

Psychologist explains why fans cover their faces when football players take penalties

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Penalty shootouts in football are one of the most unpredictable and dramatic events in sport, producing moments of utter ecstasy and deep despair in players and managers. As we saw in the recent UEFA Euro 2020 championship, fans often cover their faces when players take

penalties.

Research shows us why. There are psychological reasons behind the powerful emotions that fans' experience, and behind the nervous facial and body expressions in the image above.

Although the penalty taker may draw on feelings of competence and control to lessen their anxiety and stress, fans have no control over events. Indeed, as fans have very little ability to influence events beyond cheering to encourage their team and jeering to put off the opposition, sometimes fans will cover their faces as a way of coping and to partially block out what is happening.

Another factor at work is the influence of those around us. When we watch people in a crowd, we [capture their emotions](#) through their facial expressions, bodily movements, yells and postures. This is due to the presence of "mirror neurons" in our brains which fire when we observe other peoples' behaviour, and we then mimic and synchronize our emotions with theirs.

From the moment referees blow their whistle to indicate that the outcome of the match will be decided in a penalty shootout, to watching the penalty taker taking the long walk from the halfway line to the penalty spot, fans are feeling the emotions of the players. The image below shows this response to the stressor visibly etched on a fan's face as they seek to manage the unfolding drama.

Environment scanning

Penalty shootouts are particularly fear- and stress-inducing events due to the importance of each kick for the outcome of the entire match, and their unpredictability. According to one prominent [theory of stress and coping](#), we continually scan our environment for stressors, and when we

encounter them, we evaluate their personal significance to us in terms of threat, harm, challenge or benefit, and then assess the extent to which we have the resources to cope.

Emotions are a pattern of physiological and psychological responses to meaningful situations, such as the outcome of a football match. These responses include changes in bodily sensations such as a raised heart rate, and in mental processes such as thoughts, feelings, expressions, and related behaviours.

As humans we have a fundamental need to belong and feel a sense of connection with others, as was shown in research carried out by [Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary](#). Membership of a group, such as being a fan of a particular sports team, can provide a strong social identity.

In the context of sport, this refers to the extent to which an individual feels psychologically connected with a team and views the team as an [extension of themselves](#). Indeed, the stress the player feels on the pitch is also being felt by the fans.

As social identity is linked with how we view ourselves, highly identified fans are heavily invested in whether their team wins or loses, and will therefore experience the most intense [emotional](#) responses to match outcomes. The success or failure of groups that we identify with is linked to our [emotional state](#) and although there are many benefits of being a sports fan, including enhanced social connections and [improved well-being](#), there are also downsides when your [team loses](#).

Health effects

Fans of unsuccessful teams typically report higher levels of negative emotions and lower levels of positive emotions in comparison to fans of [winning teams](#). There have even been effects on health, with a reduction

in heart attack deaths after France won the [World Cup in 1998](#).

So, next time you watch a [penalty](#) shootout, don't just think about the players and whether the kicks are scored or saved, spare a thought for all the other fans and the emotions and reactions they are experiencing.

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