletes to build mental toughness

### Diminished motivation

Feeling external (e.g., coaches, parents) or internal (e.g., shame, guilt) **pressure to continue** to train and compete in sports.



*"I don't play the sport because I love it anymore; I play because I have to."*

### Negative self-related beliefs

**Internalizing** negative feedback from coaches.



*"I'll never be good enough, no matter how hard I try."*

### Excessive fear of failure

Feeling **negative emotions** when faced with achievement-oriented activities due to belief they will not meet their goals.



*"The fear of making a mistake is paralyzing; it's like every move I make is a potential disaster waiting to happen."*

## Diminishing mental health and well-being

Certain performance-driven cultures that value "unshakeable mental toughness" can **deter athletes from seeking mental health support** due to fear of being seen as weak.

This pressure may also lead to the **use of performance-enhancing drugs** and increase risk of **depression, anxiety, body image issues, low self-esteem, disordered eating, and burnout**.

## Potential outcomes on physical health

The performance-driven culture often praises athletes for toughness and managing pain.

To maintain this image, athletes may **take risks, downplay pain, skip injury rehabilitation, and self-sacrifice**, which can **lead to further injury and harm their well-being**.



*"I didn't want to seem weak, so I just keep playing even if I was in pain. I was scared that if I missed a practice or game that I would lose my spot in the lineup."*

## Social isolation and identity dilemma

Elite athletes can develop a **singular identity** where sport is their life. Extensive commitment to a sport can lead to **less time invested in relationships and other activities**. This can lead to **social isolation** as well as **threats to their identity** when they retire from the sport.



*"I don't know who I am without my sport."*

# How can coaches better promote athletes' resilience and the capacity to navigate adversity?



Instead of using the term mental toughness, coaches' should focus on **developing athletes' resilience and ability to navigate adversity.**

**Resilience** is the capacity to **grow and learn** from stressful experiences, gaining **new skills and self-awareness** that better equip individuals to **navigate future adversity.**

Rather than resorting to controlling and violent behaviours that hinder athletes' performance and well-being, coaches should **focus on** teaching them **self-regulation tools** that they can apply in various situations.



Why is it more **beneficial to foster self-regulation** instead of self-control?

Self-control aims to stop athletes from expressing their impulses and emotions. Instead, self-regulation aims to equip athletes with skills that can help to better understand and manage their emotions in the future.

## Teaching athletes' strategies to foster self-regulation



### Encourage constructive self-talk

- Use **encouraging and supportive language** in your interactions with athletes as this can become their **internal dialogue.**
- Teach athletes to **recognize negative or harmful thoughts** that can hinder their ability to function and **reframe them** into constructive statements.



*"I notice that you tend to be hard on yourself. Could you phrase that in a more objective way? Try to speak to yourself like you would speak to a friend."*

- Help athletes create a list of **helpful and realistic affirmations** they can repeat to themselves, such as **"I am strong"** or **"I can handle this."**



To be useful the athlete must **believe in the affirmation.** Allow the athlete to **formulate** these short phrases themselves.



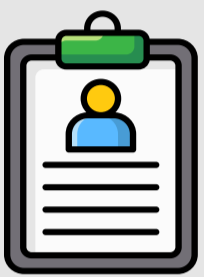
## 2 Develop imagery skills

- Encourage athletes to **mentally rehearse** their routines or game scenarios to **build confidence and familiarity**.



Lead **guided imagery sessions** where athletes can practice visualizing success and overcoming challenges. Want to learn more about imagery? [Click here](#)

- Instruct athletes to **incorporate all of their senses in their visualizations**, making the imagery as vivid and realistic as possible.



*Visualize hearing the crowd, feeling their body move, smelling the competition environment.*

## 3 Promote mindfulness

- Athletes' ability to be **fully present and aware** of the current moment, **without judgment**.
- Incorporate simple **mindfulness exercises** into practice, such as **deep breathing, body scans, or mindful stretching**.



Guided meditations and breathing exercises (e.g., [headspace](#), [calm](#), [YouTube](#))

[Heart rate variability training](#) (apps include HRV4Training, Elite HRV)

## 4 Cultivate self-awareness

- Athletes' **capacity to pay attention to their sensations** to understand their internal states.
- Foster athletes' **development of self-awareness** using mindfulness.



Training journals to reflect on their experiences (refer to the end of this guide)

- Encourage athletes to debrief with others (e.g., teammates, coaches).

## Self-compassion

- Athletes' ability to be **kind to themselves**, see their experiences as part of the **larger human experience** and have a **balanced awareness** of their experience. This leads to a greater ability to **accept unpleasant emotions** when faced with undesirable outcomes.
- Practice being compassionate **towards your athletes and yourself** by showing acceptance of performance regardless of the outcome. It is important to **demonstrate self-compassion** in the presence of athletes to show them mistakes and difficulties are normal.
- Show compassion **towards athletes with injuries** by respecting the time needed to recover, reducing training intensity or duration, as well as making sure they still feel a part of the team.



*Examples of self-compassion exercises to introduce to athletes*

### How would you treat a friend?

Imagine **treating yourself the way you treat a close friend when you're going through a difficult situation.**

How might this change things?  
Why not try treating yourself like a good friend?



Want more information on this exercise?  
[\*\*Click here\*\*](#)

### Self-compassion break

Think about a stressful situation in your life. **Feel the sensation in your body.** What do you observe?

Say to yourself: "This is hard", "Suffering is a part of life", "May I be kind to myself"



Want more information on this exercise?  
[\*\*Click here\*\*](#)



As a coach, it is important to **normalize and encourage athletes' seeking help for mental or physical health issues** when needed. This will help **combat the stigma** that getting help means an athlete is mentally weak.

It is crucial to **recognize athletes as human beings, not machines.**

## Strategies to implement during training

### 1 Integrate simulations to training

- Used to help athletes **employ self-regulation skills** in a high-pressure practice setting.
- Expose athletes to **real competition situations** during practice to help athletes **mobilize untapped resources, encourage them** to use their support system, and **feel a sense of control** over future high-pressure situations.
- **Collaborate with athletes** to determine what high-pressure situations they would like to practice.
- Make sure that the athletes **understand the purpose** of simulated high-pressure training and do not perceive it as a punishment for bad performances. **Transparency is important!**



*If you are working on break outs in practice, simulate a real game time situation by adding defensemen who are pressuring the offense. Simulate crowd noises, timed penalty shots, high-stake games, decision making under pressure.*

- **Feedback and debriefing** are essential following simulation training to show the athlete you support their integration of tools they learned. For more guidance, refer to the **training journal** at the **end of this guide**.



**Do not confuse** added pressure with controlling behaviors and violence!

### 2 Helping athletes set specific and challenging goals

- Encourage to set **S.M.A.R.T** goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-based). Coaches should **encourage different types of goals** including performance, and process goals as well as daily, short-term, and long-term goals.



Want to learn more about goal setting? [Click here](#)



*"Within the next month I want to improve the precision of my shots by dedicating 15 minutes to shooting free throws after every training session."*

- Provide athletes with **positive and encouraging feedback** on their goals to increase efficacy. Provide **constructive feedback** by focusing on **observable facts** instead of personal attacks or criticism. See the **end of this guide** for a visual representation of the **feedback sandwich**.



*"You're showing great improvement in your footwork, and I've noticed that you sometimes hesitate when going for the ball, which gives your opponent an advantage. Stay aggressive and trust your instincts. Keep up the hard work."*

# Want to learn more?

Coaching can be very **stressful**. It is important to also implement the abovementioned tools (i.e., mindfulness, self-compassion, constructive self-talk) for yourself. These can help you to **better manage your emotions** and be a **model for your athletes**.

## Additional training

**Game Plan  
Canada**

[Click here](#)

**Canadian  
Center for  
Mental Health  
and Sport**

[Click here](#)

## Resources

**Practical Guides  
for Coaches**



[Click here](#)

**Safe Sport 101**

[Click here](#)

**Mindfulness**

[Click here](#)

**Constructive  
self-talk**

[Click here](#)

**Self-compassion  
exercises**

[Click here](#)

**Self-compassion  
podcast  
(in French)**

[Click here](#)

**Imagery**

[Click here](#)

**Simulation  
training**

[Click here](#)

**Certified Mental  
Performance  
Consultants**

[Click here](#)

# Putting it into practice

Review this guide and **identify one mental skill** practice you wish to integrate in the upcoming week?

**1. What practice will you integrate?**

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**2. How do you plan on integrating this practice? Be specific.**

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**3. Do you foresee any obstacles? How can you overcome them?**

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**4. What effects do you think this practice will have on the athletes?**

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# Training Journal

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Event: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Goal(s): \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. How would you evaluate your mental preparation today?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Very bad				Neutral					Very good
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 2. Do you think you achieved your goal(s) for this event?

Yes       Partially       No

## 3. In general, are you satisfied with your mental preparation?

Yes       No       I don't know

## 4. Evaluate your overall mental preparation for this event.

	1					6		
	Not optimal	2	3	4	5	Optimal	NA	Notes
<b>Self-talk:</b> Constructive and encouraging	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Visualization:</b> Mentally repeat your routines or game scenarios.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Mindfulness:</b> Be fully present and aware in the moment, without judgment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Self-awareness:</b> Look inward and reflect to understand your internal states (e.g., your emotions).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Self-compassion:</b> Be kind to yourself, view your experiences as part of the broader human experience, and maintain a balanced awareness of your emotions and thoughts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

## 5. After my warmup and before the start I felt ...

	1					6		
	Not at all	2	3	4	5	Very	NA	Notes
<b>Physically ready</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Technically ready</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Mentally ready</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Excited to compete</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Confident</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Worried about my performance</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>In control</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Concentrated</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

# Training Journal

## 6. Reinforce strong point and make adjustments.

*What worked well for you today in your mental preparation?*

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*What didn't work as well for you today in your mental preparation?*

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*What adjustments do you want to make?*

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*How will you make these adjustments?*

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*As a coach, how can I help and support you with these adjustments?*

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## 7. Regarding this event, name one thing ...

*You are proud of:*

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*You learned:*

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*You want to improve:*

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## 8. Any other elements you would like to note.

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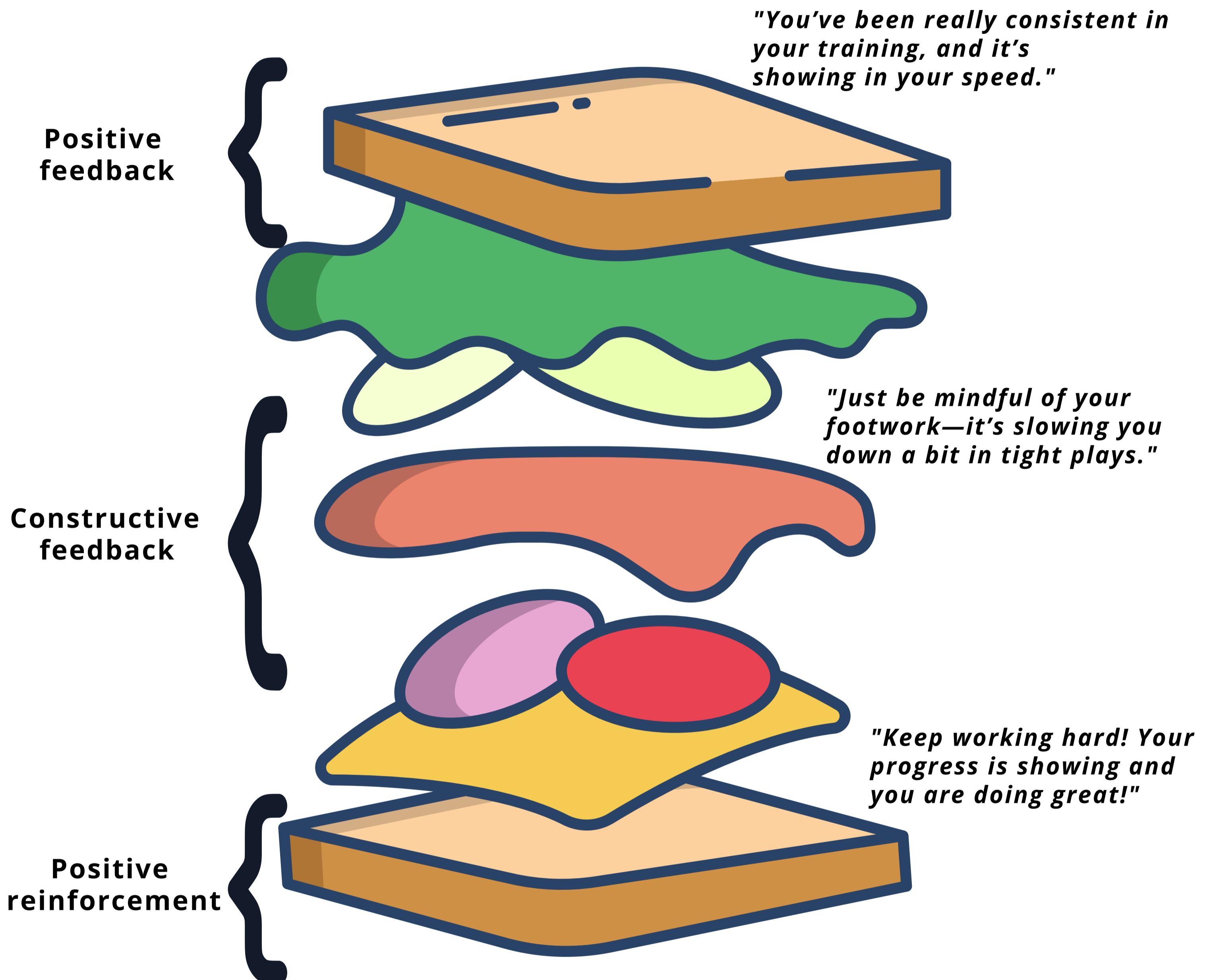
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# Feedback sandwich

A tool to implement when communicating points of improvement or constructive criticism to athletes.



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# Chaire de recherche Sécurité et intégrité en milieu sportif

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