

WORKING WITH ATHLETES DURING A PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

Preamble. Members from the International Society of Sport Psychology and their colleagues are presently working in unforeseeable circumstances with aspiring Olympic athletes and their various organizational providers. Following informational exchanges among members, the ISSP with this document identify general challenges and potential strategies intended to inform sport psychology practitioners¹.

Challenge: Career Disruption

The postponement of the Olympic and Paralympic games represents a significant career disruption. It potentially involves a loss of identity, motivation and meaning.

For *early career athletes*, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics may have been their first experience at a major games. Early career athletes and athletes struggling with injuries or poor form may see the postponement as a relief and an opportunity to perform even better at the Games in 2020.

For *late-career athletes*, the Tokyo 2020 Olympics could be a final Olympic games, pending retirement. Some late-career athletes may be forced to retire and exit from international competition, which may cause an identity loss (especially if the athlete's athletic identity is her/his primary identity). Other late-career athletes may have to postpone other life goals (education, moving into own house, and starting a family). In both cases, the postponement represents a significant career disruption that may stimulate a series of mental health issues.

Strategies to Mitigate Career Disruption

Educate and validate. Use this time to educate the athletes about how the mind works. Teach them that anxiety, grief, worry and anger are perfectly normal human reactions in a time of crises and identity loss. Provide opportunity to consciously discuss and identify their emotions with regards to the recent developments. Not being positive all the time is expected, and making room for negative thoughts and emotions (through mindfulness) actually promotes mental health.

Look for opportunities. Support early career athletes in reframing their postponement for future opportunities. Help athletes to use this difficult time to develop strategies to handle adversity and frustrations that will be of benefit for them in their future careers.

¹ We recognize that the recommendations will likely have to be adapted for each given culture, and national sport system. This calls for sport psychology consultants to be culturally competent. We also recognize that this is a time for being extra careful of when athletes should be referred to clinical mental health services (e.g., tele-consulting)

Focus on what is within control. Many things are outside of our control right now, and we should teach athletes to identify what is within control and focus on that. We cannot control the past, the future (will I have to qualify again?), COVID itself or the world economy. We can, however, control how we act in the face of the crisis.

Stimulate patience. Athletes are like anxious to start setting new goals and plan their autumn schedule. However, with no definite plans in sight, the time is not right for setting new sport goals and making new plans. However, we can help late-career athletes in readjusting their precautionary retirement plan.

Be compassionate. Provide high compassion for athletes and their key service providers. Empathetic, attentive listening of the athlete's concerns can provide an outlet for the athlete to vent and discuss not their concerns about the sport, the isolation and life in general. Reinforce your availability for the athlete during their time of need.

Stimulate collaborative care. Making a coordinated effort to help athletes and take care of their mental health is challenged by support staff working in isolation. The sport psychology practitioner is often in a good position to act as coordinator of a multidisciplinary team, for example by stimulating discussions with the head coach and nutritionist in terms of how to support healthy and reasonable nourishment. Also, be alert to the needs and potential stress of the support staff.

Challenge: Unmonitored and Isolated Training Environment

The postponement of the Games and closure of training facilities disrupts the daily schedule of the athletes and may halt training altogether.

Without teammates, an athlete may feel isolated when left to train on their own. An unstructured training environment may also lead to a possible reduction in physical activity, as the athlete may not have the motivation or training environment to train at the same intensity pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Although the training intensity and frequency may decrease, one's caloric intake could stay the same, and an unwanted, unanticipated weight gain can lead to a decrease in confidence and compound mental health issues.

Strategies to Mitigate Unmonitored and Isolated Training

Stay in close contact. Athletes respond differently to a crisis. Staying apart of the athlete's life is essential, as she/he is likely to trust you and willing to share feelings, insecurities, and worries. Schedule weekly group and individual online video meetings with athletes and staff to discuss events that occurred prior in the week and prepare for the upcoming week.

Promote recovery. When there are no sport goals in sight, it is only natural that athletes will experience a short-term decrease in motivation. The air will likely go off the balloon and training may seem meaningless. Doing high quality alternative training at home in the living room when there is no goal in sight is beyond what we can reasonably expect from even the most committed

people. Validate and help athletes understand that this is normal, and promote a focus on high quality recovery. Stimulate athletes to discuss with their coach how they can adapt their training in this hard period.

Stimulate a search for small improvements. Help athletes see potentials for small improvements during this time away from ordinary training. Athletes may develop a heightened understanding of tactics, learn analytics or start mental training. Discuss with the athlete and coaching staff what possible areas of weakness may be improved on in isolation. Following the identification of weaknesses, help the athlete create goals tailored towards improving her/his weak areas.

Help athletes maintain daily routines. Stimulate a daily routine that integrates mental and physical components. Provide athletes with examples of a daily routine. Model good routines yourself, and engage coaches in doing the same. Consider integrating an exercise around designing daily routines in your weekly meeting to provide variation in the routines.

Promote connection. Athletes like all human being are social animals with a need for human contact. Help coaches and athletes set up ways to be together despite not being able to train together. Arrange common online mindfulness sessions or e-sport events in their own sport. Ask athletes to read the same book and host meetings to discuss key messages. Supervise coaches on how virtual coordinated training can be used to encourage team engagement.

Remember you own mental health. As mental performance consultants, we may also be under pressure. Practitioners may have to juggle a full consultation schedule with solving private financial issues and home-schooling kids. Engage in peer supervision, mindfulness, exercise and healthy routines to take care of yourself. Check in with your colleagues to see how they are doing.

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