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Mental Performance Recommendations for Optimizing Performance Preparation with COVID-19

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March 15, 2020

INTRODUCTION

The WHO (World Health Organization) has described the Coronavirus as a controllable pandemic <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-mission-briefing-on-covid-19---12-march-2020> meaning that the world-wide containment of the virus is not possible. *It is possible to slow the rate of transmission.* WHO recommends that Countries practice social distancing strategies as the central action to slow the rate of transmission. Media has reported the cancelation and/or postponement of professional (and amateur sport contests. Your own sport federation may also have announced strategies that present a disruption to your current and planned preparation routines and strategies for Major Competitions and Games. It should be emphasized that the disruption of these events is *multifactorial and is not necessarily related to COVID-19.* But, as with most unforeseen disruptions, **it is common and normal** to experience intensified feelings such as fear, anxiety, concern, and worry regarding how the Coronavirus will affect your (mental) health as well as performance preparations.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

The following are science-based strategies to help you cope with your emotions and concerns about Coronavirus and proceed with optimal performance preparation (adapted from Brenda Bursch, posted by Kecmanovic, 2020, TheConversation.com).

1. Practice Tolerating Uncertainty by Focusing on the 'Controllables'

Intolerance of uncertainty, makes people vulnerable to anxiety and other difficult emotions. For example, a study during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic showed that people who had a harder time accepting the uncertainty of the situation were more likely to experience elevated anxiety.

As sport performers, you face uncertainty in most every competitive endeavor. You've also likely faced many unforeseen events (such as an injury, or poor weather affecting performance) where you exercised resilience and even thrived in the stress of that event. Don't underestimate your capacity to use your ability to focus on what you can control and to be resilient. This is a great time to **formally practice** 'controlling the controllables'.

- Write a list of all your concerns (For example, "What ifs...") and separate what is controllable from that which is not under your control.
- Set a daily intention to focus (and refocus) attention and actions on aspects of preparation that are under your control and accepting/letting go of aspects of preparation that are not under your control.
- Have alternative plans (for example, plan B) should disruption to training, recovery, and/or competition occur. Your team training schedule is likely to change into an 'individualized' training program. Be adaptable to the changes and trust that the changes to your routine will serve you.

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- Make a list of your coping strategies. Be deliberate in using your coping strategies to manage changes to daily activities and emotions that arise.
- Reflect daily on the positive actions that bring you closer to your goals.

2. Be Mindful of the Information That You Consume

You are receiving a wealth of information from formal and non-formal sources about the Coronavirus pandemic. Canada's Sport Medicine advisory committee is sending COPSIN advisory updates every 48 hours at 4 pm ET. This is an excellent resource providing accurate information and recommendations pertaining to health threat, travel advisory, and preventative actions to be practiced. It is important that you seek out accurate and trustworthy information. Be cautious about social media reports and extended conversations with family and friends who are not in your immediate daily training environment. It is recommended that you limit your exposure to COVID-19 news to no more than 30 minutes a day.

3. Feel the Feelings and Strengthen Self-Care Routines

Difficult emotions, such as fear and anxiety, intensify in proportion to how much one tries to get rid of it. Or as Carl Jung put it, "***What you resist persists.***"

While it might feel better in the moment to distract yourself through eating, watching Netflix more than usual, repeatedly seeking reassurance from friends, family or health experts, or obsessively checking news streams and social media, these actions can *make these feelings worse* in the long run. Avoiding the experience of uncomfortable emotions almost always backfires.

Instead, allow your anxious thoughts, feelings and physical sensations to wash over you, accepting your emotion as an integral part of human experience. When waves of emotion show up, notice and describe the experience to yourself or others without judgment. Resist the urge to escape or calm your fears by obsessively reading virus updates. Paradoxically, facing the emotions in the moment will lead to less reducing the discomfort from the emotion with time.

During unpredictable times like this, it's important to remember the tried-and-true stress reduction strategies: ***Get adequate sleep, normalize routines as much as possible, practice mindfulness, spend time in nature and employ relaxation techniques when stressed.*** Prioritizing these behaviors during the coronavirus crisis can go a long way toward increasing your psychological well being and bolstering your immune system.

4. Reframe the Threat of Change from "Normal or Ideal" associated with Coronavirus Pandemic as an Opportunity

The Coronavirus is a world-event that is impacting every country simultaneously. The actions that are chosen and the swift timing of response to this event can provide a competitive advantage. Being open to the possibility that changes to accommodate disruptions will advantage your performance, for example from a team-based training environment to individualized training environment, can thwart any perceived limitations associated with the disruptions.

- Consider "***How does this [stressful event] advantage me?***"
- Model positive belief about performance preparation behaviours for team members.

5. Seek Support from Your Team of Sport Performance and Medicine Professionals

Your team includes sport performance and medicine professionals who have all been trained to support you during these types of stressful events. If you feel particularly overwhelmed and are experiencing challenges related to training, and activities of daily living, please do not hesitate to seek out their support.

Also note that specialized mental health support is also available. Contact your regional Game Plan advisor (<https://www.mygameplan.ca/>), Director, Health and Performance Services at your COPSIN centre or institute, or CCHMS (<https://www.ccmhs-ccsms.ca/>) for assistance with a mental health referral.

“Success comes amid chaos as much as it comes through planning and preparation...The global reaction to COVID-19 will be requiring changes from all of us. Roll with it, talk to your team, anticipate possible situations, and change as needed.”

-- Marnie McBean, Team Canada Tokyo Chef de Mission