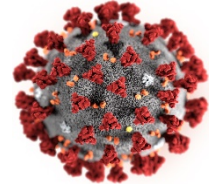


UPDATED March 24, 2020

## Athlete Mental Health and Mental Illness in the era of COVID-19



### Shifting focus: A New Reality

The life we are living today is a loose approximation of how we were living just 2 weeks ago. Even 2 days ago. Within 48 hours the lives of current Canadian Olympians, Paralympians, and hopefuls have been upended and placed in a realm of uncertainty.

We are living through a serious pandemic, society seems to be shutting down, and we are told to stay home. What are we supposed to do with that? We have never experienced anything like this in our lifetime.

Are the Olympics going to happen without us??



It is likely that last question that is tying up most of the National elite athlete populous and national sport administrations. Most other Nations are wondering if they will still be expected to go. Many athletes from other countries have taken to social media to express support for Canada and Australia for definitively stating that they will not send their athletes to an Olympic/Paralympic Games this year; and hope that their Nations will follow suit. The risks are real.

Canadians can begin to shift focus- there will be no Games for us in 2020. Many National Sport Organizations are already starting to explore resource allocations and alternative training plans. Various pathways are being planned that can align with numerous potential outcomes.

Despite the work that is being done “behind the scenes,” athletes still need to take care of day to day business and figure out where in the world they need to be and what they should be doing!

Major Games do not exist in a vacuum. Athletes have families, friends, school responsibilities, housing, significant others, jobs, sponsorships, and other things that either ground them or pull them in different directions.

The amount of cohesiveness that has been demonstrated among athletes from international communities has truly been remarkable. They are speaking with one voice, as if they are one team. Competitors in one sense; but teammates in another.

This cohesiveness, the “Olympic Buzz” that connects us all- will bring us through this (and hopefully into 2021). The strength that guides us in our homes on a daily basis comes from the innate qualities make us “Olympic”- fierce National pride, tenacity to excel, and desire to achieve the pinnacle of our potential. Those elements are still there. For some they feel suppressed right now; but for others they are shining brightly.

We are Olympians. We are Canadians.

Remember who you are and what you have worked for. Timelines have shifted and some uncertainty persists, so turn to what you know. Your sport, your teammates, your family, your leisure activities, your safe spaces, your go-to people and your training. It won't all look the same, but if you look hard enough, you will find it.



Remember these points:

You may feel-

- Fear of falling behind in physical preparedness
- Competitive disadvantage
- Illness
- Social isolation from supports
- Disconnection from typical healthy outlets and support networks
- Learning that friends, family or teammates are ill
- Fear of illness
- Overthinking: about life direction: what to do if the Games are delayed or cancelled; whether to continue; about next steps in general.



Pre-existing mental illness or ill mental health may be worsened with the shifting sands in the world today. Be aware of *your health* and *your needs*.

- Isolation can fuel depression
- Worries and anxiety can fuel insomnia
- Poor sleep will make it more difficult to cope
- You may not want to “burden” your teammates because “they are struggling too.” Sometimes it is easier to think and talk about other peoples’ challenges- it can serve as a distraction and a way to support each other. **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**
- The basic building blocks will get you through: eat, sleep, self-care, staying connected, having a purpose, forward-thinking
- Work with your National Sport Organizations to develop appropriate training regimens as the sands continue to shift



**Remember:**

### **Sport Equips Us with Special Powers**

Concepts like “Mental Toughness,” “Resilience,” and “Adversity Tolerance” are often spoken about in the sports world. They are applied in terms of persistence in competition, maintenance of intensity, and task completion to the end goal. Athletes and those embedded in the sports world are equipped with gifts and talents beyond the competition or training venue; and it is those qualities that make them not only tenacious competitors, but leaders in life as well. Illustrations of this strength and leadership are evident throughout social media and the internet as athletes, coaches, and IST staff have posted inspirational messages, extended support to complete strangers, and provided examples of creative workouts while in isolation. In today’s age of technology, isolation doesn’t have to mean “alone.” Even if group training is prohibited, there are creative ways to make it concurrent and connected.



Special powers do not diminish our humanity. We can feel for our friends whose businesses are shuttered and finances are in peril. In these times we will experience a myriad of emotions ranging from guilt (for even thinking about sport at this time), to sadness, fear, or comfort. Friends try to find ways to bring laughter as an oasis in this storm. Allow it.

**BUT MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT, BEING A YOUNG, HEALTHY ATHLETE DOES NOT MAKE YOU IMMUNE TO COVID-19**

## Forward Focus

Whose job is it to promote calm throughout this uncertainty? There is no algorithm to dictate who weathers through a global pandemic better than others. Some athletes are managing through this uncertainty and disruption with calm reserve and optimism; while some coaches and administrators are having more difficulty maintaining composed focus. We are all in this together, we must pick each other up, and find a way to help each other through this the best way we can.

## Role of the Internet and Social Media

Many athletes have removed themselves from social media platforms because of the constant, pervasive bombardment of apocalyptic catastrophization. Others have taken advantage of the global reach of social media platforms to serve as ambassadors of reason to major sporting bodies about the need to prioritize the health and safety of athletes above political and financial motives. The bottom line is, athletes and sport personnel need to choose what works for them at this time.

## Which path will YOU take?



One path follows forward-thinking: continuing to train and maintain goals, while utilizing supports and trusting that your opportunity will still come.

Another path follows uncertainty, with swirling insecurity about a future that has a vague outline of school, housing, family and finances.

Yet others follow declining trails of desolation, negativity, sadness, frustration, and feeling of loss.

The most important things you can do right now are to do whatever it takes to keep moving *forward*.

1. **Know where to go.** The type of struggles you are having may dictate what level of support you need.
  - a. If you are worried about how these interruptions will affect your maintenance of fitness and mental strategies for performance and anxiety, then **Mental Performance Consultants** can support that.
  - b. **Psychologists and counsellors** can assist in the delivery of psychotherapy to discuss mood changes, anxiety and sleep strategies (as well as other things).
  - c. For more severe symptoms such as severe anxiety, or low (or high) mood that lasts for a week or more and interferes with function and self-care, a **Sports Psychiatrist** would be the best service to access. If anxiety, disordered eating, mood or OCD symptoms (obsessions and compulsions) are more difficult to manage, or if insomnia or panic attacks are become more regular, a Sports

Psychiatrist should be involved in your care. If hopelessness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts are occurring, referral to a sports psychiatrist is a must.

- d. One of the biggest differences between the types of providers include the fact that Psychiatrists are medical doctors who can make diagnoses, order medical tests (if necessary), provide prescriptions (if necessary), and their fees are covered by provincial health insurance.
- e. All of these providers can work together to provide comprehensive and complementary care for the athlete. Many National Sport organizations have access to Sports Psychiatry services that can be delivered across the country. For those who do not have a formal relationship with a Sports Psychiatrist, support can be easily accessed.

**Available resources:**

Specialized mental health support is available. Contact your regional Game Plan advisor (<https://www.mygameplan.ca/>), Director, Health and Performance Services at your COPSIN centre or institute, Sport Psychiatry Services ([www.synergysportmentalhealth.ca](http://www.synergysportmentalhealth.ca)) or CCHMS (<https://www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca/>) for assistance with a mental health referral.

1. **Game Plan- @gameplandematch- Morneau-Shepell Support line 1-844-240-2990;**  
<https://mygameplan.ca/resources/health>
2. **Director, Health and Performance Services at your COPSIN Center or Institute**
3. **Sport Psychiatry- Central contact for services across the country, direct athlete care: Dr. Carla Edwards- [cedwards@synergysportmentalhealth.ca](mailto:cedwards@synergysportmentalhealth.ca) [www.synergysportmentalhealth.ca](http://www.synergysportmentalhealth.ca)**
4. **Assistance for general service referral - CCMHS- (<https://www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca/>)**

Canadians are STRONG and RESILIENT.

#37millionstrong

Postpone today, conquer tomorrow

Dr. Carla Edwards, MD