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ADVICE FOR ATHLETES DURING COVID-19



INTRODUCTION

This document aims to provide psychological support and guidance for athletes during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Since 23 March, lockdown in the United Kingdom has meant extreme changes and athletes have been forced to significantly alter their training and competition routines. These changes can lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration, and anger for some, and this guidance aims to help alleviate these emotions.

The Covid-19 lockdown can be called a non-normative¹ transition* (c.f.²) in sport, this means that it was unexpected and could not be prepared for. This can make it more difficult to manage, and have negative consequences for mental health and psychological wellbeing. This

Covid-19 transition will be overwhelming for some – posing many questions around the uncertainty of how long the lockdown period will last, the effect of lockdown on long-term goals for training and competition, and further doubts about what the transition process of emerging from lockdown will look like.

We will offer psychological advice to help you deal effectively with the Covid-19 transition, and to place you in a better position to deal with the psychological and behavioural challenges the current situation poses, regardless of when, and if, you return to sport. Three key priorities have been identified which have been shown to be critical for managing transitions, such as the Covid-19 transition^{3,4}.

ADVICE

Learning to adjust and cope, and to overcome the daily adversities of

work life balance, childcare, home schooling, training regime, managing

* An event or a non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and, thus, requires a corresponding change in one's behaviour and relationships

coach and self-expectations in training, contractual sport or employment

responsibilities can be challenging during a time of rapid change.

Three priority areas can support athletes:

1. Mental health and dealing with uncertainty
2. Maintaining social connections
3. Motivation and goal setting

1. MENTAL HEALTH AND DEALING WITH UNCERTAINTY

With many events and competitions postponed indefinitely, with no certain confirmation of when some will resume, this is likely to cause a significant amount of stress for athletes. If you struggle to cope with stress, over time it is likely to have a negative impact on your mental health, especially if you do not seek support or begin to take proactive measures to manage your wellbeing^{5,6,7,8}.

Mental health in sport is described as ‘a state of wellbeing in which those involved in competitive sport realise their purpose and potential, can cope with competitive sport demands and normal life stressors, can work productively and fruitfully, can act autonomously according to their personal values, are able to make a contribution to their community and feel they can seek support when required’ (p.4)⁷.

There are a number of successful psychological strategies you can use to cope with stress⁹ or manage your mental health⁵. These strategies may also be effective to help with the uncertainty caused by coronavirus. The sections below describe how you can self-manage your mental health and cope with uncertainty.

Control the controllable(s)

Focus on what is within your control (e.g. exercising and training safely, seeing opportunities for personal development and growth, maintaining physical distancing but maintaining social interactions).

Accept that some sources of uncertainty are outside of your control (e.g. when sporting events will be resumed, when physical distancing restrictions will be lifted).

Accept that feelings associated with stress and anxiety are normal responses to uncertainty.

Maintain a sense of perspective (e.g. given the lockdown restrictions it may not be possible to maintain 'typical' levels of fitness).

Athletes tend to prefer 'problem-focused' coping strategies¹⁰. However, this approach may not be effective if the source of stress is outside your control. Therefore, we recommend that athletes prioritise strategies that cope with what is within their control and learn to accept what is outside of their control.

Focus on your response to the uncertainty

Practice deep breathing

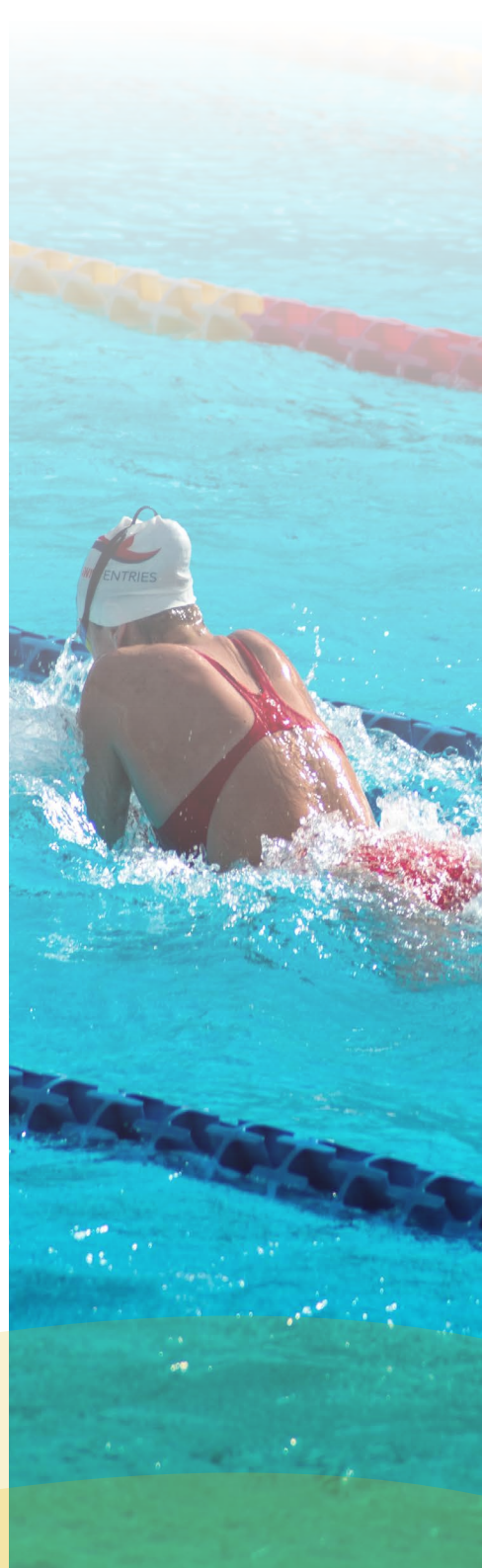
Use relaxing imagery

Engage in mindfulness or meditation

Listen to music

Develop routine contact with family, friends, team-mates or coaches to talk about how you feel

Write your thoughts, feelings, and worries down regularly



When faced with sources of stress outside your control, it is better to focus on regulating your emotions¹¹ rather than the uncertainty itself.

Use helpful distractions

Train or exercise (within social distancing guidelines)

Take a walk in a green space – where possible (this has been shown to reduce stress levels)

Take up a new hobby at home

Do an activity with members of your household

Watch television (but be wary of

repeatedly watching too much Covid-19 related news stories)

Take part in a virtual quiz

Listen to a podcast

Avoid reminders of cancelled sporting events

Research has suggested that, when unable to compete and train with fellow athletes, distraction and avoidance can be an effective way of coping with stress for some sportspeople¹².

See our list of contact numbers at the end if you feel in distress or would like to speak to someone about your mental health.

2. MAINTAINING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Covid-19 has resulted in great changes to the rhythm of daily life and in particular to how we maintain social connections and have a sense of belonging. Athletes have a strong professional-identity; created, in part, from the time spent within the organisational structure of sport and socialising with other members^{13,14}. Our social network is organised into layers of intimacy, with those whom we are closest to offering the greatest level of support and connectedness (thought to be approximately 15 people)¹⁵. Feeling connected with others and being part of groups that we perceive to be positive

and meaningful is beneficial for our psychological health and wellbeing¹⁶. At this time, you will need to consider how narrow or wide your social network is in terms of personal and professional relationships, who you want and need to maintain communication with, within and outside sport:

Family members

Friends

Peers in sport

Coaching staff and management

The focus of these interactions could be either performance or social or a combination of both. Some strategies that can be used to maintain our

connections to others are (A) Identity Mapping¹⁷; and (B) The COMPASS Model.

A) IDENTITY MAPPING

The identity mapping exercise can help you to understand the group memberships that are meaningful to you. You can create your own identity map by sketching a map of the significant and meaningful groups that you are part of. Examples of groups could include sports team, leisure groups, friendship groups, family ties and workplace groups. The

crucial part is that you believe these groups are important to you. Next, reflect on these groups by considering how you are currently connecting (or not) with them, have you not connected with one for a while? If not, it could be a good time to re-connect. You can also reflect on the level and type of support you give and receive within these groups.

B) THE COMPASS MODEL

Maintaining relationships – The COMPASS model¹⁸ proposed 7 strategies that can maintain successful,

professional communication between athletes and their coach:

- I. Conflict management – efforts to identify, discuss, resolve, and monitor areas of the relationship or activities that may lead to disagreement between both.
- II. Openness – efforts to open the lines of communication
- III. Motivation – efforts to develop a rewarding and active partnership
- IV. Positivity – efforts to be upbeat during interactions
- V. Advice – providing each other with feedback regarding training, performance and personal difficulties
- VI. Support – helping actions during difficult and or challenging circumstances
- VII. Social networks – communication with the wider network (e.g. parents, friends, sport peers, management).

Relationships are reciprocal and so it may be that you can support others by listening to their struggles and supporting them to change their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. There are many forms of social support that you can offer another person such as sharing knowledge, practical help, emotional support, validation (role modelling), and companionship¹⁹.

By keeping communication channels open and by scheduling regular connections with key individuals

or groups it will be easier to raise difficulties before they become more problematic. Think about what forms of communication you use, for what purpose, with whom and when. Presently in our work with elite sports teams and individuals we have found the scheduling of online coffee chatrooms is an easy way to maintain communication along with sharing daily hassles and concerns, while also maintaining a sense of fun, and 'banter'.

3. MOTIVATION AND GOAL SETTING

Many sports people will have begun this year immersed and focused on high-performance goals that may have represented the culmination of years of dedication and commitment. The impact of coronavirus and the cancellation and suspension of competitions and training means that these goals are no longer a daily presence and driving force; and for many, are now unobtainable this year. The sudden loss of this opportunity to achieve your goals combined with isolation, restrictions on social movement, exercise and training can lead to significant mental health issues^{20,21}. Adopting self-regulation strategies and adjusting or re-engaging

in alternative goals can improve wellbeing through increasing feelings of self-control²².

Create a daily structure and alternative goals for wellbeing

If you find yourself struggling on a daily basis, unsure of what to do and how to create structure in your day consider using goal setting principles to set goals across several areas of your life that allow you to feel a sense of accomplishment (see 5R goal setting cycle below). This may be the time to set goals about things you have often said 'one day I will...'. These goals can centre around:

Creating new social networks and maintaining contact

Physical wellbeing, for example sleep patterns, nutrition and Pilates to name a few

Personal development such as learning a new skill, or taking up a hobby

The most important point is to log these goals and review them on a daily and or weekly basis. Goals outside of performance can give you structure and a sense of self-worth during this time through simple achievement. Additionally, many athletes find the use of a reflective diary as a useful and effective way to log their progress, but in the current situation such diaries can be used to disclose worries and anxieties you may have. The act of writing problems down can be an effective technique to help deal with worries and concerns.

Readjust and reframe goals

As you look to the future you may also want to think about taking some time to define or redefine your mastery goals. Mastery goals are those that focus on self-improvement (getting better at a skill, having insight into why improvement occurred), they help maintain motivation and can provide a sense of purpose as we move into the new normal. You can use the 5R cycle as a starting point, and sharing this with coaches and friends will help you develop the plan.

1. Reflect – Where am I at?
2. Re-evaluate – What could I do to be even better?
3. Review – What mastery goals will help me
4. Revise – What does my new plan look like
5. Record – Write them down

Importantly, when you are setting goals, whether these are to structure your day or mastery goals to aid you moving forward, remember to be

realistic, use your support network to help you achieve the goals and don't be afraid to reach out to your social network for advice and feedback.

CONCLUSION

We hope you find the psychological advice provided in each of the three priority areas within this guidance report useful, and that it helps you

to adjust and cope with the current situation to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing.

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RESOURCES

Further resources are available to support your mental health at this time. Below are examples available.

If you are or someone you know is in distress or despair, call **LIFELINE** on 0808 8088000 or visit: www.lifelinehelpline.info

Samaritans is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for anyone struggling to cope. Call the free helpline on 116 123.

In crisis go to or contact the Emergency Department of your nearest general hospital if someone is in immediate danger. You can also contact the emergency services by calling 999 or 112.

Contact a local GP or GP out of hours service. A GP can give you advice and information on support available to you.

www.mindingyourhead.info has information on mental health and the supports and services in Northern Ireland.

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