



# Module 4: Creating a safe and inclusive coaching environment



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## Module Overview

- Duration: approximately **3–4 hours** (adaptable to training needs)
- Target group: **sports coaches, trainers, social workers**, and professionals working with **victims of trafficking**
- Delivery mode: **face-to-face or blended**
- Methodology: **Constructive Alignment** – learning outcomes, methods, and assessments are fully integrated
- Aim: to understand how to **create a safe and inclusive coaching environment**

## Learning objectives

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

1. **Apply** safeguarding principles and trauma-informed coaching practices to create physically and emotionally safe environments for victims of trafficking and vulnerable athletes.
2. **Design** a structured practice session that incorporates boundary respect, autonomy, and trauma-sensitive approaches appropriate for working with VoTs.
3. **Evaluate** problematic coaching language and communication patterns.
4. **Implement** conflict management strategies and group dynamic interventions that are sensitive to the unique needs and triggers of trafficking survivors.
5. **Demonstrate** consistent, trustworthy coaching behaviors.

## What does “*safe space*” in sports means?

A “*safe space*” is an environment – physical, emotional, or psychological – where individuals feel secure, respected and free to express themselves without fear of judgment, criticism or harm.

Creating safe spaces in sports is important for VoTs as they:

- ✓ Offer emotional and physical safety, reducing the risk of further exploitation or abuse;
- ✓ Provide a supportive community that helps survivors feel accepted and reduces isolation;
- ✓ Facilitate access to protection mechanisms, education, and resources to prevent re-trafficking;
- ✓ Allow survivors to express themselves, heal from trauma, and regain control over their lives;
- ✓ Empower vulnerable individuals by affirming their dignity and rights through inclusive and respectful sporting experiences.

## Tips on the creation of safe sports spaces

**Establish clear  
safeguarding rules**

**Be consistent and  
trustworthy**

**Communicate openly  
and keep promises**

**Maintain a non-  
judgmental attitude**

**Use trauma-informed  
approaches**

**Devote time and effort  
to include everyone in  
the team**

**Manage group  
dynamics and  
conflict**

# 1. Establish clear **safeguarding** rules



All measures to prevent violence, harassment, or abuse to children or adults during sport and all recognition, reporting, response, and remedy activities undertaken to respond to actual or potential abuse or harmful behaviour.

It means ensuring that sport is a space of respect, fairness, and safety.



This includes:

- Children and young people
- Athletes of all levels and ages
- Coaches, volunteers, officials, and staff
- Marginalised or vulnerable groups

## As a sports professional, you can apply basic safeguarding principles by

- developing and communicating straightforward **rules on behavior and boundaries**, at the start;
- regularly reminding the colleagues (i.e., assistant coach, volunteers, external collaborators, referees) to reinforce safety norms, such as **confidentiality, respect of personal boundaries, non-judgmental attitudes, safety in physical spaces**, and the activation of **the emergency plans**;
- staying informed about your organisations'/club's **safeguarding protocols and principles**.



## Points to remember

- ❖ *Confidentiality: respecting the privacy of athletes by not discussing their personal stories outside the coaching space, except when safety concerns require otherwise. This helps survivors feel safe to share and participate*
- ❖ *Respect personal boundaries: allowing survivors to control physical space and interactions, such as choosing seating or opting out of physical contact, respecting their need for control and safety*
- ❖ *Non-judgmental attitudes: treating all athletes with dignity and without assumptions. This includes avoiding victim-blaming or questioning their experiences in ways that could cause distress*
- ❖ *Safety in physical spaces: ensuring the environment is free from hazards, providing private and quiet areas when needed, and controlling who has access to the coaching area to prevent further harm*
- ❖ *Emergency plans: using clear protocols for responding to crises or disclosures of harm, including contact with appropriate support services or authorities, if necessary, explained sensitively to*

## 2. Be consistent and trustworthy

- Arrive on time and follow through on commitments.
- Use predictable session structures while allowing flexibility for individual needs.
- Share information transparently, explaining what to expect to reduce anxiety
- Be accountable when changes occur in the team structure, physical space, training schedules etc.

## 3. Communicate openly and keep promises

- Practice **active listening** by giving full attention without judgment.
- Validate survivors' feelings and experiences, affirming their worth.
- Using simple, transparent language to explain activities, possible risks, and athletes' rights, ensuring informed consent and reducing confusion or fear.

*Click here for  
more tips on  
active listening!*



## 4. Maintain a non-judgmental attitude

- **Avoid assumptions** about background or behaviors.
- Use **strengths-based language**, focusing on capabilities and growth.
- Encourage **questions and discussion** using phrases:
  - *What are you thinking about today's training? Feel free to ask anything or share your thoughts.*
  - *Is there anything you want to know more about or something you'd like to try differently?*
  - *Please let me know if something feels uncomfortable or unclear at any point.*
- Provide **gentle feedback** aimed at support by:
  - Framing improvements as options, i.e., *"One way to approach this could be... What do you think?"*
  - Being specific and supportive i.e., *"You kept your focus really well during today's practice, which is fantastic."*
  - Validating the effort, i.e., *"I see you are working hard on this. That's a really positive step."*
  - Use non-threatening body language and tone with soft voice and open posture to convey safety and encouragement.

## 5. Use **trauma-informed** approaches

An approach that is grounded in the understanding that *trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development.*

It aims to increase practitioners' awareness of how trauma can negatively affect individuals and communities, and their ability to feel safe or develop trusting relationships with services and staff. The purpose is to improve accessibility and quality of services by creating culturally sensitive, safe environments that people trust and want to use, while actively resisting re-traumatization and empowering individuals to make choices about themselves.

(UK Government, 2022)

- **Recognize** signs of distress and provide options to pause or opt-out of activities.
- **Avoid** competitive or high-pressure tasks; favor cooperation and personal progress.
- **Allow** athletes to make decisions about their engagement, such as opting out of activities or taking breaks, respecting autonomy and reducing retraumatization risk.
- **Encourage** mindfulness or grounding techniques to help manage triggers during sessions.

## 6. Devote time and effort to include everyone in the team

### Learn about participants' diverse backgrounds and needs

- During early interactions, **practice deep, non-judgmental listening**. Encourage athletes to share what matters most to them about their background and needs, while being sensitive to their comfort levels.
- **Observe** athletes' behavior, communication style, and engagement patterns during sessions, and adapt accordingly.
- Recognize that knowledge of backgrounds and needs grows through consistent, respectful engagement. **Give space and time** for trust to develop so athletes feel safe disclosing personal details at their own.
- **Ask open questions** such as "*Can you tell me about what's important to you when participating in activities?*" or "*Are there any accommodations or support you feel would help you engage better?*".
- Where possible, **collaborate** with social workers, therapists, or cultural mediators who have deeper knowledge of the athletes to inform coaching approaches.

## 6. Devote time and effort to include everyone in the team

Use inclusive language that respects all identities.

- **Person-first VS identity-first language:** Both approaches to language are allowed, and it is best to check with the person or group (if present) which approach they prefer. Otherwise, the best solution is mixing the language. For example:
  1. “During practice, we supported the *player who had experienced trafficking* in learning the new technique.” (person- first language)
  2. “During practice, *the trafficking-experienced player* focused on mastering the new technique.” (identity-first language)
- **Avoid** idioms, jargons, and acronyms.
- **Avoid** phrases that suggest victimhood and euphemisms e.g., “afflicted by”, “victim of”, “suffers from”, “confined to a wheelchair”.

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Use inclusive language that respects all identities.

- **Avoid** the use of derogatory names that come from the context of mental health (“psycho”, “crazy”, etc.) as well as the use of the names of real mental disabilities (“OCD”, “bipolar”), as a metaphor for everyday behavior.
- **Avoid** universal male language when the gender is not of concern. Include both female and masculine gender or non-binary and neutral terms (when possible).
- **Avoid** violent language such as “Killing it”, “Take a shot at”, “Take your best shot”, “Take a stab at”.

*If you are not sure, ask for one’s preference.*

## 6. Devote time and effort to include everyone in the team

**Actively address biases and stereotypes when they arise.**

- Intervene when stereotypical comments and behaviors appear.
- Intentionally mix groups avoiding assumptions based on race/gender/ability
- Consistently highlight diverse role models/stories/achievements in sports and in general.

## 7. Manage group dynamics and conflict

- **Set** clear, collaboratively developed rules for the accepted and not accepted behaviors.
- **Be** attentive for early signs of tension and intervene early.
- **Facilitate** open dialogue for athletes to voice concerns.
- **Use** restorative practices if conflicts arise (e.g., *guided discussions in circles, cooling-off periods followed by guided reflection for all parties*), focusing on the harm caused, validation of the emotions, and the identification of steps to repair the relationship.



## 7. Manage group dynamics and conflict: **Be sensitive to unique survivors' needs**

- **Understand** that survivors may have experienced situations where their autonomy was severely compromised.
- **Encourage** survivors to make decisions about their participation, what they feel comfortable with, and their level of engagement. Respect refusal without pressure or judgment.
- **Be mindful of triggers**, as certain coaching methods or feedback styles might unintentionally replicate past trauma dynamics.
- Survivors' needs vary widely; some may require more emotional support or physical accommodations. **Regular check-ins and referrals** to relevant experts will allow a respectful response to these unique needs.



**Let's test our  
knowledge!**

*(explanations for the correct answer can be found in the  
lesson plan!)*



**Question 1:** An athlete discloses during a private conversation that they are having trouble sleeping but asks you not to tell anyone. When would it be appropriate to share this information outside the coaching space?

- A. Never - confidentiality must always be maintained
- B. Only when there are safety concerns that require intervention
- C. When discussing with other coaches to improve training approaches
- D. When the athlete shows poor performance in sessions



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**Question 2:** You notice an athlete struggling with a technique. Which feedback approach best aligns with trauma-informed, non-judgmental coaching?

- A. “I’ve noticed a pattern in how the movement plays out for you. Maybe try following the version I usually use?”
- B. “Others seem to have settled into this technique already. Perhaps giving it a bit more attention could help?”
- C. “I see you're working hard on this. One way to approach it could be adjusting your stance. What do you think?”
- D. “That attempt didn’t quite match the form. Take a look at my version and try to mirror it.”



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**Question 3:** During warm-up, you notice an athlete becoming withdrawn and breathing rapidly. What should be your immediate priority?

- A. Continue the session as planned to maintain structure and predictability
- B. Draw attention to her behavior so the group can offer support
- C. Recognize her distress and suggests to pause or modify her participation
- D. Increase activity intensity to help her refocus through physical exertion



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**Question 4:** An athlete, recovering from trafficking experience, consistently arrives early and stays late, volunteers for every activity, and never takes breaks despite visible fatigue. From a trauma-informed perspective, this behavior might indicate:

- A. Excellent engagement and commitment to recovery
- B. Natural athletic enthusiasm that should be encouraged
- C. A need for more challenging activities to match his energy
- D. Possible fear of disappointing authority figures



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**Question 5:** You need to change the training schedule next week due to facility issues. How should you communicate this to your team?

- A. Explain what happened and what the new plan is, acknowledging any inconvenience this may cause
- B. Post the new schedule in your common WhatsApp group
- C. Cancel the sessions entirely rather than risk disrupting their routine
- D. Mention it the day of the change to avoid causing unnecessary anxiety before



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