

Psychological aspects in chess - Fear and negative emotions in chess

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This paper presents how fear and negative emotions influence the behavior and the results of chess players and provides practical solutions on how one can:

- I. Identify negative emotions
- II. Manage their own emotions
- III. Exploit opponent's emotions

Fear is an anxiety and disorder feeling, induced by a real or imaginary danger. In chess, fear is a negative type of emotion and has great impact on a chess player's tournament results. The term emotion comes from the Latin, "emotionis", translated as „the impulse that brings reactions". In chess psychology fear is often associated and even confused with other negative emotions that affect the results of a player such as: frustration, lack of self esteem, irritation, anger, (over)saturation, shame and others.

Types of fears:

- Innate fear – every normal human being has it as a natural defense mechanism
- Identity fear – it's a type of fear generated by the way we think others judge us in the event of failure.

I. Identifying negative emotions

A. Fear and negative emotions during a chess game

In contrast to everyday life, fear and negative emotions influence one differently. For a person who doesn't play chess tournaments it is pretty difficult to understand the concerns of a chess player. During chess games, in order to perform at high level, the tournament player needs to activate a proper state of mind. This specific state of mind helps the player to isolate himself from external distractions and access cognitive knowledge, both rational information and automatic reflexes. Contrary to other intellectual activities, during a game of chess players are not allowed to talk and even more important is that they cannot take full breaks! Even when they stand up from the chess board and try to relax, their brain is still connected to the game in progress.

In order to fully understand the mechanism of fear and negative emotions one has to notice a very important thing. During a match, not even a meter away from the tournament player, there is its opponent and he has completely different interests during the game. It is often crucial to

anticipate the way our opponent thinks, so certain psychological pressure is exercised between us and him. Taking into account that people, as social human beings, are used to communicate and collaborate with each other, the process described below turns out to be very difficult. Hence the first cause of fear and negative emotions can be derived:

1. Constant tension during a chess game

➤ **Justified causes:**

- the presence of the opponent in front of us
- the lack of control, generated by the fact that the evolution of a game is a result of both our actions and our opponents'
- profound cognitive processes used for relatively long time
- lack of total breaks

2. Besides relatively justified causes of tension, there are also negative emotions that can (and should) be reduced or eliminated if possible:

- fear of blunders
- inferiority complex
- fear of losing against a lower rated player
- fear of losing in a winning position
- fear of losing rating points
- fear of losing decisive games
- fear of losing games when playing in team competitions.

B. Emotions between rounds during a chess tournament

If during a tournament game the constant tension is relatively justified and we can accept it and manage it properly, after finishing a game the approach should be different. In order to keep an optimal state of mind, the chess player should release both the tension generated by the previous games and the fears generated by the following round. Nevertheless players often fail to get out of the game state of mind, torturing themselves psychologically. This might result in approaching the following round already stressed out and tired.

➤ **Causes of Tension in the free time during a chess tournament (between rounds)**

- inability of a chess player to get rid of the tension caused by the game (especially after losing a game)
- emotions generated by knowing the opponent and preparation against him
- **fear of losing rating points**

- fear of losing against a lower rated player
- lack of control
- inferiority complex.

C. Ways in which fear and negative emotions appear

- making **concessions**

In chess a concession is considered a decision (a move, or a couple of moves) taken by a player which allows to the opponent a certain advantage for apparently justified reasons. A concession can be a bad move, a bad plan, often because it's too passive, accepting draw in a superior position, and so on.

- wasting time and energy calculating the same variations over and over again
- constantly being in time trouble
- or contrary to the previous point, playing very fast, eventually executing moves quickly in critical positions.
- missing (constantly) winning positions
- changing repertoire(openings) or chess playing style just before one game generated by the fear of opponent's preparation
- adopting a very friendly attitude with the opponent before the game or during the game, usually consisting in a dialogue
- adopting super solid openings or types of positions or, on the contrary, super aggressive ones
- walking a lot through the playing hall.

II. Managing own emotions

Managing emotions represents the ability to:

- identify consciously own emotions
- be aware of the differences between various own emotions
- use information related to the emotional side to guide our thinking and behavior

It is essential to point out that in order to improve the way we control our emotions in chess related activities (and in general) we have to accept that all of us experience negative emotions once in a while. I noticed that especially among children who play chess but also among adults, there is a tendency to deny certain emotions, especially fear. This is one of the main reasons I chose to include the word „fear” in the title of this lesson. Children need to be taught that fear is a normal defensive mechanism and that they should not be ashamed to accept it, but work to manage it. Usually they feel ashamed because of it, which amplifies the negative state.

After presenting the main negative emotions experienced by a chess player it's time to illustrate concrete ways to manage them.

A. Issues in managing emotions in everyday activities

There is an obvious connection between how chess players manage their emotions in everyday life and their capability to control themselves in chess tournaments. It is advisable to study psychology and emotional intelligence materials and (even more important) to apply in chess activities what we learn from them. Observing successful sportsmen can be useful.

B. Issues in managing emotions in chess related activities

Any professional chess game requires the use of profound cognitive processes for a relatively long amount of time. Besides the general skills a built up by various regular educational experiences, chess cognitive processes can be improved by using the following methods:

- Creating a personal psychological mechanism by which a player can connect in the game mentally
- Adopting a proper fighting attitude required for best performing in chess games
- Developing self esteem, both as a chess player and social being
- Finding different perspectives
- Eliminating inferiority complex
- Adopting a time management plan

Practical methods:

- Worst case scenario (Kramnik – Leko) – to be applied in difficult mental state situation
- Eliminating any thoughts about chess-related events that can go wrong – to be applied when a player feels at least normal or very good from a psychological point of view
- **Transforming intelligence in bravery**
- After a chess position has passed we no longer think about it
- After an unpleasant action is exhausted we no longer think about it unless it is really necessary.

III. Exploiting opponents' emotions

There are several ways we can amplify and exploit opponents' emotions during a chess game. Obviously I am not talking about disturbing our opponent by any not fair-play actions, but about exploiting his lack of psychological preparation by how we play chess: the moves we play, the plans we adopt, how fast we play and so on.

A. Playing very fast in order to put pressure on the opponent and reduce total thinking time one can use in a game

There are a couple of players who are playing really fast, most of the time using (much) less than 30 minutes + increment from the total time (which is usually 90 minutes + increment or bigger). Generally this kind of players are very strong at blitz and prefer to make a compromise between the quality of the game and the pressure they exert on the opponent. By tremendously reducing total time of a game they sometimes manage to get their opponents out of their normal routines. This could be even more effective against a smoker or against players who usually stand often during chess games. Examples of players who often apply this strategy are Nepomniachtchi Ian and Fier Alexandr.

B. Playing a long game, by choosing positions which are not characterized by very concrete play, **in order to force the opponent to face his (internal) emotions for as long as possible**

This method can be very effective against players known to be very stressed during a chess game. This stress can be caused by things like fear, lack of self esteem, inferiority complex, and so on. As a general rule: Concrete play helps lowering a player's emotions, especially by making exchanges and reducing the lasting time of the game. **The longer the game, the longer the tension is felt.**

C. Driving opponent to unknown territory

As a general rule, players with few experience tend to lose themselves and take irrational decisions when facing new (unknown) types of positions or new openings. Nowadays lots of players invest too much time in opening preparation and playing rare lines from time to time could help us exploit not only their lack of knowledge but also amplify their negative emotions.

D. Determining opponent to make **concessions**

Similar with Newton's 3rd law, about action and reaction, when our opponent launches a threat against one of our position objectives the first impulse is to defend the threatened objective. This is happening because professional chess players have developed reflex mechanisms in order to spot instantly their opponent intention and act properly. Despite the automatic impulse, we should not let ourselves carried away by instinct, but we should identify whether or not the

threat is real and whether or not it is necessary to defend against it. Sometimes we can make a counter-threat or an intermediate move and just ignore (temporary or forever) the threat.

Because of these reflex mechanisms I described above, when we found ourselves stressed, under pressure, in time trouble, and so on, we make **concessions**. And our opponents do the same. Concessions are one of the main causes of losing a game between opponents with similar strengths.

E. Psychological initiative

Since the chess game opponents have a certain mental interaction on the chess board, they exert a psychological influence on each other. The psychological initiative is different than the normal one and it can exist in any position, no matter who is better or who attacks.

How does it work?

In certain situations, in balanced positions the player who possesses the psychological pressure will press (even if the position on the board doesn't indicate this), on the other hand, the player who does not will be pleased with (maximum) equality.¹ For these reasons the player who doesn't possess the psychological initiative will start to make small concessions, often characterized by unfavorable exchanges in order to simplify the position or he will not exploit his chances to take over the (real) initiative.

Generally the initiative is possessed by the **better rated player**. In the situations where the rating is similar the color can count – quite a lot of players have different objectives with white than with black. **The image the players have about themselves in relation to the opponent** can also play an important role, also the mental state of mind during tournament or the expectations a player has for a game or for a tournament. One of the most common ways of taking the psychological initiative is by **refusing a draw offer in an equal position**.

¹ G.M. Vlad Jianu

About the Author

Tiberiu Georgescu is currently the youngest Grandmaster in Romania. He was Romanian National Super-league Champion and Romanian Youth National Champion. He has experience in working with strong players like Constantin Lupulescu, Parligras Mircea and many more.

Besides chess, he is a Teaching Assistant and PhD student at The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. He is both teaching and researching in the field of computer science.

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