

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

Sport has always been an activity that brought the community together and promotes social cohesion. 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 centres, 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 those less fortunate and looked after. Teams find themselves in similar circumstances of training and competition interruption, while wondering when the situation will improve.

Timing

Since COVID-19 started to eke its way across the globe, it has affected athletes and sport organisations in variable ways. There are understandable uncertainties and anxieties about when competitions will be held, how to maintain fitness and training, and whether competitive sport will resume this year.

With Canada and Australia leading and restricting athlete movement the IOC has tentatively discussed about postponing the Olympic Games and holding this in 2021. In other sports such as AFL/AFLW, NRL, Cricket, Soccer, Rugby and a variety of other codes the season has been suspended or cancelled and there is great uncertainty over what will happen next.

Pandemics have the potential to affect everyone and this raises several issues for elite athletes including;

- Fear of falling behind in physical preparedness
- Competitive disadvantage
- Inability to train due to closure of gyms and training centres
- Illness
- Social isolation from supports
- Disconnection from typical healthy outlets and support networks

- Increase in use of harmful coping strategies like alcohol and illicit substances
- Worrying about family and friends falling ill
- Fear of illness
- Overthinking: about life direction and next steps in general
- Concerns about financial difficulties
- Concerns about the survival of a club or indeed the whole sporting code in certain cases

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. However the threat of sport cancellations force an athlete in a direction that is not on their terms.

Effect on Athlete Mental Health

Athletes who have a pre existing mental illness or the vulnerability to develop mental illness may express them due to the immense stress and uncertainty. The common prevalence disorders like mood and anxiety disorders are the likeliest to occur. Athletes who fled countries abroad as the curtains of COVID-19 travel bans were falling may 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 support team 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. Others who have had their relevant sports cancelled altogether have no access to training centres and are recommended social distancing and self isolation. Some athletes are still trapped in foreign countries, unable to return home. In the average person this would trigger feelings of fear and helplessness. With the threat of severe illness across the globe, it can also create fear of never making it home.

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 and like, 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

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.

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 organisations 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 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 reading, photography, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, cycling, golf, watching movies, playing video games, 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 the season).
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.

- If you are worried about how these interruptions will affect your maintenance of fitness and mental strategies for performance and anxiety, then performance psychologists and high performance teams can assist with this.
- Psychologists and counsellors can assist in the delivery of psychotherapy to discuss mood changes, anxiety and sleep strategies (as well as other things).
- 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 necessity.
- 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 usually covered by players associations or by mental health networks within the sporting code.
- All of these providers can work together to provide comprehensive and complementary care for the athlete. Many national sport organisations 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 please liaise with your CMO who will be able to provide further information.

Available resources:

Specialised mental health support is available. Please discuss with your club or code medical professional or mental health professional in your club or training centre on how to access care.

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