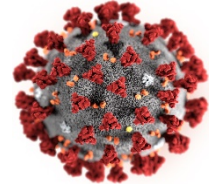


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Athlete Mental Health and Mental Illness in the era of COVID-19



Few events in history have altered the staging of the Olympic Games. Thus far only the World Wars have kept our athletes away from the grand stage, and several politically based boycotts prevented some nations from participating in other Olympic Games.

In fact, few events have altered day to day function across the globe as has COVID-19. In what seems like an instant we have gone from training and congregating wherever and whenever we want- to travel restrictions, closed borders, closed training centers, and millions of people living in self-isolation.

Pandemics in one sense are isolating, while in another they are unifying. Neighbourhoods and communities band together to ensure the least advantaged are taken care of. Teams find themselves in similar circumstances of training and competition interruption, while wondering if they are being disadvantaged if other nations are not abiding by the same restrictions.

Timing and the Olympic/Paralympic Games



Let's think about a typical Olympic/Paralympic Quadrennial: Starting with the amazing experience of the Games- some surprises, some expected performances, and some disappointments- followed by retirements, "breaks", school, and gearing up for the next Games. Some take a prolonged break while others insist on never missing a beat in training, already focused on the next Games. In between there are World Cups, World Championships, Pan American Games, ParaPan Am Games, Pan Pacific Championships, NORCECAs, and many other qualifying competitions for various sports.



Athletes put their lives on hold for this. Innumerable sacrifices occur along the way: relationships, jobs, school, friendships, and housing- to name but a few.

Since COVID-19 started to eke its way across the globe (in the final half of the final year of this Quadrennial), it has affected athletes and sport organizations in variable ways. There are understandable uncertainties and anxieties about when qualifiers will be held, how to maintain fitness and training, and whether the Olympic/Paralympic Games will occur this year. There are numerous camps who believe the Games should go ahead as planned; while others support them being postponed or cancelled. There are huge ramifications for all of those options, but the tangible concerns among athletes will include:

- 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.



Transitions in an athlete's career are inevitable. Graduation and retirement after major games are natural transition points and are more under the athlete's control, while significant injuries, deselection, and the threat of Games cancellations force an athlete in a direction that is not on their terms.

Effect on Athlete Mental Health

Athletes who have **pre-existing Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** that features compulsive handwashing may scrub their hands until they bleed and lose much of their epidermis. Athletes who fled countries abroad as the curtains of COVID-19 travel bans were falling may experience symptoms of **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**. They find themselves feeling **alone and isolated** as those around them do not understand their experiences and cannot provide the comfort they need. There are feelings of **helplessness and fear** as either they, their teammates, or Interdisciplinary Support Team (IST) members are tested for COVID-19 and await the results. Their support structures are physically disbanded, and they have a lot of time on their hands.

Some athletes are still trapped in foreign countries, unable to return home. In the average person this would elicit feelings of fear and helplessness. With the threat of severe illness across the globe, it can also create fear of never making it home. National Sport Organizations have worked hard to get their athletes home, but those who are away on professional contracts have other hurdles to jump.

Our Canadian athletes are across the globe- they need support wherever they are. Let's start by validating their concerns and letting them know they are not alone!

A global pandemic such as Covid-19 can have a significant impact on an athlete's life, including:

- Exacerbation, triggering, or worsening of pre-existing mental illness (anxiety, OCD, depression, insomnia) * **IF YOU HAVE A HISTORY OF MENTAL ILLNESS SUCH AS ANXIETY DISORDERS, MOOD DISORDERS, OCD, PTSD-** these have a potential to be triggered and amplified by these circumstances. It is important to monitor your symptoms and **seek support from a sports psychiatrist if you feel your symptoms are unstable or if you are having thoughts of suicide or self-harm**
- Illness (COVID-19)- yourself, teammate, family member or friend
- Isolation
- Quarantine

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.

Advice to Athletes, Coaches and Support Staff

1. **It is normal to feel fear at this time.** This is a serious pandemic and we have to exercise vigilance. Restrictions are established in the interest of personal and public safety and they must be respected. These are uncertain times and the scientists at the leading edge of this virus are learning more and more on a daily basis. We must heed their recommendations and do what we can to “flatten the curve.”
2. **It is important to take a “health first” approach.** Mental health and physical health must come before training. If you are experiencing ANY symptoms of COVID-19, follow the protocols and seek advice around testing. Attend to any and all health needs at this time- performance will



come if you are healthy

3. **Mental health can suffer for the many reasons mentioned above.** Anxiety would be normal under these circumstances, with an abundance of uncertainty about how things will unfold over the next days, weeks and months. The IOC has maintained that the Olympics are going ahead as planned even though the number of infected individuals continues to increase around the globe and the window for qualification, selection and preparation is closing.
4. **“Control what you can control.”** We have to trust that the experts are doing their jobs and will give us the right information at the right time. We have to trust that our sport organizations are going to heed the advice of the experts and make decisions that make safety the top priority.
5. **Change your field of vision.** A necessary quality of an elite athlete is that they have to be able to stay focused on their goals- and an Olympic Quadrennial is all about the long game. Right now the long game is unclear, and to reduce the anxiety about that requires **shifting your vision to the present and redefining the goals and purpose of the short game.** The short game must include elements to establish and maintain the foundational building blocks of health and function- including good nutrition, adequate sleep, self-care, and doing things that make you feels good. For some, that may entail tapping into hobbies that had been previously set aside for busy travel, training and competition schedules. These can include: Painting, sketching, reading, poetry, photography, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, nature hikes, cycling, skiing, snowshoeing, watching movies, playing video games, going for long country drives, playing instruments, listening to music, and individual/modified workout sessions. Days need to be restructured (temporarily) and should include some forms of focused, intentional activities (to reduce the time spent worrying about COVID-19, lost training time, and worrying about getting ready for an Olympic Games that may or may not run as planned).
6. **Stay connected to your teammates and programs.** You are not alone in this! This situation is affecting everyone to a different degree for different reasons.
7. **Reach out for supports even if you think you’re just feeling mild or normal anxiety.** This is a major disruption in daily life- not just sport. It affects us all and sometimes it can be very helpful to just express what you are going through to someone else.
8. **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



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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) 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 www.synergysportmentalhealth.ca**
4. **Assistance for general service referral - CCMHS- (<https://www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca/>)**

#SocialDistance4TheWin

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