

Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Tips for Players and Athletes COVID-RECOVER

CONNECT-OUTDOORS-VISUALIZE-IDENTIFY- DISCOVER- RECOVER

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We wish to acknowledge the inspiration of Professor Aidan Moran (1957-2020) in our work.



4 IDENTIFY

Use a diary or online notepad to **record your thoughts and emotions each day** and use this to **map out the activities that you find most beneficial for you** (e.g. ones that keep your energy levels high).

5 DISCOVER

Sign up to a **free online module on a topic that you are passionate about** and ideally **buddy up with a teammate or training partner** so that you can compare your reflections as you progress on your new journey.

6 RECOVER

Engage in good sleep hygiene and yourself give space to recharge. **Plan your daily activities to establish a routine and make space for reflection. Maintain self-compassion** as it is likely you are in a transition phase for training.

Mental Health Ireland

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#BeyondCovid19 Tips for Athletes and Players

6 Strategies to Promote Athlete Well-Being

1 CONNECT

Create a **social contract** to share your training progress and personal emotional responses several times per week at an appropriate time (e.g. time of previously scheduled training).

2 OUTDOOR

If possible, **find a range of outdoor spaces for physical activity** or review images of prior positive experiences in nature to savour the positive emotions. Be sure to stay safe and comply with social distancing or other healthcare advice.

3 VISUALISE

Review your season goals, recall past positive experiences, seek meaning in longer-term goals and **think ahead and imagine what you would like to achieve in 2021 and beyond** to help you maintain positive motivation.

Background

The aim of this guidance is to provide a framework for athletes to cope, thrive and engage in personal growth during the current pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely led to wide-scale disruption of your sporting trajectories for 2020. This has included the cancellation or postponement of sporting events, limits to group training due to social distancing, restrictions on use of sporting facilities and loss of face-to-face access to coaches and support personnel. In the context of a threat to public health, arguably sports competition sinks into lesser importance, but for athletes like you, for whom sport is a full-time job or major life goal, or for those who identify sports competition as a key part of their identity, it is important to share recommendations based on evidence and theory on how to support athletes and players through this time. The unprecedented situation means that evidence from similar or related contexts and relevant theories needs to be used to extrapolate to COVID-19 and all its challenges. Each of the guidelines below should be viewed like a menu to choose from and try, test and review, and be seen as a road to discovery instead of passive prescription of activities. Our team of practitioners and researchers have collated the knowledge below based on four premises:

1. **Psychological Strengths:** As a performer on the sporting stage, you have, in all likelihood, developed many skills and habits to support your on-field performance. Pre-performance routines for penalty taking, for example, may include relaxation and focusing components which aid emotional regulation. This can be also applied to help you cope in world outside of sport (i.e. outside the bubble). Awareness of your repertoire of psychological skills and the ability to use them across different contexts is highly important.
2. **Resilience:** The capacity to mobilise resources both in advance and after a major challenge, is developed through our sporting challenges. In the face of a trauma, it is likely that resilience is the default rather than the exception. As an athlete, you have the ability to respond in an optimistic way to major stressors and engage in post-traumatic growth. Further, you have successful experiences from memory to call upon on which By doing this, you build a firm foundation on which to build your beliefs that you have sufficient resources to cope with COVID-19.

3. **Individual Responses:** It is important to acknowledge that athletes in different sports and at different levels of competition have developed diverse sets of abilities and competencies. Dual-career athletes (e.g. student-athletes) may have invested much of their effort in their sport despite study or work commitments, and injured athletes may be over-identifying with their sport as a predictable response to injury, in both cases making these athletes very vulnerable to major stressors.
4. **Perception of Control:** Loss of control is a major source of anxiety in a pandemic (see Mansell, 2020). Developing autonomy and a sense of control is a key part to feeling safe and secure. With COVID-19, the new habits that could help protect you such as physical isolation, hand hygiene, and avoiding touching your face can help you gain control in an uncertain world. And finding new ways to exercise, to work and to interact can open up a world of exciting possibilities. Athletes have shown an ability to develop positive habits and maintain self-control, skills transferable to meeting the present challenging circumstances.

1. Connect

Sport, by definition, involves performing in a social context. We need to physically distance at present, and be aware that physical distancing and social isolation are different. Maintaining social connectivity to your teammates, training partners and support staff is a key psychological resource; in other words it benefits your well-being. Maintaining contact with your friends, family, team-mates, colleagues and wider networks is equally important. Using technology to interact with key individuals or indeed a group online chat can help you cope with the current challenge. When speaking with friends, it's worth remembering that they too are experiencing the strains and negative impact of this current pandemic. Your engagement could not only help improve your emotions, but also help improve their emotions too.

Suggested Actions: Create a **social contract** with your teammates or training partners to share your training progress and concerns several times per week at an appropriate time (e.g. time of previously scheduled training). This might be shared on social media

platforms, WhatsApp groups, etc. **Potential Risks:** You will face a mix of emotional responses and this may be challenging for you. To mitigate this risk, maintaining contact with non-sport contacts is also highly important. Your parents should always see you as their son/daughter before they see you as an athlete.

2. Outdoors

Physical activity in the outdoors, what we term green and blue natural spaces (e.g. in parks, beaches, etc.) is an obvious choice for many athletes to continue physical activity of some type despite the current challenge. There are advantages to exercising outdoors, however. Exercise in natural settings has additional benefits above gym-based activity and indoor training for many. Research has established that the environmental conditions (e.g. good air quality and reduced noise pollution), presence of nature (e.g. tree canopy overhead and birdsong) and challenge of the activities (e.g. trail running) has both benefits and co-benefits beyond much of our typical sport activity in indoor or in hybrid settings (e.g. field game pitch). Amongst the benefits, exercise in natural environments helps to reduce anxiety - important in the current challenge - and also helps to improve mood and psychological well-being. Focusing on the natural scenery, such as hilltop views or the sounds of birds, can also distract from the physical sensations of effort and discomfort we often experience during exercise. The net result is that exercise can feel easier, more pleasant and more enjoyable in natural settings in comparison with indoors. The co-benefits are interesting too, as nature contact typically increases our connection to nature and increases empathy and group cohesion (e.g. after outdoor training people often share their memorable moments which is rare in gym-based activity). A caveat here is that going outdoors is not a choice for some of us even now in this challenge. Two alternatives exist here: 1. Train indoors on, for example, a bike trainer, with an indoor cycling app to provide a visual display of outdoor routes; 2. Use images of your prior experiences in nature to remind yourself of previous positive experiences and feelings (something psychologists call *savoring*). This can also help to boost your mood.

Suggested Actions: If possible, find a range of outdoor spaces for physical activity and try to photograph images of the nature scenes for subsequent viewing. **Potential Risks:** Maintain social distancing as per local health authority guidelines, adhere to local healthy

authority guidelines where required (e.g. if there is advice in place to only leave your house for essential reasons such as shopping). To avoid social disapproval, from people who might not think that exercise is fundamental to your mental health as you, actively seek routes and times of the day when you are away from other people, and always comply with your health authority guidelines

3. Visualise

As an athlete, you may have imagined many scenarios, from performing a winning move, to standing victorious on a podium. Visualisation, or mental imagery, is a mental skill that allows us to use our senses to simulate different actions and emotions. This skill has particular resonance in the current situation. Practitioner sport and exercise psychologists, in some cases, work with rehabilitation specialists to promote the use of mental imagery of both functional movements and sporting actions. These imagery abilities can be employed for imagining your positive future (in fact this is what you as athletes do in goal setting tasks; positive future thinking). This long-term optimism or *hope* is a key attribute to cultivate now. Many sport goals, including the five-ringed ones, are clouded in obscurity right now so it's a good time to reflect on a range of positive future goals. One goal that often resonates with elite athletes, who typically display high levels of mastery motivation (e.g. motivated by the goal to perform a skill at a higher level of precision) is the objective to *become a better athlete*. This concept takes the pressure off immediate issues like team selection or individual qualification and, in some ways, can put 2020 in perspective. A key question to ask yourself right now is “What kind of athlete do I want to be in 2021?” Your answer should ensure there is relevance and connection with your strengths as an athlete. Doing that, you maintain a sense that the long-term goal is not lost.

Suggested Actions: Review your season goals, seek meaning in longer-term goals and the focus on what kind of athlete you want to be. This review in the present context of uncertainty should help you maintain a positive motivation. **Potential Risks:** Some of your season goals may have been your lifetime goals, particularly athletes aspiring for Olympic selection, and so this can lead to a level of distress and unpleasant emotions. This could be tempered by doing this online with your coach or someone you trust and

the act of identifying and sharing the distress you feel will help you manage these emotions. The distress is shared by the coach and via discussion, you help regulate each other's emotions.

4. Identify

You should try to identify and recognise how you feel? Am I upset? Angry, frustrated? Worried? Anxious? –explore your emotions and think why you are experiencing them. Its most likely to be a combination of unpleasant emotions which are linked to a series of uncertain factors – about health, the future, employment, sport. When these are thought through, it's easier to accept why you are feeling like this. Therefore, it is normal to experience intense emotions. As such, use of emotion regulation strategies is a good idea. Become aware of your emotions as early identification of negative mood is important. The first aspect of emotion regulation is to recognise when you need to use it. And so an awareness of feeling negative - whilst not necessarily a good thing to focus on - can be useful if you are to prevent an intensive unpleasant mood from developing. Mood differs from emotion in that they do not have an identifiable cause, whereas emotions are linked to a cause that the person knows. For example, anxiety as an emotion is when a person feels nervous, experiences somatic symptoms (e.g increased heart rate) and negative thoughts in relation to whether they will be infected with COVID-19. Anxiety as a mood is when someone experiences the same symptoms but cannot identify a specific cause. An unpleasant mood is particularly unhelpful as the person can experience some of the negative effects such as low motivation, unhappiness, poor sleeping habits etc., but as the cause of the negative mood is not known. The key message is to check in with yourself and if you are feeling low, try to identify the cause of that feeling. When you have identified this then decide whether to:

Change your situation. Do something different, go somewhere different or actively choose to do something you like. You will need to **adapt your training**. The nature of activity, where you train, having a flexible approach to training, and finding something good about your new mode of training will help.

Attention deployment refers to the process whereby an individual directs his/her attention to influence his/her emotions. That is, when it is difficult to change the situation, you can choose to attend to stimuli that do not negatively impact on emotion (for example, listening to music on headphones to relax). 1) **Focus on changing the emotion itself.** Strategies include visualisation, listening to music and exercise 2) **Use your emotions to keep safe:** Keep the torch burning: Use emotions of fear of life as information - unpleasant emotions help revise attentional processes and serve as a reminder to make changes. When you become complacent and forget to make good health choices, then reminding yourself of the possible consequences and experiencing unwanted emotions will help you to adapt to the changing circumstances. Positive emotions can be used to remind of priorities, and intense emotions are useful for increasing energy and emotional contagion enables your good mood to be shared with others.

Suggested Actions: Use a diary or online notepad to record your feelings each day and use this to map out the activities that you find most beneficial for you (e.g. ones that keep your energy levels high). **Potential Risks:** This process may require recalling some negative thoughts or images so perhaps share these with a friend to help you find your pathway to your own well-being.

5. Discover

Take the opportunity to develop your key psychological strengths (e.g. visualisation abilities, concentration, resilience), upskill on game knowledge (e.g. performance analysis, etc.), or focus on acquiring a new individual sport skill (e.g. trying a sport skill with your non-dominant hand or foot). Psychological skills training is something that almost all athletes wish they could do better, especially when performing under pressure. With your sporting programme now on hold, you can try a range of online resources to enhance your knowledge. Mass Open Online Courses, for example, offer expert training on topics like resilience, mindfulness and wellbeing. Online Apps offer a further means to increase your knowledge of your psychological strengths (e.g. Tackle Your Feelings).

Suggested Actions: Sign up to a free MOOC on a topic that interests you and ideally buddy up with a teammate or training partner so that you can compare your reflections

as you go along. **Potential Risks:** You may feel you don't have the energy for online learning so pace yourself rather than try a Netflix-type binge.

6. Recover

Psychological recovery and sleep are also important right now. Constantly checking social media and news feeds for the latest COVID-19 updates can feel overwhelming and increase your anxiety levels. Because of this, making active plans for rest, recovery and solitary time is important. Getting enough sleep, and sticking to your usual sleep habits is important to help you relax, recharge and maintain a healthy immune system. The need for better hygiene and acts of self-control required (e.g. remembering not to touch your face) are also mentally effortful. We need to find a way to adjust to this 'new normal'. Because of this, planning activities that help you relax is important. You can do so by engaging in some practices that encourage more advantageous recovery under the given circumstances. **Healthy Habits:** Greater hand hygiene and physical distancing will aid in reducing the spread of this virus. One goal is to avoid touching your face and another is to keep your hands clean. A key part of that is identifying and list where and when you touch items as these represent an opportunity where you could receive or transmit the virus. In training it is likely to be the gym or sporting equipment. At home, it can be the light switches, door handles or utility handles i.e. fridge, microwave etc. Once you identify the list, then you should plan safe ways to negate the risk (i.e. unnecessary touching of face) and in doing so, change your behaviour. Make sure to make a habit of wiping down all surfaces with anti-bacterial spray daily or as required especially if more than one person is using them. If you need to develop reminders of what to do, then set these in an 'if-then' plan, a strategy shown to be an effective way to prime the desired solutions to overcome unwanted behaviours. For example, if I clean down surfaces every night before bed then I am reducing chances of contamination. Effective nutrition is linked to well-being and it is worthwhile investing time in managing this aspect. **Time Management:** We have all been advised to self-isolate, and self-isolation over time may create some cabin fever. Try and look at self-isolation as a time to be proactive and to utilise solitary time to its best advantage so that you do not feel time is wasted. Why not use this time to catch up on some life admin that you often push to the side. Create to-do lists that

outline what you need to accomplish in the coming week, two weeks, month etc and prioritise tasks. A reference point is a good way to keep you on track and ticking of your list is a great motivator. Being proactive also helps with healthy habits. It can filter out the required, important and unnecessary tasks that are part of your day or week. **Sleep:** Getting good sleep is not wasted time, but a way of recharging your physical and mental energy, and maintaining a healthy immune system. The need for better hygiene, the self-control of behaviours and adjusted routines required right now are mentally tiring. Where possible, try and keep a normal sleep routine. Training schedules may have to adjust for some or even cease for others. **Routines:** Try and keep your daily structure as consistent to what it was before COVID-19. For this, it is quite important to bookend your day consistently. Solidify your normal morning routine by getting up at the same time throughout the week. You also need to keep a regular night time routine for balance. A lack of structure or training schedule may influence your sleeping habits. Monitor your screen time and compare to your regular training day. If you have become more sedentary now as this may impact your ability to regulate sleeping habits. We have control over decisions we make about how we start and end our days as well as items we prioritize daily or weekly. Solidifying morning and evening routines, getting enough sleep, and deliberately incorporating other acts of self-care (e.g., journaling, engaging in personal hobbies, and eating nutritious foods) into your life helps to partially re-establish feelings of control and comfort while supporting your health and well-being. **Relaxation:** We find meaning in daily routines. Unfortunately with disruption to routine and structure you may feel stressed. Stress as we know over time can influence your immune system, therefore it is important to plan activities to help you relax. Engaging in meaningful and enjoyable activities is beneficial. These activities do not need to be taxing or take up resources. Start with a technique you are comfortable with, whether that be muscular relaxation or mindfulness. Active recovery is also important for reducing circulating hormones after training that reduces your resting rate, muscle soreness, allowing you to be less fatigued for the next days training sessions(s). This could include an outside activity such as walking or combine a long cool down with watching a tv show or listening to relaxing music.

Suggested actions: While you should remain vigilant to react in a timely manner, know that it is okay to take a break and disconnect from the overwhelming amount of information that is available. In other words, take some time during your day to turn off your TV and put down your smartphone in order to mentally and emotionally recover from the stress of this pandemic. Psychological detachment is a term most commonly uses in relation to work. In this instance it can be applied to the constant media pollution surging COVID-19 news and reports. Minimise the amount of time you gave to thinking about the negative aspects of the virus and invest your mental effort more on self-care strategies.

Potential risks: With more time self-isolating indoors, negative thoughts may start to increase and mood can be effected. The first step in managing your experience is to recognize how you feel. COVID-19 is impacting everyone differently, and the impact it is having on you is completely normal and valid. Anticipate that your emotions will also likely change over time as the Coronavirus pandemic evolves. That been said, worrying about uncontrollable situation will not benefit you in the long term. Instead, focusing on actions that you can control (like washing your hands, getting enough sleep, or spending time on self-care strategies) will benefit your health and well-being now and in the longer-term.

Mental Health Resources



Mental Health Ireland Five Ways to Well-Being during Tough Times

The COVID-19 Pandemic: Tips for Athletes, Coaches, Parents, and the Sport Community

Other Links

HSE COVID-19 Updates

HSE Mental Health Services

Minding your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Green exercise** refers to physical activity in natural green spaces (e.g. parks, wilderness).
- **Blue exercise** refers to physical activity in blue spaces (e.g. Blueways)- blue spaces are outdoor environments—either natural or manmade—that prominently feature water and are accessible to humans either proximally (being in, on or near water) or distally/virtually (being able to see, hear or otherwise sense water).
- **Pre-performance routines** are a sequence of task-relevant thoughts and actions which an athlete engages in systematically prior to his or her performance of a specific sports skill.
- **Savoring refers to** the use of thoughts and actions to increase the intensity, duration, and appreciation of positive experiences and emotion.

- **Resilience** is a capacity that develops over time in the context of person-environment interactions.
- **Mental health** is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.
- **Well-being** is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community.

Selected Readings

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